If we may rely on the historians of Japan, voluntary death is common in that empire. The devotees of the idol Amida drown themselves in his presence, attended by their relations and friends, and several of the priests, who all consider the devoted person as a saint, who is gone to ever­lasting happiness. Such being the supposed honours appropriated to a voluntary death, it is not surprising that the Japanese anxiously cherish a contempt of life. Accordingly it is a part of the education of their children “ to repeat poems in which the virtues of their ancestors are celebrated, an utter contempt of life is inculcated, and suicide is set up as the most heroic of actions.”

A notion seems also to have prevailed among the an­cient Scythian tribes, that it was pusillanimous and ignoble for a man whose strength was wasted with disease or infir­mity, so as to be useless to the community, to continue to live. It was reckoned an heroic action voluntarily to seek that death which he had not the good fortune to meet in the field of battle. Perversion of moral feeling does not spring up, we hope, spontaneously in any nation, but is pro­duced by some peculiarities of situation. A wandering people like the Scythians, who roamed about from place to place, might often find it impossible to attend the sick, or to supply from their precarious store the wants of the aged and infirm. The aged and infirm themselves, no longer able to support the character of warriors, would find themselves unhappy. In this way the practice of putting to death such persons as were useless to the community might originate, and afterwards be inculcated as honour­able ; but he who put an end to his infirmities by his own hand obtained a character still more illustrious.

The tribes of Scandinavia, which worshipped Odin, the “ father of slaughter,” were taught, that dying in the field of battle was the most glorious event that could befall them. This was a maxim suited to a warlike nation. In order to establish it more firmly in the mind, all were excluded from Odin’s feast of heroes who died a natural death. In As- gardia stood the hall of Odin, where, seated on a throne, he received the souls of his departed heroes. This place was called *Valhalla,* signifying “ the hall of those who died by violence.” Natural death being thus deemed inglori­ous, and punished with exclusion from Valhalla, the para­dise of Odin, he who could not enjoy death in the field of battle was led to seek it by his own hands when sickness or old age began to assail him. In such a nation suicide must have been very common.

As suicide prevailed much in the decline of the Roman empire, when luxury, licentiousness, profligacy, and false philosophy, pervaded the world, so it continued to prevail even after Christianity was established. The Romans, when they became converts to Christianity, did not renounce their ancient prejudices and false opinions, but blended them with the new religion which they embraced. The Gothic na­tions, also, who subverted the Roman empire, while they re­ceived the Christian religion, adhered to many of their for­mer opinions and manners. Among other criminal prac­tices which were retained by the Romans and their con­querors, that of suicide was one ; but the principles from which it proceeded were explained so as to appear more agreeable to the new system which they had espoused. It was committed either to secure from the danger of apostasy, to procure the honour of martyrdom, or to preserve the crown of virginity.

When we descend to modern times, we lament to find so many instances of suicide among the most polished nations, who have the best opportunities of knowing the atrocity of that unnatural crime. The English have long been re­proached by foreigners for the frequent commission of it ; and the “ gloomy month of November” has been stigma­tized as the season when it is most common. But this dis­graceful imputation, we think, may be justly attributed, not to the greater frequency of the crime in England titan in other countries, but to the custom of publishing in the newspapers every instance of suicide which is known.

It might lead to some interesting conclusions to compare together, not only the number of suicides in different coun­tries, but also the rank and principles, the sex and age, of those unhappy persons by whom it has been committed. Mercier says, that at Paris it was the lower ranks who were most commonly guilty of it ; that it was mostly committed in garrets or hired lodgings ; and that it proceeded from po­verty and oppression. A great many, he says, wrote letters to the magistrates before their death. Mr Moore’s corre­spondent from Geneva informed him, that from the year 1777 to 1787 more than 100 suicides were committed in Geneva; that two thirds of these unfortunate persons were men ; that few of the clerical order have been known to commit it ; and that it is not so much the end of an im­moral, irreligious, dissipated life, as the effect of melancholy and poverty.@@1

Humanity would in most cases dispose us to conclude that suicide is the effect of insanity, were there not so many instances of cool deliberate self-murder. That suicide is an unnatural crime, which none but a madman would commit, compassion indeed may suppose ; but the murder of a wife, a father, or a child, are also unnatural ; yet compassion does not teach us in all cases to ascribe such a crime to madness. Passion may often arise to such a height of outrage as to be scarcely distinguishable from madness in its symptoms and its effects ; yet we always make a distinction between that madness which arises from disease and that which is owing to a violent perturbation of mind. If a person be capable of managing his worldly affairs, of making a will, and of disposing of his property, immediately before his death, or after he formed the resolution of dying by his own hands, such a man is not to be considered as insane.

But though a regard for truth prevents us from ascribing suicide in ail cases to insanity, we must ascribe it either to insanity or to vicious passion. These two divisions, we imagine, will comprehend every species of it, whether arising from melancholy, *tædium vitæ* or *ennui,* disappointment in schemes of ambition or love, pride, gaming, or a desire to avoid the shame of a public execution ; passions which are often increased by false views of God, of man, and of a fu­ture state, arising from deism and infidelity. If these be the causes of suicide in modern times, what a disgraceful contrast do they form to those principles which actuated many of the ancient philosophers, the Gentoos, the Japanese, and the worshippers of Odin? When they committed suicide, they committed it from principle, from a belief of its law­fulness, and the hope of being rewarded for what they judged an honourable sacrifice. But in modern times, we are sorry to say, when it is not the effect of madness, it is the effect of vice : and when it is the effect of vice, it proves that the vicious passions are then indulged to the highest degree ; for there is no crime which a man can commit that is so strong a symptom of the violence of particular passions. It is from not attending to this circumstance that it has been found so difficult to refute the arguments in favour of sui­cide. If the criminality of suicide be confined merely to the violent action, many apologies may be made for it ; but if it be considered solely as the effect of vice, as the strong­est symptom of ungoverned passion, he who undertakes its defence must undertake the defence of what all men will loudly condemn.

As suicide was deemed a crime by the most illustrious

@@@\* Moore’s Enquiry into the subject of Suicide. Load. 1790, 2 vola. 4to.