

Sacred and Profane Suicide

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Suicide is an act of one taking one's own life. Suicide is often considered a sin, a profanity - a connotation perpetually reinforced by many societies throughout the ages. Interestingly enough, suicide has also been glorified as divine and sacred by the very same societies - labelled as martyrdom or self-sacrifice. Yet the line is so thin. Who draws that line? Does a perpetrator have a say in societal perception of perpetrator's act of taking perpetrator's own life? When did such a dichotomy even arise in society?

For the sake of this essay I will not consider accidents or forcing as neither "suicide" nor "sacrifice"; however if an accident or one being forced to give up one's own life are considered as either in explicit cases I will also consider them as either.

Human life has been revered and held sacred since the times immemorial. Archaeological studies have affirmed that even in "primitive" hunter-gatherer societies of prehistoric past the idea of human life, and subsequent manipulations with it has been mystified and ritualized. Many neanderthal societies have put flowers and goods into the graves of their deceased - fifty millennia old burial sites have been found on the territories of what is now Russia and Iraq; such finds have made it clear that the concept of life has been closely tied to emotional and spiritual practices, indicating that the act of living was perceived as something intrinsically "divine", i.e. worth explicitly parting with - even long before the emergence of what we call "civilization".

But was the life itself considered valued? Or were it only the borders of life (such as birth or death) that were held in respect? Once again, archaeological finds posit that even often considered "asocial" neanderthals most likely did take care of their weak, sick and old.

According to abovementioned points, I will continue with the notion of life being considered sacred (as either an act or a resource) since the formation of first societies and I will assume that evolution of spiritual culture, while possibly affecting the "origin" of life's sacredness did not affect the absolute value of said sacredness.

It's possible to archeologically prove the value of one's life in context of one's society (group), but is it possible to take the same historical approach to the act of losing one's own life, let alone assume the motif? Let alone establish the perpetrator?

While mortuary archaeology is barely of help in this case, development of means of preservation and distribution of information allows us to take a look and assess the general cultural overview of phenomena of taking one's own life and possible justifications of such act.

Prehistoric societies did not have many means to preserve their abstract ideas so it's generally considered impossible to assess their idea of suicide. However, stemming from studies on more modern hunter-gatherer (traditional) societies the general consensus is that commune and mutual care is held in high regard and deliberate suicide rates are low. What is interesting is that documented practices of suicide in more modern traditional societies are also very communal: Inuit elders voluntarily giving up their lives as to not burden the community or South American tribesmen ending their lives as a result of explicit failure to meet communal expectations; but even so the cases of "selfish" suicides are extremely scarce (!Kung people being a popular "research sample" as one of the few secluded hunter-gatherers in modern age). I don't believe it possible to explore the relation of idea of self-inflicted death with such limited data, but it's rather

compelling to conclude that in those societies the very idea of committing suicide is, in a way, as sacred as the idea of a community.

The first societies to partially document their view on suicide were Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh the strong notions of life being a “divine gift” are present however no explicit glorification of self-sacrifice or condemnation of suicide is found. With afterlife being described as an uncomfortable place and big emphasis being put on the rich experience of life and its hardships I would assume that Mesopotamians did in a way encourage people “to live”, however no strong stance is found.

A slightly more expressive vision was introduced by Egyptians: according to their writings, life was “entrusted” to humans by gods and neglecting it would mean betraying the gods, also spelling uncomfortable afterlife. Such thought are expressed in "The Dispute Between a Man and His Ba" in which a man is essentially debating ending his life due to hardships with his soul - the final idea of the text being life-reassuring. However, not every “giving up on life” was considered a profane offence of gods - giving up one’s own life for a god or a pharaoh (god’s representative) was considered sacred and celebrated.

To conclude, apparently in those early societies the origin of sacredness of life has shifted from a community (compared to primitive societies) to a “divine connection” and while suicide was not inherently profane or punishable in itself (simply discouraged) - it could still attain a sacred status if done for the benefit of the origin of sacredness.

Starting with Ancient Greece and Rome, suicide has finally become a prominent (recognized) subject of philosophical debate. While not as stigmatized as it will become with the rise of Christianity, the general public consensus was that suicide was a condemnable act. Greek Plato believed it to be an escape from duty (but with exceptions such as being commanded by state) and Aristotle believed it to be an “act against society” but generally it was seen as acceptable if it was tied to honour. Roman idea was similar: Seneca viewed suicide as acceptable if it was an act to “preserve dignity in the face of dishonour”. In Homer’s Illias, Ajax commits suicide after losing a contest for Achilles’ armour, unable to bear the shame. Another example would be Socrates drinking hemlock voluntarily on his own after being sentenced to death by the state - seen as a great act of obedience and honour. The only real case of suicide being deemed profane and explicitly restricted by law was in later Rome when soldiers were forbidden to commit suicide as it was seen as an act of disservice to the society.

Here, compared to previous societies we can see that sacredness of life now has two new origins: individual honour and devotion to the state, acting on which commends one’s suicide as sacred and worthy of respect - interestingly enough, both origins of sacredness hint on more expressed individualism (as I believe the notion of heavily identifying oneself with the state is also inherently individualistic - in a context of “us versus them” - a philosophy prevalent in ancient Rome).

With the coming of Christianity and Medieval Ages into Europe, suicide has become a strictly stigmatised phenomena - considered to be a rebellion against God’s plan and equated to murder, most documented sanctions against perpetrators were the denial of burial, confiscation of property and posthumous humiliation (such as dragging the corpse through the streets or hanging). Another interesting thing is that found suicide notes were either destroyed by the church or altered according to the dogma. “Honour” suicides, as opposed to Rome and Greece no longer were considered sacred, for example knights ending their life in captivity would eventually the same posthumous sanctions. However, a very specific caste of “suicidal” people

had emerged - the martyrs; while not necessarily by their own hand, many martyrs have purportedly consciously chosen to act in the name of God despite knowing that would essentially lead to their ruin (i.e. suicidal actions) - a profane act turned sacred by the hand of authority? There are some controversial cases of sacred martyrs - debated to this day as to whether it was right to bestow martyrdom upon them. Such cases being Saint Pelagia of Antioch and Saint Apollonia of Alexandria - both voluntarily committing suicide rather than facing dishonour.

I think it was a very volatile and in a sense hypocritical period full of controversies. From the societal point of view, it could be considered a complete opposite to the primitive societies - suicide being an inherently profane act, origin of profanity being an absolute authority (compared to suicide being an inherently sacred act, origin of sacredness being a commune in primitive societies).

In Feudal Japan (time period approximately overlapping with medieval Europe), on the other hand, suicide had been a major part of culture and traditions. While not considered inherently profane or stigmatized, mostly tied to honour and loyalty, suicide had to fulfil a certain number of conditions in order to be considered sacred. Namely, it had to be a ritual. Seppuku was a form of suicide which required the perpetrator to cut through perpetrator's own bowel in a specific pattern - perpetrator would often be accompanied by a kaishakunin - a person who would finish off the perpetrator as to not cause more suffering. Seppuku was essentially a way to restore or protect perpetrator's honour or to express loyalty - there could be any number of reasons such as following the master in the master's death, atoning for failure or less "loyalty-related" reasons such as being raped (in case of women), getting disowned by one's family and so on. However, if performed out of despair or emotional instability or performed poorly, the act would be considered profane and could spell dishonour for the whole lineage. Some of the prominent religious teachings such as Shinto, Buddhism or Confucianism were essentially discouraging suicide with notions of it being karmically bad or disruptive to the flow of the world, however no sanctions were imposed.

Both in Feudal Japan and in Medieval Christian Europe, opposed to previous societies, life's origin of sacredness now lies in its end itself - i.e. life only attains the attribute of sacredness if the death was also sacred. Compared to Ancient Rome and Greece, where life's origin of sacredness lies in individual honour and acting on which commends the suicide as sacred, in Feudal Japan life's origin of sacredness lies in preserving the attribute of individual honour at the moment of death, i.e. any suicide is sacred if it reifies the perpetrator's honour.

After that, I believe next major (after gradual shifting) change of perspective on suicide has only come in the 20th century - with increasing globalisation and subsequential singularization of society there is no longer well-defined reference to dictate the origin of sacredness of one's life. During the World Wars indirect suicidal actions, much similar to Medieval Christian Europe's martyrdom, such as going to war (arguably a being as important as God back then), has become simultaneously sacred and profane. Much similar to Ancient Rome and Greece and Feudal Japan, individual honour of loyalty has become an origin of both sacredness of life and death - not by one's own hand but often by one's own unchanged fate. What ones considered sacred others considered profane - an overwhelming wave of individualism has swiftly engulfed most of the world, leaving too little space for either sacred or profane - suicide now deemed neither sacred nor profane - every reason being valid just as no reason being strong enough. I believe only one form of suicide has managed to still answer to that polarity, in a way still making the whole singularized global society deem it sacred - I believe suicide by swift public suffering (such as self-immolation) in the name of greater goal is able to still be considered

sacred. With the emergence of completely individualistic society, the origin of sacredness of life has once again begin to be found in a community and the sacredness of suicide once again stems from expressing the love of said community; in a way modern martyrs no longer suffer for God but for whatever was recognized as a “communal faceless God”. In modern society the “profanity” of suicide is often tied to inconveniencing the perpetrator’s immediate community (namely the family) but even so no sanctions are applied.

In a way, it’s possible to distinguish two major types of societies. First is a society in which origin of sacredness of life is communal, and therefore the notion of one taking one’s own life can be perceived either as a “communal issue” act or as an act of ultimately sacrificing one for the sake of the sacredness of community. In this society suicide is not perceived as inherently profane, but can be still perceived as sacred given the right ritual had taken place.

Second is a society in which origin of sacredness of life is tied to one singular entity - either to an individual bearing the individual’s own life or to a greater external singular entity defined as a “bearer” of an individual’s life. The notion of one taking one’s own life is therefore perceived either as a failure before the singular entity or as an act of honourable sacrifice for the sake of the sacredness of the singular entity. In this society suicide is perceived as inherently profane - a betrayal of the singular entity - but can still be perceived as sacred if the singular entity had deemed suicide not an act of betrayal but an act of tribute.

Essentially the main difference between these two types of societies is the presence of the notion of betrayal by death (being essentially absent in the First type communities); therefore the universal notion of profanity of suicide is closely associated with the notion of betrayal; and the notion of sacredness of suicide is closely associated with the notion of altruism.