

Freedom, suicide, and martyrdom: reflections on their meaning for Dante and Mbembe.

Author: Wouter Maas

The moral system of Dante's hell and modern discussions on morality. Examine a specific vice or a category of sinners in Dante's hell and compare its treatment and judgment in the Comedy to a contemporary discussion on an equivalent vice or a modern counterpart (for example Dante's falsifiers of persons versus identity theft; Dante's sodomites versus debates on same-sex marriage legislation etc.).

In this essay Dante's views on suicide will be compared to modern reflections on suicide and martyrdom. Following the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2022) a (voluntary) martyr is "a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion". To explore this concept, first the views of the modern philosopher Mbembe (2019), who in specific wrote on the ideas of *Necropolitics* in relation to suicide as an act of voluntary martyrdom, will be explored. Then the Christian view on suicide and martyrdom in Dante's time will be contextualised. Finally, Dante's own views, as presented in the Divine Comedy, will be explored and compared.

In Mbembe's (2019) work *Necropolitics*, he tries to extend on Michel Foucault's concept of *Biopower and Biopolitics*¹. Foucault was revolutionary in showing how power-

¹ A thorough explanation of Foucault's ideas is beyond the scope of this essay, but these concepts can be summarised in Mbembe's (2019, p.66) own words as: "Biopower: that domain of life over which power has asserted its control. [...] The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes. To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power."

knowledge could be used to influence the will of individuals to make different choices. However, where Foucault's ideas can be seen as mainly focusing on the subtleties of 'the managing of life', Mbembe wants to draw attention to the not so subtle 'managing of death'. Mbembe's main point is that in circumstances of terror and war, humans are often reduced to what he calls *bare life*, a state in which human life has so little value to the rulers who oppress them, that a human can be killed for the smallest of reasons. Mbembe points to concentration camps and the system of slavery in the American plantations as examples. Life, in these places, has lost all its meaning in any significant way, as the choices of individuals have been nullified in all their significance. The logic that rules such places, *death worlds* as he calls them, is not one of life but one of death, as such he calls the logic of power of these systems *Necropower* and *Necropolitics*.

In relation to these concepts Mbembe (2019) discusses suicide as part of the act of voluntary martyrdom. He does this through the epitomized example of the suicide bomber. The suicide bomber fuses with his weapon by hiding it on his own body, as such the weapon and the killer become one. Mbembe (2019, p.89) explains that "[i]n the logic of 'martyrdom,' the will to die is fused with the will to take the enemy down with you, that is, to slam shut the door on the possibility of life for everyone." As such, the suicide bomber, just before his death, claims a place of power over his oppressor. By facing death head-on, the voluntary martyr has reclaimed his power over death. As such, death through suicide can be represented as a final act of creating agency for the oppressed true believer.

Retterstøl (1998) describes how in the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition the way suicide was judged changed over time. In the early Jewish tradition suicide was viewed

as a sin, as life was viewed as sacred and as such it was necessary to save life itself. This changed slightly in the early Christian period as there were a significant number of voluntary martyrdom acts due to the high number of prosecutions of early Christians. As such there was a greater focus on life after death in comparison to life on earth. Voluntary martyrdom, at this point, could be seen as a way to come closer to God. This changed again with Roman Empire Augustine (354-430 AD) as he saw suicide as murder (and no one has the right to kill anyone) and as unnoble (referring to the fact that in the bible, Job lived through all kinds of suffering without taking his own life). The perspective on martyrdom was slightly changed again when the Church synod at Braga (563 AD) determined that no church rites would be performed to the body of someone who committed suicide. However, Retterstøl (1998, p.5) notes that there were circumstances in which such rites would be given: “voluntary martyrdom, self-inflicted death through an act of asceticism, and the suicide of a virgin or married woman to preserve her virtue”. Finally, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 AD) had a profound impact on the official view of the Christian Church on suicide. In Aquinas eyes suicide was sinful for 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.” (Retterstøl, 1998, p.5)

However, as Inglis (1995, p.17) explains, even for Aquinas, voluntary martyrdom had a special position and could be seen as virtuous as “[it] meant having the strength to consider the present world of little value when compared with the highest good in the life to come”. In this view voluntary martyrdom could thus be seen as a last true act to come

closer to God, once again creating agency by willingly departing from this life by entering the next. Hence, this view is similar to Mbembe's in this regard.

The impact of Aquinas ideas on Dante's work are well documented (see for instance (Ryan, 2013)), Dante himself however, never directly addresses the difference between suicide and voluntary martyrdom in his *Divine Comedy*. The closest Dante comes to discussing Aquinas views is when he addresses suicide in the second ring of circle seven of hell, the circle of violence. Dante distinguishes three main acts of violence a human can commit, which all have their own ring in the seventh circle: violence against one's neighbours, violence against the self and violence against God, Art and Nature. In canto thirteen Dante and Virgil arrive in the Wood of the Suicides, the inhabitants of which have committed violence against the self by committing suicide. The punishment for this sin is that they are turned into shrubs, trees, and bushes. The sinners are unable to move and only have the ability to speak when a branch is broken of their bodies, causing great bleeding and pain to the immobile sinners. To worsen the sinners' torment, harpies live in the forest and feast on their bodies.

Dante lets the reader learn about the sin of suicide through a figure which Hollander and Hollander (2000) reveal is Pier della Vigna, a minister of the Emperor Frederick II. In 1249, Pier was accused of being a traitor and therefore he was blinded and imprisoned by Frederick II, shortly afterwards he died, possibly from suicide as suggested in the *Divine Comedy*. There is some historic debate on whether Pier actually betrayed Frederick or not. Dante most likely believed he didn't however, something which is signified in the fact that Pier is not in the ninth circle of Dante's hell (treachery). In this light, Pier's suicide could therefore be seen as an act of creating

agency in line with the views of Mbembe: Pier being blinded, persecuted and imprisoned on a wrong basis, creating the context of a *bare life*, with suicide as the last honourable means of escape.

However, Pier's true sin, in Dante's eyes, appears most clearly in lines 73-78 (Inf. 13) when Pier speaks about his former master:

"By this tree's new-sprung roots I give my oath: not once did I break faith with my true lord, a man so worthy of honor. 'If one of you goes back into the world, let him restore my reputation, which, helpless, lies beneath the blow that envy dealt it.'"

As Hollander and Hollander (2000) point out, significant is that Pier at this point refers to Frederick as his "true lord", seeming to forget that his only actual true lord is Jesus Christ. And therefore, mimicking how Judas hanged himself in a tree after betraying Jesus, Pier is turned into a tree for eternity as punishment for not fully accepting the gift of life given by God. Thus, canto thirteen shines light on the importance of staying true in your faith in God. Important to note is that in Dante's hell, Frederick II himself is being punished for heresy in circle six (Hollander & Hollander, 2000). Pier's strong faith can therefore be seen as doubly wrong, not only missing God himself but putting it in an infidel instead. In Dante's eyes Pier's suicide was therefore not the act of a martyr and as such was judged appropriately.

In conclusion, to some extent it is difficult to compare Mbembe's ideas on suicide to those of Dante, as Dante doesn't directly contemplate on the difference between voluntary martyrdom and suicide. However, for Dante, Pier would have gone to hell regardless as he had forfeited his belief in God, as such inherently linking the achievable

freedom of voluntary martyrdom with the necessity of faith in the Christian God. On the other hand, Mbembe's ideas on voluntary martyrdom, although connected to strong faith, can be perceived as more secular and philosophical in nature, creating freedom by reversing the power relation that oppresses them at the doorstep of death.

Word count: [1473]

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