

In ANCIENT GREECE, suicide was generally regarded as not wrong in itself, but there had to be a justification for it. Although Plato was considered to be often opposed to suicide, he made three important exceptions: when “legally ordered by the State” (as in the case of Socrates); for painful and incurable illness; and when one is “compelled to it by the occurrence of some intolerable misfortune”.

Two other Greek philosophers, Democritus and Speusippus, both committed suicide because of health problems when they were very elderly (the former died at the age of 90). Then, the Epicureans generally felt that when life became unbearable, suicide was justified. And, the Stoics also believed that suicide was permissible, especially if one had an incurable illness.

In ANCIENT ROME, there was usually no prohibition of suicide for citizens. However, suicide was forbidden for slaves and soldiers: the former for economic considerations, and the latter for patriotic reasons. Because life was not considered as a gift of the gods, most leading Romans supported the idea of suicide for specific situations, such as individuals preferring death to dishonour, or those who wished to avoid the decrepitude of old age. Seneca, the philosopher and statesman, strongly believed that if being elderly “begins to unseat my reason and pull it piecemeal, if it leaves me not life but mere animation, I shall be out of my crumbling, tumble-down tenement at a bound”.

There are eight suicides mentioned in the Old Testament, two in the Apocrypha, and one in the New Testament. But, none of the passages in the Bible, describing these suicides, makes any adverse comments on the morality of these acts. There are no explicit biblical condemnations against suicide - only prohibitions of killing which really apply to the unlawful slaughter of others. Throughout the New Testament, there are frequent reminders to the faithful that earthly life is of little importance (for example, “I put no value on my life”, Paul tells us in Acts 20.24). Unfortunately, a religion which preaches that life on this planet is a vale of tears, a prelude to a better afterlife, would seem to be inviting its adherents to kill themselves. In fact, suicide among the early Christians became increasingly popular and began to threaten the very existence of the Christian Church. Therefore, in the fourth century AD, persuaded by the arguments of Augustine, a strict prohibition of suicide was adopted - and, it became a mortal sin.

In the MIDDLE AGES, suicide was often regarded as the result of diabolical temptation, induced by despair or madness. Savage penalties were inflicted on the dead body - such as dragging it through the streets where the deceased had lived, and hanging it. The estates of these persons were confiscated, and Christian burial was forbidden. Sometimes, the corpse of a suicide was

buried at a busy crossroads (in order to confuse the spirit), pinned down by a wooden stake through the chest - thus preventing, it was hoped, the spirit emerging to bother the living.

Attitudes towards suicide began to change slowly during the RENAISSANCE, although for many religious people, this act was still regarded as diabolical. For example, Thomas More, writing in *Utopia* in 1516, notes that someone with a distressing, incurable disease can “free himself from this bitter life...since by death he will put an end not to enjoyment but to torture...it will be a pious and holy action”. Later, Michel de Montaigne, in his *Essays*, observed that “unendurable pain and fear of a worse death seem the most excusable motives for suicide”.

In 1777, David Hume, in his *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul*, argued that suicide did not contradict one's obligation to God, to fellow humans, or to oneself: in particular, he asked, “Why should I prolong a miserable existence, because of some frivolous advantage which the public may perhaps receive from me?” And,

*The Times*

of February 27, 1786 announced a debate on “Is suicide an act of courage?” - it cost sixpence to attend, a high price in those days. Three years later, the same newspaper stated that suicide was “now a general subject of conversation among all ranks of people”.

In the 19th CENTURY, in England, coroners' juries began bringing in verdicts of “non compos mentis”, indicating that an individual was only insane at the actual moment of suicide. And, among the aristocracy, some suicides were attributed more to accidents than to madness - thus, the suicide of an Earl of Bath, Charles Grenville, was reported as being due to “the casual going off of a pistol”. In 1839, *Bentley's Miscellany* contained a satirical section describing the “London Suicide Company” whose three directors were Graves, Knell and Gravesend. Gilbert and Sullivan's

*Mikado*, in 1885, satirized the idea that a death sentence should be given for an attempted suicide by hanging Nanki-Poo for trying to take his own life. Such satires indicated a growing ambivalence towards suicide. In this century, the religious penalties for suicide were finally abandoned.

Across Europe, suicide was slowly decriminalized, although it was not until 1961 that the Suicide Act was finally adopted in England and Wales which removed the penalties which had been in place for this deed (this Act was not applicable to Scotland, where suicide had never officially been considered as a crime). However, assisting someone to commit suicide, in the United Kingdom, remains a crime to this day - it is strange to think that helping someone now in a ‘non-crime’ is still a crime.

Since the 1930s, there have been thousands of research studies and books on suicide, and many conferences have been held, especially in the United States and Western Europe. In England, the first right-to-die organization in the world, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, was formed in 1935, by a group of senior doctors, such as Lord Moynihan, and clergy, including Canon Dick Shepherd. Since the mid-1970s, there is the World Federation of Right-to-Die Societies, now an umbrella group for 48 national organizations in 27 countries.