

History of suicide

In general, the pagan world, both Roman and Greek, had a relaxed attitude towards the concept of suicide, a practice that was only outlawed with the advent of the Christians, who condemned it at the [Council of Arles](#) in 452 as the work of the Devil. In the [Middle Ages](#), the Church had drawn-out discussions on the edge where the search for [martyrdom](#) was suicidal, as in the case of some of the [martyrs of Córdoba](#). Despite these disputes and occasional official rulings, Catholic doctrine was not entirely settled on the subject of suicide until the later 17th century.

There are some precursors of later Christian hostility in ancient Greek thinkers. [Pythagoras](#), for example, was against the act, though more on mathematical than moral grounds, believing that there was only a finite number of souls for use in the world, and that the sudden and unexpected departure of one upset a delicate balance. [Aristotle](#) also condemned suicide, though for quite different, far more practical reasons, in that it robbed the community of the services of one of its members. A reading of [Phaedo](#) suggests that [Plato](#) was also against the practice, inasmuch as he allows [Socrates](#) to defend the teachings of the [Orphics](#), who believed that the human body was the property of the gods, and thus self-harm was a direct offense against divine law.



The death of Seneca (1684), painting by [Luca Giordano](#), depicting the suicide of [Seneca the Younger](#) in [Ancient Rome](#).

In Rome, suicide was never a general offense in law, though the whole approach to the question was essentially pragmatic. This is illustrated by the example given by [Titus Livy](#) of the colony of [Massalia](#) (the present day [Marseilles](#)), where those who wanted to kill themselves merely applied to the [Senate](#), and if their reasons were judged sound they were then given [hemlock](#) free of charge. It was specifically forbidden in three cases: those accused of capital crimes, soldiers and slaves. The reason behind all three was the same - it was *uneconomic* for these people to die. If the accused killed themselves prior to trial and conviction then the state lost the right to seize their property, a loophole that was only closed by [Domitian](#) in the 1st century AD, who decreed that those who died prior to trial were without legal heirs. The suicide of a soldier was treated on the same basis as desertion. If a slave killed himself or herself within six months of purchase, the master could claim a full refund from the former owner.

The Romans, however, fully approved of what might be termed "patriotic suicide"; death, in other words, as an alternative to dishonor. For the [Stoics](#), a philosophical sect which originated in Greece, death was a guarantee of personal freedom, a way out of an intolerable existence. And so

it was for [Cato the Younger](#), who killed himself after the Pompeian cause was defeated at the [Battle of Thapsus](#). This was a 'virtuous death', one guided by reason and conscience. His example was later followed by [Seneca](#), though under somewhat more straitened circumstances. ^[clarification needed] A very definite line was drawn by the Romans between the virtuous suicide and suicide for entirely private reasons. They disapproved of [Mark Antony](#) not because he killed himself, but that he killed himself for love.

In the [Middle Ages](#), the Christian church [excommunicated](#) people who attempted suicide and those who died by suicide were buried outside consecrated graveyards. A criminal ordinance issued by [Louis XIV of France](#) in 1670 was far more severe in its punishment: the dead person's body was drawn through the streets, face down, and then hung or thrown on a garbage heap. Additionally, all of the person's property was confiscated. ^{[1][2]}

Changes in attitude



[Gilbert and Sullivan](#)'s [The Mikado](#) musical satirized the illegality of suicide, with Ko-Ko deciding not to kill himself, as it would be a capital offence.

Attitudes towards suicide slowly began to shift during the [Renaissance](#); [Thomas More](#) the English [humanist](#), wrote in [Utopia](#) (1516) that a person afflicted with 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”. [John Donne](#)'s work [Biathanatos](#), contained one of the first modern defences of suicide bringing proof from the conduct of Biblical figures, such as [Jesus](#), [Samson](#) and [Saul](#), and presenting arguments on grounds of reason and nature to sanction suicide in certain circumstances. ^[3]

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, loopholes were invented to avoid the damnation that was promised by most Christian doctrine as a penalty of suicide. One famous example of someone who wished to end their life but avoid the eternity in hell was [Christina Johansdotter](#) (died 1740). She was a Swedish murderer who killed a child in Stockholm with the sole purpose of being executed. She is an example of those who seek suicide through execution by committing

a murder. It was a common act, frequently targeting young children or infants as they were believed to be free from sin, thus going straight to heaven.^[4]

The secularisation of society that began during [The Enlightenment](#) questioned traditional religious attitudes toward suicide to eventually form the modern perspective on the issue. [David Hume](#) denied that suicide was a crime as it affected no one and was potentially to the advantage of the individual. In his 1777 *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul* he rhetorically asked, “Why should I prolong a miserable existence, because of some frivolous advantage which the public may perhaps receive from me?”^[3] A shift in public opinion at large can also be discerned; [The Times](#) in 1786 initiated a spirited debate on the motion “Is suicide an act of courage?”^[5]

By the 19th-century, the act of suicide had shifted from being viewed as caused by [sin](#) to being caused by [insanity](#) in Europe.^[2] Although suicide remained illegal during this period, it increasingly became the target of satirical comment, such as the spoof [advertisement](#) in the 1839 *Bentley's Miscellany* for a *London Suicide Company* or the [Gilbert and Sullivan musical](#) *The Mikado* that satirised the idea of executing someone who had already killed himself.^[6]

By 1879, English law began to distinguish between suicide and [homicide](#), although suicide still resulted in forfeiture of estate.^[7] In 1882, the deceased were permitted daylight burial in England^[8] and by the mid 20th century, suicide had become legal in much of the [western world](#).

Military suicide

In [ancient](#) times, suicide sometimes followed defeat in battle, to avoid capture and possible subsequent [torture](#), mutilation, or [enslavement](#) by the enemy. The [Caesarean assassins](#) [Brutus](#) and [Cassius](#), for example, killed themselves after their defeat at the battle of [Philippi](#). Insurgent [Jews](#) died in a mass suicide at [Masada](#) in 74 CE rather than face enslavement by the [Romans](#).



A Japanese [kamikaze](#) aircraft explodes after crashing into *Essex*' flight deck amidships, 1944.

During [World War II](#), Japanese units would often fight to the last man rather than surrender. Towards the end of the war, the Japanese navy sent [kamikaze](#) pilots to attack Allied ships. These tactics reflect the influence of the [samurai](#) warrior culture, where [seppuku](#) was often required after a loss of honor. It is also suggested that the Japanese treated Allied [POWs](#) harshly because, in Japanese eyes, by surrendering rather than fighting to the last man, these soldiers showed they

were not worthy of honorable treatment. In fact, a Japanese unit in Singapore sentenced an Australian bombing unit to death in admiration for their bravery.^{[[citation needed](#)]}

In modern times, [suicide attacks](#) have been used extensively by [Islamist militants](#). However, suicide is strictly forbidden by [Islamic law](#), and the Muslim clerics who organize these attacks do not regard them as suicide, but as [martyrdom operations](#). These clerics argue the difference to be that in suicide a person kills himself out of despair, while in a martyrdom operation a person is killed as a pure act. This attitude is not universally held by all Muslim clerics. ^[1]

Spies have carried suicide pills to use when captured, partly to avoid the misery of captivity, but also to avoid being forced to disclose secrets. For the latter reason, spies may even have orders to kill themselves if captured – for example, [Gary Powers](#) had a suicide pill, but did not use it when he was captured.

Social protest



[Thích Quảng Đức](#), a Buddhist monk who [burned himself to death](#).

In the 1960s, [Buddhist](#) monks, most notably [Thích Quảng Đức](#), in [South Vietnam](#) gained [Western](#) praise in their protests against President [Ngô Đình Diệm](#) by [burning themselves to death](#). Similar events were reported in eastern Europe, such as [Jan Palach](#) following the [Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia](#). In 1970 Greek geology student [Kostas Georgakis](#) burned himself to death in [Genoa](#), Italy to protest against the [Greek military junta of 1967-1974](#).^{[[citation needed](#)]}

During the [Cultural Revolution](#) in China (1966–1976), numerous publicly known figures, especially intellectuals and writers, are reported to have committed suicide, typically to escape persecution, typically at the hands of the [Red Guards](#). Some, or perhaps many, of these reported suicides are suspected by many observers to have, in fact, not been voluntary but instead the result of mistreatment. Some reported suicides include famed writer [Lao She](#), among the best-known 20th-century Chinese writers, and journalist [Fan Changjiang](#).^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Famous historical suicides

Main article: [List of famous suicides](#)

- [List of suicides in the 21st century](#)

- [Boudicca](#)
- [Brutus](#)
- [Mark Antony](#)
- [Cleopatra VII of Egypt](#)
- [Judas Iscariot](#)
- [Hannibal](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [Virginia Woolf](#)
- [Sadeq Hedayat](#)
- [Adolf Hitler](#)
- [Ernest Hemingway](#)
- [Sylvia Plath](#)
- [Marina Tsvetaeva](#)
- [Yukio Mishima](#)
- [Hunter S. Thompson](#)
- [Kurt Cobain](#)
- [Ludwig Boltzmann](#)
- [Ian Curtis](#)
- [Vincent van Gogh](#)

See also

- [Philosophical views of suicide](#)
- [Religious views of suicide](#)

References

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5th Century B.C.-1st Century B.C. - Ancient Greeks and Romans Tend to Support Euthanasia

Hippocrates, author of the Hippocratic Oath

Hippocrates, author of the Hippocratic Oath

Source: www.howstuffworks.com (accessed May 5, 2009)

"In ancient Greece and Rome, before the coming of Christianity, attitudes toward infanticide, active euthanasia, and suicide had tended to be tolerant. Many ancient Greeks and Romans had no cogently defined belief in the inherent value of individual human life, and pagan physicians likely performed frequent abortions as well as both voluntary and involuntary mercy killings. Although the Hippocratic Oath prohibited doctors from giving 'a deadly drug to anybody, not even if asked for,' or from suggesting such a course of action, few ancient Greek or Roman physicians followed the oath faithfully. Throughout classical antiquity, there was widespread support for voluntary death as opposed to prolonged agony, and physicians complied by often giving their patients the poisons they requested."

$1.4M \times .3 = 420,000$

$4M / 100,000 = 40 \times 7 = 280,000$