

# The act of suicide in greek mythology

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## Abstract

Suicide is defined as the voluntary, and intentional, act of causing one's own death. As a topic of scientific study, suicide has continuously been the focus of attention for a multitude of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychiatry, to name a few. The act of suicide has been documented since antiquity. The present study is focused on highlighting suicidal behaviors in Greek mythology as well as on determining the method used and the motive behind each act of suicide. The cases of suicidal behavior presented in this study were drawn from a selection of various Greek myths, and were chosen on the basis of whether or not the mythical figures involved caused their own death either directly or indirectly, according to the main myth or a version of it. The Myth can provide helpful insight into the understanding of suicidal behaviors and of the mechanisms that govern human existence and conscience, inasmuch as mythological cases of suicide constitute important examples, useful to therapeutic practices focusing on suicide, regardless of psychotherapeutic perspective.

**Key Words:** ancient Greece, suicide, Greek mythology, philosophy

## Introduction

### Suicide

Suicide is defined as the voluntary, and intentional, act of causing one's own death. As a topic of scientific study, suicide has continuously been the focus of attention for a multitude of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychiatry, to name a few. This trend has prompted a significant progress in the understanding of the neurological and genetic basis underpinning suicidal behaviors, as well as possible associated psychological factors. With regard to the phenomenology of suicidal behaviors, mental distress is considered to be not only the most important factor associated with suicide, but also a necessary condition precipitating the suicidal act. The act of suicide is, allegedly, carried out when the amount of mental pain or distress (psychache) experienced by a subject is deemed unbearable by said subject (Shneidman). According to psychoanalytical discourse, suicide serves as the consequent response to the psyche's succumbing to the predominance of hostile, destructive drives ("death drives"), which gravitate toward restoring human life to the inorganic state from which it, assumedly, derives. Suicide contains an inherent form of hostility directed toward someone else (Freud). In his book "Le Suicide" (1897), French sociologist Emile Durkheim postulates that suicide is "every death that is the immediate or indirect result of a positive or negative action of which the subject is aware that death will be the result". French historian Nicole Loraux describes suicide as a "tragic death, chosen by those who, compelled by want, are overwhelmed by the unbearable pain of a unending anguish" (Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman, 1991).

### Suicide throughout history and philosophy

The act of suicide has been documented since antiquity. In ancient Greece, Orphic and Pythagorean philosophers condemned suicide as an act that defies the will of God. Aristotle denounced suicide as a crime committed against oneself and against one's country,

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as an act of cowardice in the face of life's adversities. In his "Laws", however, Plato states that in certain cases, such as when one is suffering from a fatal illness or their honor or reputation has been severely afflicted, the act of suicide can be regarded as justified and absolved of disgrace. Stoic and Cynic philosophers accept one's abandonment of life if indeed one's life has become excruciatingly distressful. Seneca the Younger declares that the wise man is free to exact himself from life in light of unfavorable fortune, whilst "foolish is he who lives a life of suffering". With regard to a person's death, Epicurus suggests that "death, the most horrible of all evils, is nothing to us, precisely since we exist when death is inexistent, whilst when death comes to existence we, in turn, are inexistent". Furthermore, he states that "the wise man, neither renounces life, neither fears inexistence. For life is not distressful to him, nor does he consider it bad to be alive. However, a fool is he who suggests that it is best to never have been born at all, but that if indeed one has been born, one should make haste toward the gates of Hades. If one believes such suggestions, why does one not abandon life?"

During the middle ages, suicide was considered as the most heinous of crimes against nature and society, as well as against God, since it was believed to "result from the direct influence of the devil or of madness". Renaissance saw the acknowledgement of the "virtuousness" of the act of suicide. In his 1511 essay "In Praise of Folly", Erasmus hints at the possibility that committing suicide may in fact be regarded as an act of wisdom, should suicide be seen as the ultimate act of evading the evils and madness of this world. Throughout the Age of Enlightenment, the great thinkers of the time, such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, associate suicide with physical and mental illnesses, such as "madness", "melancholy" and "mania", while Voltaire introduces the issue of heredity with the regard to the prevalence of suicidal behavior. Furthermore, Voltaire suggests that, "if the tendency toward suicidal behavior is the result of psychosomatic disorders, then this tendency should be amenable to therapy". Voltaire then puts forth certain possible remedies such as "cinchona", therapeutic "salts", "thermal baths" and others. The 18th century saw the emergence of a number of suggestions, among scholarly circles, pertaining to other possible motives behind the act of suicide. At the center of these novel interpretations was Epicureanism, according to which, life should be rejected if it causes more suffering than pleasure. David Hume stated that as life becomes more and more agonizing, whether it be physically or mentally, then suicide could become desirable. The Romanticist movement highlights Romantic suicide as a result of heartbreak, loneliness, melancholy or despair. Romanticist thought often regarded death as a driving force

in that it was seen as a form of deliverance from the finite and perishable capacity of human existence. Philosophers and writers of the Romantic period, idealized suicide as the sole escape from a life wrought with pain and anguish. In "The Sorrows of Young Werther", Goethe tells the story of young Werther's unfulfilled love toward Lotte, which ultimately lead him toward ending his own life.

Literary interest in the act of suicide survived throughout the 19th and 20th century as well. Tolstoy saw suicide as the only escape from a life of decay, sadness, death and eternal oblivion. Other thinkers consider suicide to be the ultimate and absolute proof of human freedom. In "Demons", Dostoevsky posits that, "whoever searches for supreme freedom must possess the boldness to kill himself...there is no other freedom. Here is everything and further than this there is nothing." In "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus emphasizes that: "There is none but one truly important philosophical question: the question of suicide. The moment upon which one decides whether life is worth living, you answer the fundamental question of philosophy".

### The significance of the myth

The myth reflects on a collective level what the imaginary does so on the individual level. The space occupied by the myth and the imaginary with regard to the individual and the collective realm respectively, indicates desire. In line with this reasoning, the myth is a means for organizing the collective psychic structure.

According to Jung, the myth encodes and unearths the collective unconscious and the inherited primordial archetypes. The identifiable elements providing the structure of the myth are present in the unconscious psyche. The archetype of the Hero resurfaces throughout various myths as a figure that heroically overcomes strenuous obstacles and adversities in order to fulfill his destiny. Therefore, the Heroic myth becomes the principal path toward realizing the self, and hence becomes a pivotal part of Jung's approach to the myth. Other myths, such as the myth of creation, of the apocalypse, can all be regarded as composite parts of the heroic myth, symbolizing important aspects of it.

Levi-Strauss identified the focal point, or "epicenter", of the myth as consisting of a socio-psychological problem from which the myth emanates and to which the myth refers. Therefore, due to the myth's familiarity, it becomes the impetus through which a society comes into unconscious dialectical contact with the issue or subject it has itself encoded (concealed). In other words, the myth provides a space for compressing a society's collective anxieties. Society "faces unconscious conflicts, which the myth narrates, negotiates with and

eventually relieves, in the same way that a dream protects the process of sleep from conflicting unconscious desires". According to Chartokoles, the role of the myth in tragedy can be thought of as a sort of "soil" for the development of the tragic figure who encounters a revelation concerning his self which forces him to face a series of ethical dilemmas the revelation presents him with. It is precisely thanks to such revelations that tragedy evokes the resulting ethical questions in a fashion highly similar to that of the psychoanalytic process. The myth is the environment that surrounds such processes.

Nietzsche writes of the utility of the Myth: "When the myth is absent, every culture loses the vigorous fertility of its primitive energy. Only a horizon whose shape is restricted by myths can ensure the unity of the living culture it encircles. All sources of apollonian fantasy and dreams are in need of the myth that saves them from wondering about aimlessly. The images of the myth must be possessed, omnipresent guardians, protecting the development of the young soul, their messages conveying to man the meaning of his life and of his struggles."

### Ancient Greek terminology

Ancient Greek and Roman dictionaries do not offer a specific term that unequivocally denounces the act of suicide. Descriptions of suicide include irrational death, voluntary death... Antisthenes, founder of Cynic Philosophy and student of Socrates introduces the term "justifiable extraction" in order to describe the act of suicide. It is relatively clear that during antiquity, free will and the right to self-manage one's life were held as important values. Suicide is regarded as a virtue when committed under circumstances that insure the dignity and honor of the person committing suicide. Besides, words such as self-death, self-killing and self-murder appear in texts dated after the 1st century A.D.

### Aim

The present study is focused on highlighting suicidal behaviors in Greek mythology as well as on determining (if the case permits) the method used and the motive behind each act of suicide. Additionally, the present study aims at establishing any likely systematic differences between cases of suicidal behavior among men and suicidal behavior among women, as well as attempting to provide an explanation for any such observed differences. Finally, by studying suicidal behavior throughout Greek mythology, the present paper will attempt to put forth a discussion on the enduring and collective aspects of the phenomenon of suicide.

### Method

The cases of suicidal behavior presented in this study were drawn from a selection of various Greek myths, and were chosen on the basis of whether or not the mythical figures involved caused their own death either directly or indirectly, according to the main myth or a version of it. Para-suicidal behaviors were set as the study's exclusion criteria. In cases in which there appeared to be more than one version of the account of a selected method of suicide, the oldest version was chosen.

### List of cases of suicide in greek mythology

**Agravlos-Herse-Pandrosus:** Wife and daughters of Kekrops, who, according to one version of the myth, jumped from the Acropolis in order to escape from the young Erectheous who had the lower body of a snake. According to another version of the myth, the three women jumped from the Acropolis in order to save the city of Athens.

**Alea (Nymph):** Wife of Poseidon, who drowned in the sea after having been raped by her own sons.

**Antigone:** Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta. Hung herself when, as a result of her burying her brother Polynices, is condemned by Creon to being buried alive.

**Eurydice:** Wife of Creon and mother of Haemon. Stabbed herself with a knife when learning of Antigone's and her son's suicides.

**Canace:** Daughter of Aeolus. Stabbed herself with the sword given to her by her father after she had slept with her own brother (Macareus).

**Ino:** Daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia. Drowned in the sea after her son's murder.

**Protogonia-Pandora:** Daughters of Erechtheus, sisters of Cecrops. Committed suicide after their younger sister Otina agreed to sacrifice herself in order to save Athens from the Eleusinians.

**Alcestis:** Wife of Admetus. Poisoned herself in order to substitute her husband's death with hers.

**Glaucus:** Son of Sisyphus, father of Bellerophon. Drowned in the sea as a result of his sadness over Melicertes' fate.

**Polydora:** Wife of Protesilaus. Threw herself into a burning pyre whilst holding a statue of her husband sculpted prior to Protesilaus' journey to Troy. Her uncle, Acastus, had caught her sleeping with the statue in her arms, and had ordered for it to be burned in the pyre which Polydora then threw herself into.

**Evenus:** Son of Ares and wife of Alcippe. Drowned himself in the river Lycormas after being humiliated by his daughter Marpessa's abduction at the hands of Idas.

**Erigone:** Hung herself from a pine tree after finding the body of her father Icarius, the man who first produced wine.

**Niobe:** Jumped off a cliff, after first burning her children alive, so as not to be wed to her own father.

**Althaea-Cleopatra:** Althea, mother of Meleager, and Cleopatra, Meleager's wife, both committed suicide when, after burning a log of wood that was keeping Meleager alive, held themselves responsible for his death.

**Polymele:** Wife of Peleus and daughter of Actor, king of Phthia. Hung herself after hearing spiteful rumors that her husband planned to leave her.

**Stheneboea:** Daughter of Iobates and wife of Proteus. After Bellerophon rejected her advances, Stheneboea falsely accused him of rape before killing herself because of unfulfilled love.

**Aminias:** Tenacious suitor of Narcissus. Buried a dagger into his own chest at Narcissus' doorstep after Narcissus spurned his advances.

**Narcissus:** According to a version of the myth, Narcissus stabbed himself due to the agony of desiring his own unattainable self.

**Cephalus:** Son of Hermes and Herse. Jumped into the sea off the cape of Leucas after finding himself responsible for the death of his wife Procris (daughter of Erechtheus).

**Althaemenes:** Grandson of Minos. Fell into a stream after discovering that he had killed his own father, Catreus, with a spear.

**Ariadne:** According to the myth, hung herself in fear of the goddess Artemis' wrath.

**Aegeus:** Jumped into the sea and drowned, after mistakenly believing that his son, Theseus, had perished.

**Soloeis:** Companion of Theseus. Jumped into the river Terme after the amazon Antiope rejected his advances.

**Phaedra:** Hung herself after her stepson Hippolytus dismissed her advances. In revenge for her rejection, Phaedra wrote and left behind a letter accusing Hippolytus of rape.

**Menoceus:** Father of Jocasta. Jumped off the walls of Thebes, believing that he was responsible for the plague sent to Thebes by the gods as a result of Oedipus' actions.

**Jocasta:** Wife and mother of Oedipus. According to the known myth hung herself after finding out that Oedipus was her own son.

**Megareus:** Son of Creon. Like his uncle, Menoceus, Megareus jumped from the walls of Thebes in order to save his city from siege (Seven Against Thebes).

**Evadne:** Wife of Capaneus whom Zeus struck and killed with a thunderbolt. Evadne was burned alive after throwing herself onto her husband's funeral pyre so as not to be parted from him.

**Haemon:** Son of Creon. After failing to kill his own father, turns his knife on himself.

**Broteas:** Son of Tantalus. After being punished by Artemis who drove him mad, making him think that he was completely non-flammable, Broteas threw himself into a burning pyre. In another version of the myth, Broteas throws himself into the pyre because of everyone's repulsion of his ugliness.

**Chryssipus:** Son of Pelops. Killed himself out of shame after being raped by Laius when he was just a child.

**Hippodamea:** Wife of Pelops. Killed herself in Argolis.

**Pelopea:** Third wife of Atreus. Stabbed herself with her father's sword after realizing that it is he who had raped her and who is father to her son Aegisthus.

**Clymenus:** Hung himself after his daughter Harpalyce killed their son and served him up to Clymenus at a banquet.

**Erigone:** Daughter of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Hung herself after Orestes was pardoned by the Areopagus on charges of matricide.

**Androkleia-Alkis:** Jumped off the walls of Thebes in order to save their town from Erginus' siege.

**Cycnus-Hyrie:** Cycnus jumped into a lake in order to escape the persistent advances of Phylus. His mother, Hyrie, followed him into the lake.

**Pleiad Taygete:** Hung herself at the top of mount Taygetos after being raped by Zeus who gave her her son Lacedaemon.

**Hemerus:** Son of Lacedaemon. After a night of debauchery during which he defiled his sister, Hemerus jumped into the river Eurotas.

**Eurotas:** Laconian king who, after his dishonorable defeat at the hands of the Athenians, jumped into the river that now bears his name.

**Tanais:** Son of the Amazon Lysippe. Chose to drown himself than to give in to his incestuous desire of his own mother.

**Archippe:** Virgin companion of Artemis. Hung herself after being raped by Tmolus, son of Ares and Theogene.

**Deianira:** Wife of Hercules. Upon realizing her unwitting involvement in her husband's death, stabs herself in the heart.

**Macaria:** Daughter of Hercules. Committed suicide in Marathon so that the Athenians would defeat Eurystheus.

**Cleite:** Wife of Cyzicus. Hung herself when learning of her husband's death at the hands of the Argonauts.

**Aeson-Polymele:** Parents of Jason. Killed themselves in order to escape from Pelias. Aeson commits suicide by drinking the blood of a bull and Polymele by stabbing herself.

**Aesacus:** Son of Priam. Jumped off a cliff after the death of his beloved Asterope.

**Cinyras:** King of Cyprus. Committed suicide after realizing he commit incest with his daughter Smyrna.

**Ajax:** Son of Telamon. Falls upon his own sword after realizing the outcome of his dishonorable mania.

**Oenoe:** First wife of Paris. Depending on the version of the myth, Oenoe either jumps off the walls of Troy, hangs herself, or throws herself into Paris' funeral pyre, overwhelmed by remorse for not trying to heal Paris' wounds inflicted by Philoctetes.

**Polyxena:** Daughter of Priam. Stabbed herself in front of Achilles' grave in order to atone for not reciprocating Achilles' love while he was still alive.

**Phyllis:** Wife of Demophon, leader of the Athenians during the Trojan War. After her husband abandons her, Phyllis loses all hope that he would return, curses her husband and poisons herself.

### Results

Total amount of suicides: 59

Men: 22

Women:37

### Methods of suicide

	Men	Women	Total
Fire	1	3	4
Jumping from height	3	6	9
Drowning	10	2	12
Stabbing	4	5	9
Poisoning	1	2	3
Hanging	1	10	11
Unknown	2	9	11

A first glance at the results of this study will show that there appear to be more female than male mythological figures that commit suicide. Additionally, the method of suicide chosen by women shows a greater degree of variance than that chosen by men.

Specifically, the most frequently chosen method of suicide for female mythological characters appears to be hanging (10 out of 37 cases of suicide). This may seem intuitive considering the ease with which one may find a rope or a belt in everyday life. Virgil described suicide by hanging as the "utmost dishonorable death" and referred to it as "nodum informis leti" (the coil of unbecoming death). Out of the total 37 cases of suicide among female mythological characters, six are carried out by jumping from height. Jumping from height has been referred to as the "medium of the desperate" and had been widely reprehensible in ancient Greece. Suici-

de by stabbing appears to be a method of suicide frequently chosen by the wives of warriors, who utilize either their husbands' weapon or the weapon that killed their husband, in order to carry out the act of suicide.

The most frequently chosen method of suicide for male mythological characters, on the other hand, appears to be drowning, either in the sea or in a river. It may be highly intuitive that death by drowning would be the most frequently chosen method of suicide among men, however we must not overlook the fact that in several cases the method of suicide is not explicitly stated. Out of the total 22 male mythological characters that committed suicide, three chose the method of jumping from height, one of which fell toward the ground that opened up and swallowed him whole, whilst one character committed suicide by poisoning himself ("blood of a bull").

## **Motives behind the act of suicide**

### **Motives related to the character's past and motive's related to the character's future**

In an attempt to determine the motives behind suicidal acts in Greek mythology, the cases of suicide mentioned in the present study can, at a first stage, be divided into two groups: acts of suicide motivated by events that occurred in the mythological character's past and acts that took place in light of events that could take place in the future. In the first case, death appears to be the result of the hero's actions and comes as a form of resolution or catharsis with regard to the crisis in which the hero has found him/herself. In the second, and more tragic, case, suicide is a means of avoiding, altering or preventing a dreaded future event.

Acts of suicide associated with events in characters' pasts include cases in which a hero's past actions predetermine future death, such as in the case of incest and rape. Suicide, in this case, appears as a consequence of violence that is either exerted by the character or inflicted upon them by someone else. It is not necessary however that such acts of suicide are associated with or are a result of horrid or terrible deeds on behalf of the hero, but may instead result from either the physical or symbolic loss of a object of desire, as is the case of acts of suicide that follow rejection of one's love.

Acts of suicide, which are carried out in anticipation of future events, on the other hand, are characterized by an element of heroism. Death, in this case, is associated with the salvation of a given community. The hero takes his own life in order to save his city or in order to determine the outcome of a battle.

Caution is required when attempting to classify the acts of suicide listed in the present study according to the two aforementioned types of suicide. It is not always clear whether the motive behind a suicidal act lies in past events or in the anticipation of an inevitable future event. In other words, in certain cases it may not be evident whether a hero is lead toward suicide due to unbearable consequences of past events or in light of an incredibly ominous future.

## **Motives behind suicidal acts among women**

### **Love and suicide**

The element of love is highly prevalent in a large number of female suicides. Rejection from a desired other, either of the same or opposite sex, and unfulfilled love are both common causes for a multitude of female suicides. The pain associated with abandonment and fear of public defamation, are both important factors in female suicide in Greek mythology. Noted examples are those of Stheneboea, daughter of Iobates and wife of Proteus, who committed suicide by unknown means, after being rejected by Bellerophon, and Phyllis, who fell in love with and married Demophon, and who later hanged herself when Demophon abandoned her.

### **Loss**

The death of a relative (most commonly male) functions as a powerful motivation behind female suicide in antiquity. A woman's physical and emotional dependence on a male figure determines her personality and social role in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Within this context, female suicide can be understood as the ultimate act of loyalty toward the deceased relative. Whether the deceased is a husband, son, brother, or father, female suicide is seen as an act of vindication and recognition for the lost object of desire. In some cases, acts of female suicide are characterized by feelings of guilt and self-blame, feelings that are caused by the tragic figure's belief that she is responsible for her loved one's death, either as a result of her actions or of her carelessness.

Notable cases of suicide motivated by loss are that of Deianira, who stabs herself in the heart when learning of Hercules' death, Euridice, who stabs herself when learning of her son Haemon's suicide, and Erigone, who hangs herself after finding her father Icarus' dead body. Even more intriguing as an example of suicide motivated by loss, is the myth of Polydora, wife of Protesilaus. In this case, the object of loss, the wooden statuette of Protesilaus, is in fact an actual physical object, sculpted by order of Polydora herself following her

husband's departure for the Trojan War. We could posit that this object, Protesilaus' wooden statuette, functions as a transitional object, to which Polydora affords certain symbolic properties so that she can transition from her dependence on her husband characterized by a relationship bordering on fusion, toward a state of independence characterized by the loss of the actual object of her desire, her husband. Polydora sleeps with her husband's wooden statuette by her side, until she is discovered by her father who orders that the statuette, be burned in Protesilaus' funeral pyre. Unable to withstand this second, "symbolic", loss, Polydora throws herself into the pyre that turned both her husband and his statuette to ashes.

### **Shame-humiliation**

Rape appears frequently in Greek mythology. In ancient Greek society, rape is considered to be the utmost violent offense against a woman. The tragic woman commits suicide either in order to avoid rape, or a result of it, thus asserting her repulsion toward it and emphasizing the immense humiliation that it carries. Rape is a form of sexual violence, and constitutes a perpetuating (reoccurring) and cross-cultural issue that results in serious physical and psychological implications for the victim, which in most cases happens to be female.

An example of a tragic female figure that committed suicide as a result of rape is that of Archippe, virgin companion of the goddess Artemis, who hanged herself after being raped by Theogene, son of Ares.

An additional motive behind female suicide is incest. Incest is permitted only among gods, while among mortals it is considered an act of impiety that frequently results in death, most commonly by suicide. The most famous example of incest resulting in suicide is that of Jocasta, who hanged herself after discovering that her husband Oedipus is also her son. Another example is that of Canace, whose father, Aeolus, instructs her to stab herself after her incestuous affair with her brother Macareus, an affair that also leads to the birth of her son.

A more complicated case is that of suicide motivated by circumstances in which both rape and incest occur. In such a case, the tragic woman not only suffers from the humiliation that rape entails, but also from the disgrace brought to the holy institution that is family. It is as a result of such tragic circumstances, that the Nymph Alea drowns in the sea after being raped by her own sons.

### **Motives behind acts of suicide among men**

#### **Bereavement-loss**

The loss of a child appears to be an important motive behind suicide among men as well. Aegeus, mythical king of Ancient Athens, drowns in the sea after believing that his son, Theseus, was dead. The case of Aegeus is particularly tragic given that the actual loss of his son Theseus is not real. Aegeus therefore commits suicide in bereavement of a death that has not yet occurred. Guilt also plays an important role in Aegeus' decision to drown himself in that he feels responsible for his sons' violent death at the hands of the Minotaur, after consenting to his travels to Crete.

Rejection, whether by someone of the same or opposite sex, also acts as a motive behind several male acts of suicide. A few notable examples are that of Aminias, who stabs himself after being spurned by Narcissus, and Soloeis who drowns in a river after the Amazon Antiope rejects his advances.

#### **Wrath**

Wrath is an emotional state that may be a result of dishonor, physical or emotional trauma, and indignity. In certain cases, aggression initially directed toward third parties is often re-directed toward oneself in the form of suicidal behavior. In Greek mythology, this behavior characterizes only male characters. There are at least two noted examples of mythological heroes that commit suicide in a state of uncontrollable fury. The first case is that of Haemon, who, enraged by Creon's belligerence toward Antigone and after failing to kill Creon, turns his knife toward himself. The second case is that of Evenus, who, in a state of sadness and anger over the abduction of his daughter Marpessa at the hands of Idas, drowns in the river that now bears his name, after failing to thwart Idas' plans.

#### **Madness**

In Greek mythology, madness is regarded as god-send punishment placed upon mortals who refuse to pay tribute to their gods. Broteas, son of Tantalus, a formidable hunter, famous for his repulsive ugliness, refused to pay tribute to the goddess Artemis who, as punishment, "meddled with his reason". As a result, Broteas was inflicted with, what today would be referred to as, "delusions of grandeur" making him believe that his body is non-flammable, delusions that lead him to jump into a burning pyre.

#### **The case of Ajax**

The suicide of Ajax constitutes the most distinctive example of suicide in Greek mythology. Both ancient and contemporary writers have studied and attempted

to “interpret” the stages that comprise the emotional escalation leading up to Ajax’s suicide. At first, Ajax is humiliated and shamed when Achilles’ arms are awarded to Odysseus’ for his intelligence. His dignity and moral integrity disintegrate after realizing that in the newly prevalent value system, intelligence is of higher regard than physical strength and bravery. This fuels him with immense fury toward the leaders of the Greek army, Agamemnon and Menelaus, whom he holds responsible. His arrogance and presumptuousness with regard to his abilities and heroism constitute “hubris” toward the Gods, resulting in his punishment by the goddess Athena who drives him insane by clouding his conscience with delusions and hallucinations (madness-mania, rage). In a state of disarray and with an altered and foggy perception of reality, the “tragic” Ajax attacks the Greek army’s cattle and slaughters it. Finally, Ajax realizes his dishonorable deeds, sealing his tragic fate. Without regretting his actions, and continuing to insist on his pathological arrogance, Ajax recognizes that suicide is the only solution for eliminating the shame brought on by both Odysseus’ awarding of Achilles’ arms and his dishonorable actions, and also for maintaining and preserving his heroic identity. (“It is shameful for a man to live when disasters are only exchanged for other disasters”)

### Self-sacrifice

Self-sacrifice carried out in order to serve a military, patriotic or religious duty appears as a frequent cause behind several cases of suicide throughout mythology. Heroes often place the “common good” above their own interests and sacrifice themselves in order to fulfill a given prophecy. In this way, heroes anticipate and prevent oncoming crises and catastrophes that threaten their city. Such self-sacrifices usually consist of “group suicides”. Notable cases include that of the Erechtheides (Protoponia, Pandora, Otina), who committed suicide in order to save Athens from the Eleusinians. Another case is that of Agravlos, Herse and Pandrosus, who, according to a version of the myth, jump off the Acropolis in order to save Athens. A third example is that of Menoeceus (son of Creon), who, following the Oracle Tiresias’ prophecy, jumps off the walls of Thebes in order to save his city from siege.

### Interpretative approach

Throughout the process of studying and assessing the phenomenon of suicide throughout classical mythology and of investigating the possible motives behind each case of suicidal behavior, certain themes arise. At this point, an attempt will be made at assessing two of

these themes: the “heroic” death, and guilt. Both of these themes will be examined from the scope of modern scholars as it is clear that both of them are of a greater collective concern to society and play an important role in the development and formation of human behavior.

### “Heroic death”

A topic that merits consideration is that of the appearance of “heroic death” or heroic suicide as a product, a result, of the “heroic” way of life. Philologist Ioannis Sikoutres, whom himself committed suicide, sheds light on the topic stating: “Whether the death will be voluntary or involuntary is irrelevant. A heroic death is always voluntary in that the hero has consciously chosen a path that leads him, inevitably, toward death. Besides that, the hero usually chooses his time of death himself, a choice he strongly believes is his absolute right: If and when one will be born are not things that depend on one’s consent, however, departing from this life and choosing when to do so are decisions that God has bestowed on our responsible judgment.”

The essence of the heroic way of life partially excludes the concept of “suicide” but rather endorses voluntary death as the ultimate act in defense of a higher ideal. Such an ideal could in fact be the authority itself that one has over his own life, epitomized in the responsibility of deciding when to end it. The ancient Greek literature is replete with cases drawn from Greek mythology, where suicide constitutes the last resort in defense of a certain ideal, a prized possession which surpasses the individual’s own life. In a paradoxical apostrophe, this idea of choosing one’s own death, which highlights a sense of pronounced voluntarism that, according to Sikoutres, governs the heroic way of life, becomes the ultimate destiny of the hero: “The hero suffers his own downfall and pain but at the same time thrives in the moral necessity for his pain and loss. Furthermore: the hero becomes infatuated with his own downfall beforehand, he relishes it, and extracts a humorous form of solace precisely from his own downfall.”

The heroic death, or heroic suicide, is consequently seen as fateful, as Sikoutres avoids portraying suicide as something that may reflect possible psychopathologies or highlight the materiality of the experience per se.

Additionally, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and writer Giorgos Cheimonas, in his book “Peisistratos”, praises suicide as the ultimate act of freedom comparable to that of Creation. Furthermore, Cheimonas goes on to denounce mortality, matter, and the material world as a source of decay. According to Cheimonas, the only way to achieve Immortality is through suicide.

“Suicide, according to Peisistratos, is a grossly mis-



understood act. It is the most important deed that we can accomplish. Pain and creation comprise two intersecting circles. Each of our cells bears the pain that is brewed together with our own essence. All of us carry the same kind of pain with us, however not all of us experience it with the same intensity – that is another matter. Pain is the bearer of mortality and ends with death. It is the bearer of the tragedy that is inherent within every existence. Creation, on the other hand, is the presence of our ego in the world, the expression of our existence whether it is positive or negative. Both pain and creation become elated with suicide and form a marvelous coupling. Since I cannot birth my own self I will commit an equivalent act: I will destroy it. Extracting my self from matter, from materiality, I elevate my self against my mother that is fate. In this way I take from her the right to decide what the end of my life will be. She decided when it would start, I decide when it will end = I equate my authority to that of hers. I obtain the only medium that allows me to reach the Power, whatever its quality and quantity, with which I can stand facing the nebulous, arrogant figure of the Sphinx, as an equal. Is there any greater act of creation other than this?"

## Guilt

The term "feeling of guilt", as cited in the psychoanalytic dictionary of Laplace & Pontalis, refers to a certain emotional state that is the result of an act deemed by the person carrying it out as "reprehensible". Guilt can arise from specific causes ("the guilt of the criminal or self-accusations that appear to be irrational") or can present as a "diffuse sense of personal worthlessness unrelated to any particular deed for which the subject blames themselves". Freud classifies guilt into conscious and unconscious guilt. The unconscious feeling of guilt concerns the relationship between the Superego ("the condemning and punitive agent of the psyche") and the Ego and is articulated as a "need for punishment". The individual "does not feel guilty, but sick" (in the sense of unconscious guilt), and henceforth seeks punishment. Freud speaks of two such cases of a "need for punishment": "In the first case, the emphasis is on the excessive sadism displayed by the Superego toward the submissive Ego. On the other hand in the second case, the emphasis is on a masochistic Ego desiring punishment, exerted either by the Superego or by an external parental authority." The individual that carries out criminal deeds suffers, according to Freud, from this "dark" feeling of guilt, which emanates from the unacceptable and atrocious patricidal and incestuous desires. Freud goes on to suggest that carrying out "prohibited" criminal activities provides a sense of "psy-

chic relief" to the wrongdoer. In another text, Freud posits: "It is not of importance whether or not someone actually killed the father or if they held back from doing so. In both cases, the individual feels guilty since guilt is the expression of the ambivalent conflict, the eternal battle between Eros and the destructive drives, or Thanatos. This battle is manifested in the oedipal complex". With regard to clinical melancholia, the "sadistic" Superego attacks the Ego, "like a ...", often leading one to death. According to M. Klein, guilt places itself in the service of the death instinct, and "aims at eclipsing the life instinct".

## Conclusion

Since antiquity, the issue of suicide has constituted a subject of philosophical debate. According to Plato, the essence of philosophy itself is the "study of death", the separation of the soul from the body. In Plato's dialogue "Phaedo", Socrates states that philosophers who, rightly so, study how they will die are less fearful of death itself than other people are. A philosopher's primary virtue should be "prudence", and as such Socrates awaits his own death. The epicurean view on death, in brief, suggests that, "death is nothing to us". Many centuries later, Freud posits that anyone wishing to live truly and substantively must be prepared for death ("vis vitam para morte – if you wish for life, prepare for death").

As such, suicide submits itself to philosophical judgment. "To be or not be, that is the question" soliloquizes Hamlet, articulating as such, the foremost philosophical question (the dilemma of suicide) which man faces and to which he must provide an answer if he is to achieve absolute freedom. In other words, man must, in this way, realize he has a right, and is free, to choose "death" over "life", to hold responsibility for the choice of Being, and only then will he be truly free. Only in this way can man surpass his finite existence and liken himself to Nietzsche's Superman. According to Cheimonas, the drama and tragedy inherent in the case of Hamlet amounts to "his desire to die and his obligation to be involved. To live, in other words. They force him to live."

Nietzschean philosophy, after all, advises: "Die at your time; thus spoke Zarathustra. Of course, how can one who has not lived at his time ever die at his time? Could it ever be possible for him to never have existed? This is my advice to the needless... I praise you for my death, my desired death, the one that comes because I desire."

It is evident in Classical Mythology, as well, that suicide does not strictly constitute a reprehensible act. Mythological characters that commit suicide can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of chara-

acters that are motivated to commit suicide due to past events. Death, in this group, comes as an inevitable consequence of the hero's actions, as a form of resolution, of catharsis. The second, and more tragic group consists of heroes who end their own lives in order to avoid or alter the future, in anticipation of an oncoming crisis or catastrophe (self-sacrifice).

Through Myths, the ideals and values of a given era (honor, bravery, spousal loyalty and dedication, self-sacrifice for the "common good") emerge, which mythological heroes come to defend through the act of suicide.

From the study of suicide throughout Mythology, one can arrive at certain conclusions with regard to human nature, seeing as basic features of the psyche (anima) perpetuate throughout centuries and civilizations.

The Myth can provide helpful insight into the understanding of suicidal behaviors and of the mechanisms that govern human existence and conscience, inasmuch as mythological cases of suicide constitute important examples, useful to therapeutic practices focusing on suicide, regardless of psychotherapeutic perspective.

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