

MARCUS AURELIUS ON SUICIDE

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ABSTRACT. Current medical theory states that all, or almost all, suicide is the result of mental disorder. The aim was to explore the work of Marcus Aurelius, to understand the view of suicide that was held when Stoics philosophy was at its apogee. Appropriate literature was examined. Marcus Aurelius (a leading Stoic philosopher and successful Roman Emperor) wrote that adverse circumstances, in particular, being unable to live in accordance with one's beliefs, was sufficient justification for suicide. His work is an important link in the history of suicide.

Keywords: suicide; suicide prevention; history of medicine; philosophy

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Core tip: Suicide is not always, or almost always, a response to mental disorder. Focusing exclusively on the role of mental disorder leads to unnecessary blame (when suicide occurs) and prevents contributions from non-medical fields. Marcus Aurelius (Stoic philosopher and Roman Emperor) gave details of non-mental disorder predicaments which could lead to suicide. His work is an important link in the history of suicide.

Introduction

Leading medical authorities state, and it has been accepted by the general public, that suicide is always, or almost always, a result of mental disorder. This is a fallacy based either on lack of awareness, or the outright rejection

of the wisdom of other fields, including mythology, folk studies, philosophy, sociology, history, and literature and poetry. In all these fields, a large number of accounts of episodes of suicide indicate that this action is triggered, not by mental disorders, but non-medical predicaments ^[1].

Marcus Aurelius was a prominent figure in Stoic philosophy, the leading school in southern Europe from 300 BCE to around 200 CE (the “Hellenistic Age”). With respect to our previous work, this period sits between those of Greco-Roman mythology ^[2] and the Northern European folk stories ^[3].

The aim of this study was to describe the triggers of suicide (as they were comprehended by the Stoic school of philosophy) with particular attention to the thinking of Marcus Aurelius.

The Stoics

Zeno of Citium, a Greek, founded the Stoic school of philosophy in Athens around 300 BCE. Stoic philosophy holds that there is no higher authority than reason, and that Nature is governed by rational principles. For the Stoics, peace of mind can be attained by living in accordance with duty, virtue and nature. By virtue, they refer to moral excellence.

Epictetus (55–135 CE) encapsulated a central feature of Stoic theory: “Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them” ^[4]. Many important documents from this era have been lost, a notable exception is *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius ^[5].

The Stoics did not seek death, but equipped with a coherent philosophy, nor did they dread it. They believed that if a time came when one no longer wished to live – in circumstances of personal ruin or disgrace, or when enduring painful terminal illness – “the rational thing to do was to end one’s own life painlessly” ^[6].

With a strong sense of social duty, a number of them took stands against powerful people and were executed (Julius Canus) ^[7] or ordered to suicide (Seneca and Thrasea Paetus) ^[8]. The suicide of Seneca has been depicted many times in art works (for example, Francois Perrier, etching, *Seneca*, 1640, and Manuel Domínguez Sánchez, painting, *The suicide of Seneca*, in 1871) ^[9].

Cleanthes (330–230 BCE) was the second head of the Stoic school in Athens. He lived to 99 years of age and completed suicide ^[10] by refusing food.

Cato the Younger (95–46 BCE), a statesman in the late Roman Republic was a leading Stoic. When his forces were defeated by Caesar, rather than live under his rule, Cato stabbed himself. He was restrained and sutured, but tore out the sutures and his entrails, completing suicide. Pietro Testa made the etching, *The Suicide of Cato*, in 1648 ^[9].

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius (121–180 BCE) was born in Rome, into a wealthy, politically influential family. As a young man his greatest interest was Stoic philosophy. At the age of 19 years he became the leader of the senate. He married the Emperor's daughter at 24 years and they had more than a dozen children. He became (Joint) Emperor in 161 CE (at 40 years) in a time of disease and conflict with German tribes. He died of natural causes (at 59 years) and is remembered as a hardworking, effective administrator, but also as the leading Stoic philosopher of his time. While on campaign in the last decade of his life he wrote notes entitled *To Myself*, which were for his own self-improvement purposes. Posthumously, these were renamed *Meditations*^[5] and made available to the public.

Specific statements by Marcus Aurelius are provided in the next section. More generally, he believed that suicide is an appropriate action if carried out in a reasonable, rational and non-histrionic way, and that the only evil in suicide is when it is performed in passion (heightened emotions). He suffered a range of illnesses during his life and during the last he accelerated his death by abstaining from eating and drinking.

Meditations

Examination of this text reveals statements which, 1) encourage the reader to face death without dread, and 2) help the reader to develop the ability to face death without dread. There is a statement that 3), death (by suicide) is always an option, and another that, 4) senility is a predicament to which suicide may be the appropriate response. There are five statements that, 5) if the individual cannot or, is prevented from, living according to his/her beliefs, suicide is an appropriate solution. These are detailed below.

1. Statements which encourage the reader to face death without dread.
 - Death should “be thought of as no more than a process of nature” [5, p. 15].
 - “Take heart and wait for the end...” [5, p. 56].
 - “... we must follow whither so many great orators have gone before...” [5, p. 71].
 - “...dismiss from his mind the question how long he may have to live.” [5, p. 83].
 - “Soon earth will cover us all.” [5, p. 115].
 - “A short time and your eyes will close” [5, p. 135].
 - “... do not feel the departure to be a wrench...” [5, p. 136].
 - “... our race will soon be done...” [5, p. 146].

- “The hour of your departure draws near” [5, p. 154].
- “Pass on your way, then, with a smiling face” [5, p. 164].

2. Statements which help the reader to develop the ability to face death without dread.

- “... help towards disrespecting death is to think about those who cling greedily to their lives” [5, p. 42]. An earlier translation (1862) of this passage contains the statement, “Do not consider life a thing of any value” [11, p. 25].
- “Death: a release from...excursions of thought and from service to the flesh” [5, p. 66].
- When the individual is living amid unacceptable company, he/she should cry, “Come quickly, Death, lest I too become forgetful of myself” [5, p. 109].
- If one can “be concerned solely with the life which you are now living ...you will be able to pass the rest of your days in freedom from all anxiety” [5, p. 155].
- “... all things are born to change and pass away and perish, that others in their turn may come to be” [5, p. 159].
- “How small a fraction of all the measureless infinity of time is allotted to each of us” [5, p. 163].
- “when it matters nought to him whether his glimpse of this world be long or fleeting – not death itself can be a thing of terror for him” [5, p. 164].

3. Statement that death (by suicide) is always an option.

- “In all you say or think, recollect that at any time the power of withdrawal from life is in your own hands” [5, p. 14].

4. Statement that senility is special predicament, to which suicide may be the appropriate response.

- “The onset of senility...judge if the time has come to end his days on earth” [5, p. 19].

5. Statements that if the individual cannot or, is prevented from, living according to his/her beliefs, suicide is an appropriate solution.

- “But if men will not let you... (live according to your beliefs) ...then quit the house of life... ‘The hut smokes; I move out’ [5, p. 55].
- “If you are distressed by anything external... ‘But life is not worth living with this thing undone.’ Why then, bid life a good-humored farewell” [5, p. 102].
- If one is “dwelling in the midst of iniquity...end your life forthwith” (5, p. 108).
- “if...unable to hold your course (live according to your beliefs) ...bid farewell to life altogether” [5, p. 126].
- “attaining goodness and integrity? If you cannot live so, you need only resolve to live no longer” [5, p. 133].

Discussion

It is stated that a limitation of this type of study is that it is mere philosophy, history or literature and lacks the scientific approach central to psychiatry. We have the opposite view. Psychiatry has been too ready to embrace invalid “scientific” methods and has drawn incorrect conclusions about the triggers of suicide. Psychiatry has ignored or rejected the wisdom of philosophers, historians and sociologists, not to mention a range of social commentators, novelists and poets. To be able to assist patients, we need an understanding of human behavior which is broad and deep, and for this, at times, we need to look outside the profession of psychiatry.

The belief that suicide is always, or almost always, the result of mental disorder ^[12] has been supported by the “psychological autopsy,” a retrospective method which has been discredited ^[13]. The unfortunate consequences of this mistake include that medical and custodial staff can be inappropriately blamed when suicide occurs, and those who might be able to help (sociologists, leading societal figures, politicians, and members of the public) are discounted.

The aim of this work is to highlight the ideas of Stoic school of philosophy, particularly, through the writings of Marcus Aurelius. The term “stoic” is often taken as referring to people who are able to suppress their emotions. More accurately, the Stoics initiated the concept/practice that what we think influences what we feel, which led eventually to cognitive behavior therapy ^[4].

Marcus Aurelius became the (Joint) 16th Emperor of the Roman Empire and was known to have been intelligent and hard working. Born in 161 CE, he was the grateful heir of four centuries of Stoic philosophical thought. In *Meditations* ^[5] he did not comment on mental disorder leading to suicide, but repeatedly expressed the view that distress generated by situations could, and in certain circumstances should, be truncated by suicide.

Marcus Aurelius, along with his fellow Stoic philosophers, have critics ^[14] and champions ^[7]. We are not concerned with such criticism. Instead, we have demonstrated that this group forms a link in a chain of influential experts who believed that people in unacceptable predicaments may resort to suicide as a means of escape. He has a place between Greco-Roman mythology ^[2] and the Northern European folk stories ^[3]. Then came sociologists, leading historians ^[15], novelists (including Cervantes, Trollope and Dostoyevsky) and poets (including Coleridge, Plath and Oliver), with a similar message.

The Stoics were prominent philosophers for at least five hundred years, and Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor. They influenced the thinking of their time, and their legacy continues, contributing to the theoretical basis of cognitive behavior therapy ^[4, 7].

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