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An Update on Suicide Terrorism

Editor

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Title: An Update on Suicide Terrorism

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Abstract: The author considers the potential moral and ethical merits of suicide and suicide terrorism from a historical and philosophical perspective.

According to the Office of the Victims of Crime within the United States of America's Department of Justice, suicide terrorism is alive and well. Just a few examples along with the streams of suicide terrorism from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are the April 2005 suicide bombing of a Cairo, Egypt bazaar; a November 2005 suicide bombing of three hotels in Amman Jordan; an April 2006 suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, Israel; a July 2009 suicide bombing in Jakarta, Indonesia; two September 2009 suicide bombings of a fuel depot and an American business in Mogadishu, Somalia; and March 2010 explosions at Moscow subway stations by two women each wearing belts packed with plastic explosives.

Following up from a recent IBPP article entitled "The Psychology of Female Suicide Terrorism: Context and a Partial, Annotated Bibliography," one might best ponder not why so many engage in suicide terrorism but why so many more don't. There may be as many suicide terrorism motives worthy of support as of rejection. Some of these motives may be based on the assumption of the human as bad requiring a social force of good to counter the bad as in some versions of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes or Sigmund Freud. Other motives may be based on the assumption of the human as good but up against the badness of a social force as in some versions of the political philosophies of Karl Marx or Jean Jacques Rousseau. Still other motives might be asynchronous, random, indeterminate, and delinked from causal hypothesis.

And the same might apply to suicide. In fact, there may be little difference between suicide terrorism and suicide. Assuming suicide terrorism is defined as founded on political motive, suicide per se for personal and other allegedly non-political motives may also strike terror in the hearts and minds of those averse to it. And suicide for personal and other non-political motives may itself be a misnomer; because every intent and corresponding action may be at least partially political as some would interpret from the Lacanian psychoanalysis of the self.

Let's look at some of the main points of contention about the moral and ethical merits of suicide and suicide terrorism. They often are ignored in behavioral and social science research that bears mostly on the is of the why not the ought.

Honor and respect are often ascribed to martyrs fighting for a cause whether the martyrs are selfless or full of a self-loving even death as a road to victory. That one side of a struggle will not engage in suicide may be a weakness, even a fatal flaw that privileges the cause of the other side. The terror of what those who fear suicide of others are facing and what they can't face in themselves is a horror as antithetical to but as intense as what Kurtz faces in Joseph Conrad's *In the Heart of Darkness* (1902) and in the theater of the absurd what faces Major 'King' Kong in Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

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However, terror in others through one's own death may not be desired. Instead one may merely desire to live in a certain way that ineluctably invites death. Here, honor and respect go to Achilles and Socrates who respectively choose warrior and gadfly as pathway to death; a greater reverence to the Buddha who through enlightenment conquers and welcomes death and whose followers have at times embraced honor suicide; approval by some interpreters of Islamic text for the suicide jihadi, even if suicide is re-constituted as legitimate jihad to be compatible with literal proscriptions of it; approval of a figurative sati in Hinduism wherein one takes on life as the wife of a higher power now gone; and the Jainist support for the goal of literal and figurative starving to death even as causing the death of others may be proscribed.

Now, a digression on the worship and adoration of the Christian Son of God. To those who contend that it's God Word to not take one's life, one might respond that living in the Word and in the Life of God requires behavior leading to death—as in do what I do, not what I say. One might also take the tack popularized by John Donne in *Biathanatos* (1607) who critiques common Christian anti-suicide arguments. Donne is confronted with the usual assertions that suicide is against an extension of the 5th Commandment (an argument popularized by St. Augustine) and that it violates God's right to determine the length of our earthly existence, the community's right not to be hurt, and natural self-love (arguments popularized by St Thomas Aquinas). To these, Donne asserts that other acts of self-hurt (e.g., asceticism) are not necessarily proscribed, that suicide needs to be morally approached in situational context, that suicide is not overtly proscribed in Christian biblical scripture, and that other forms of violence and death including martyrdom are supported by Christian text.

In the history of Western thought, David Hume in "On Suicide" (1783) supports Donne's position and goes further in critiquing concepts such as divine order on which Christian proscription is based, while Immanuel Kant in *Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) rejects it. Kant concludes that as a moral being based on rational will, one cannot destroy oneself without rational contradiction. Of course, in studies of theodicy one also could argue that suicide is good and seems evil only because we don't understand God's will.

To engage in suicide behavior to avoid intolerable (psychological and physical) pain is more of a problematic position, but if the suicide is also conjoined with spiritual pain and retribution—as in the loss of the souls of one's beloved family or nation—so much the better. Thus, some of the Black Widows of Chechnya, the Naxalites of India, and Tamils of Sri Lanka. One might add to this relieving the shame and guilt of not adequately contesting the enemies of one's family or nation through suicide as tension releasing and admirable.

The negative reaction towards suicide terrorism and suicide may be a manifestation of the reactor's weakness not the weakness of the perpetrator. In a contest between human groups, those who are socialized enough to die for a greater good involving their people may well have the advantage. So, too, the individual who—even unsocialized—believes only certain ways of living are admirable and death should be chosen, when these ways of living are not possible—e.g., Seneca's suicide (65 CE) founded on living well not long, as long as one ought not as long as one can as described by Tacitus (56 CE -117 CE). Adding the libertarian and anarchist foundations against a nanny state and the utilitarian approach of greatest good for the greatest number of people, one is left with the question on suicide terrorism and suicide—too much or not enough?—with the not enough position well-defended.

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(Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu)