

*The Perversion
of Virtue*

Understanding Murder-Suicide

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Preface

This book is ambitious and single-minded about a grave subject. The goal of the book is to develop and defend a specific perspective on murder-suicide, one that borrows on established knowledge and concepts, but one that reorganizes and extends them into a coherent and incrementally novel understanding of the horror that is murder-suicide. By the book's end, I hope to have persuaded readers that the perspective developed in the book is viable, incremental beyond past work, and crucially, now ready to face off empirically with other perspectives.

The bootstrapping nature of this process deserves emphasis. The argument begins with facts, moves to conjecture, and builds from there to establish a theory of what defines murder-suicide and the thought processes that underlie it. The approach is inherently conjectural, as theory-building by definition is. My goal is to introduce a contender into the race to explain murder-suicide, not to call the race as finished.

In a field such as this, the race clearly is not finished, a main reason for which is the extent and quality of extant data on the phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, illuminating data on the mindset of the murder-suicide perpetrator are rare, and when available, incomplete. To this point, Liem and Nieuwbeerta state, "Most existing studies

on homicide-suicide do not focus on determinants and explanatory mechanisms...The few studies that do examine explanations of homicide-suicide are (qualitatively) descriptive in nature and include only a small number of homicide-suicide cases."¹

This state of affairs affects the current project as it would any project on murder-suicide, but it should be acknowledged that this book is acutely affected by this issue because the book's goal is to characterize the true mindset of the murder-suicide perpetrator. My approach is to work with what data are available, which often involve things like notes left behind by perpetrators, as well as behavioral observations made by those who knew the perpetrator. These can be quite revealing but have drawbacks as sole sources of data, as do purely anecdotal sources of information more generally. The gaps in the record are sometimes extensive enough that I speculate on the state of mind of the individuals involved. I attempt to make the tentative nature of these speculations clear and have confidence that readers can decide on their own whether they are plausible or not.

Inevitably, and I think naturally enough, the book, to a degree, favors its own argument. This would be natural enough even if there were many existing theories of the phenomenon of murder-suicide, but as the book shows, there are not. The book advocates for a particular perspective—an initial theoretical conjecture in the midst of a relative conceptual vacuum—and trusts readers' discernment regarding the merits or lack thereof of the explanation developed in what follows.

Murder-Suicide: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Initial Conceptualization

IN CONNECTICUT IN 1782, LYDIA BEADLE WAS MURDERED, as were her four children, who ranged in age from 6 to 11. Her headstone reads, “Fell by the hands of William Beadle/an infatuated Man who closed the/horrid sacrifice of his Wife/& Children with his own destruction.”¹ If William Beadle were intent on suicide, one might ask, why would he first kill his wife and children? Or, alternatively, did he kill his family rashly and then, in despair and as a consequence, kill himself? The headstone describes William Beadle as “infatuated”—what does this mean precisely? Why, fundamentally, did William Beadle perpetrate this appalling incident?

Crime perpetrated by one of us on a fellow human being opens up a unique window on our very souls. The ancient Roman playwright Terence wrote “Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto” (“I am human and nothing human is alien to me”).² Around two thousand years later, the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan said, “we are all much more simply human than otherwise.”³ Violent crime forces a

mirror on us: Why did he do that? What could have driven someone to such lengths? Given certain circumstances, do I have that in me?

In what follows, I propose some answers to these questions—answers that may surprise, maybe even shock. Truth regularly has this character. In fact, in his poignant *A Mathematician's Apology*,⁴ the eminent English mathematician G. H. Hardy described true—even beautiful—mathematical concepts as being initially surprising, but then, upon reflection and in retrospect, familiar, even obvious. The power of truth and beauty, in part, is that in rapid succession they startle us and then they ground us.

Mathematicians have perhaps more opportunities to understand and experience this power, but they have not cornered the market. Darwin's "bulldog," Thomas Henry Huxley, upon perceiving the core idea of Darwin's masterpiece and experiencing the attendant surprise, pleasure, and then familiarity, stated, "How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!"⁵

I have posed concepts in previous books that, although not Darwinian in profundity, I nevertheless contend have this character of initial surprise followed by knowing understanding. In *Why People Die By Suicide*,⁶ I argued that a kind of fearlessness is required to voluntarily face the daunting prospect of one's death, and that doing so necessarily involves a fight against ancient, ingrained, and powerful self-preservation instincts. Many are initially startled by this perspective on suicidal behavior—the concepts of fearlessness and suicide tend not to co-occur in the public mind—but upon reflection, it is conceptually obvious that confronting an extremely fearsome thing requires a certain fearlessness, just as it is empirically obvious that many highly suicidal people shrink from enacting their own deaths, despite genuine desire and intent to die, the obstacle being an uncontrollable fear of death. This perspective surprises people at almost the same time it induces them to say things like, "oh, yes, of course."

In *Myths About Suicide*,⁷ I argued that death by suicide is neither cowardly, vengeful, controlling, nor selfish. Here too, these claims contradict certainties in the public mind, and thus are received with surprise. And yet, regarding for example the question of selfishness, when it is documented that most if not all suicide decedents believe (wrongly and tragically) that they are doing everyone a favor, and that many take planful steps to lessen the massive blow of their

deaths on others, selfishness seems, at first surprisingly and then in retrospect clearly, to have no role.

In the current book on murder-suicide, I believe I have similar claims in store—conjectures that may surprise somewhat, but that I hope will have the ring of truth upon reflection. In response to the assertion “I see that suicide is not cowardly, vengeful, or selfish, but murder-suicide obviously is,” I respond: “it depends on the motive, and most, perhaps all, motives for murder-suicide—at least as understood by the person enacting it—are neither cowardly, vengeful, nor selfish.”

On the contrary, the motives for murder-suicide involve virtue.

To mention virtue’s involvement in atrocity is surprising, and indeed, many cringe reading that last sentence, understandably, because something as seemingly senseless and (often) as brutal as murder-suicide seems far from virtuous. But, as I will show in what follows, murder-suicide is not senseless, if what is meant by “senseless” is “impossible to make sense of.” From the perspective of the person engaging in murder-suicide, the act is subject to a tractable and internally coherent logic.⁸ This logic is underlain by appeals to virtue—a perverted and horribly distorted version of it to be sure—but, perhaps uncomfortably, a version of it that retains its essence as virtue even despite the distortions and perversions. This view will take us on a journey that involves understanding murder *per se*, suicide *per se*, their convergence in often horrible incidents of murder-suicide, the essence and types of virtue, and crucially, how the perversion of virtue is the *sine qua non* of genuine murder-suicide.

To get an initial sense of this approach, imagine, for instance, that you are completely certain that someone you care for is suffering intolerably, that her agony will only increase, and that her death, though assured, is still days or perhaps even weeks away. Imagine further that you are quite certain that she has signaled her wish for you to help her in dying (even if at the moment she is uncommunicative due to her condition). Would you find it virtuous to do so?

On behalf of some of their physicians, the people of Oregon (and now also those of Washington state and Vermont, and functionally though not affirmatively legally, Montana) have answered “yes.”⁹ Under Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act, passed in 1997 and enacted in 1998, terminally ill patients may make a written request to die, and then another, and the requests must be separated by at least 15 days.

Certification by a physician that the patient is mentally competent to make the decision to die, and that the patient does not have a mental disorder like depression, is also required. In such cases, physicians may write prescriptions for lethal doses of medication; it is up to the individual to actually ingest the medication (and not all who are written prescriptions follow through, sometimes because natural death intervenes, but also because people waver in their resolve...¹⁰ as is only natural: resolve to die is inherently difficult to sustain, and this is true for everyone, even the terminally ill and the suicidal).

In writing prescriptions for lethal doses of medication, what are physicians' motives? One motive is written into the very name of the law—that is, concern for people's dignity. Two other motives are clearly involved as well, namely mercy and respect for self-determination. The causing of the death is justified with an appeal to virtues like mercy.

Now, imagine a very different scenario, but with many of the same parameters—that you are sure that people you care for will suffer badly, and that death will bring a quick end to their ongoing ordeal. Imagine further that you are quite certain that death is best for them. This is the situation not only of some physicians in Oregon working under the Death with Dignity Act, but also of two California parents who decided to kill their five young children before killing themselves.¹¹

It is jarring to read of physicians and these parents as comparable because, in so many ways, they are not. But that should not obscure a crucial similarity: in both scenarios, the causing of the death is justified by appeals to virtues such as mercy. This is a fundamental motive for Oregon physicians, just as it was, *in their minds*, of Ervin Antonio Lupoe and his wife, who, according to a letter left by Lupoe, decided together that they and their children should die following numerous family stresses and strains, including the fact that both parents had recently lost their jobs. In the letter, Lupoe termed the family's life a "horrendous ordeal" and explained that he and his wife "felt it better to end our lives" and would not think of leaving their children behind to suffer the ongoing, cruel ordeal that fate had bestowed on them. The five children ranged in age from 2 to 8.

The Lupoes killed their children not out of anger, cruelty, or sadism. Neither did they kill them out of insanity, if that term is

meant to convey the kind of psychosis that can occur, for example, in postpartum psychoses during which mothers occasionally kill their infants because they believe that they were instructed to do so by God or that the baby is possessed by the devil. Rather, the Lupoes believed that killing their children was the merciful thing to do. The Lupoes probably did not misunderstand mercy itself, for, as occurs in Oregon, causing death can indeed be viewed as legitimately merciful; instead, they profoundly and tragically misunderstood their current situation and their children's future.

Though it can be hard to see it through the haze of horror, the logic of mercy is intact in the Lupoes' actions. Given first principles or assumptions of irremediable agony and needless suffering, some view death as merciful, including some Oregon physicians and parents like the Lupoes. The considerable difference between the two groups inheres not in their understanding of mercy but in their understanding of first principles. The Lupoes were mistaken in their assumption of the irremediable agony and needless suffering of their children; once they had made that assumption, however, there was an internally consistent logic to their actions, and the virtue of mercy was central to that logic. That this is uncomfortable to ponder does not make it untrue.

Of course, not all murder-suicides can be laid at the doorstep of misapplied mercy; other virtues are involved too. Indeed, the identification of the specific virtues involved in various murder-suicide incidents produces a comprehensive yet parsimonious typology of murder-suicide and may shed light on the nature of virtue itself.

A typology with these characteristics is sorely needed, for three reasons. First, accurate description is a necessary precondition to deep understanding, and previous descriptive frameworks have been bedeviled, at least to a degree, by inaccuracy, unwieldiness, or both. As will be expanded upon at the beginning of Section 2, past typology efforts¹² focus on the identity of the victim (e.g., spouse vs. extrafamilial) and on an array of motives and other factors (e.g., euthanasia, altruism, substance abuse, psychosis, seizure disorder). In my opinion, past frameworks are descriptive (perhaps overly so)¹³ but not explanatory. The taxonomy presented in this book represents an attempt at a novel and useful scholarly contribution, geared toward valid and parsimonious description as well as toward explanation.

Second and relatedly, an accurate descriptive framework can establish the foundation on which to understand the specific thought processes in the murder-suicide perpetrator's mind—essential to a full understanding of the phenomenon and, to a degree at least, isomorphic with developing a new theory of murder-suicide. Third, as one of the book's concluding chapters will show, this taxonomy has potential utility in clinical and law enforcement contexts in that it may aid in the identification and thus potential prevention of unfolding murder-suicide incidents. Useful applied and clinical implications tend to flow from valid descriptive frameworks (e.g., Kraepelinian approaches to mental disorders as seen in the modern DSM, controversies regarding DSM-5 notwithstanding).

Four Virtues Are Perverted in Murder-Suicides

The typology proposed in this book includes six categories, four of which, I contend, represent true species of murder-suicide, and two of which contain neighboring phenomena, which, though they share some features with true murder-suicides, are nevertheless distinct. The four categories of true murder-suicides correspond to the misapplied virtues of mercy, justice, duty, and glory. True murder-suicides, this book will argue, always involve the perversion of one of these four virtues. The perversion does not distort the four virtues beyond recognition; instead, it involves the gross misperception of when and how virtue should be applied.

Notice something, incidentally, about these four virtues. Unlike virtues such as freedom or autonomy, mercy, justice, duty, and glory are *interpersonal* virtues. In my judgment, this is not coincidental, a point that is expanded upon later in the book.

A fifth category lies just outside the boundaries of true murder-suicide. Consider an incident in which a person plans another's murder and also plans to then escape to another country and assume a new identity. The murder occurs but the plan for escape falls apart. With the police closing in on him, the murderer kills himself. A murder has occurred, as has a suicide, and thus it is not hard to imagine why some would classify this as a murder-suicide.

But, according to the perspective developed here, it is not. In forensics, in courtrooms, in clinics, and elsewhere, an essential issue regarding violence, either other- or self-directed, involves *motive*.

A companion concept is *intent*. Incidents such as a planned murder followed by a botched escape, and then and only then, suicide, are primarily about murder. Indeed, they would be *only* about murder were it not for the happenstance of the failed escape. The motive—the intent—is murder, and it is inaccurate to characterize suicide in these incidents as primary. To do so would give suicide a weight in these incidents that it does not deserve; as grave as it is, suicide is nevertheless peripheral in these instances.

By contrast, in true murder-suicides, at least according to this book's perspective, suicide is not only primary, but it is also the source of all that follows, especially including the appalling murders; in murder-suicide, murder occurs because of suicide, as a consequence of suicide having been settled on, and as a result of perpetrators perverting virtue along the lines of "If I am to die it is virtuous that they do too."

A sixth category will be discussed as well, a type in which the intent is suicide, there is no thought that it would be virtuous to kill others, but others are killed nevertheless. This latter category can be viewed as a perversion of fate and involves suicides that unintentionally cause other people's deaths. Of the million or so deaths by suicide that occur worldwide each year, a few accidentally also cause someone else's death. For example, those who jump from the upper floors of a building risk landing on someone who has walked out the building's ground-floor door, killing both people. Alas, this very thing occurs, though it is mercifully rare. Of course, this category does not fit the definition of murder-suicide *per se*, which involves both intentional homicide and suicide—the technical term for this phenomenon, I suppose, is manslaughter-suicide, an even more chilling phrasing than murder-suicide. It is consistent with this book's thesis that a phenomenon in which virtue is not involved—fate is not a virtue—is also one that clearly does not qualify as murder-suicide *per se*.

Of the four misapplied virtues involved in true murder-suicides, justice and mercy represent the two most common types. For the individual contemplating a murder-suicide that he¹⁴ thinks is about justice, the line of thinking is along the lines of "Soon I'll be dead. But is it fair that I suffer that end, while those who have deeply wronged me go unpunished and happily live on? Certainly not. But that is what will happen unless I deliver justice myself." Here, as

with the virtue of mercy and the horrible end of the Lupoe family, it is not the virtue that is misunderstood, because justice should be swiftly applied to those who have deeply wronged. Rather, it is the surrounding circumstances that are misunderstood, and that exert a distorting effect on the virtue in question.

Murder-suicides involving perversions of mercy and justice are horrible; they leave numerous people dead—the incident involving the Lupoe family took seven lives—not to mention the effects on family, friends, witnesses, and investigators, and not to mention the costs of lost years of productivity, funerals, insurance settlements, police and other investigations, and so on. Much the same can be said of incidents in which the virtue of duty is perverted.¹⁵ On all these parameters, as bad as murder-suicides distorting mercy, justice, and duty are, they are often outpaced by those involving a perverted sense of glory.

As well known as the incident at Columbine High School in Colorado is, relatively few seem to grasp the shooters' fundamental motives. Fifteen people lost their lives at Columbine (including shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed 13 people before killing themselves), and many more were injured. Many, including most in the media, viewed the incident, to use the terminology and framework developed in this book, as murder-suicide based on the perversion of the virtue of justice. That is, many media outlets reported that the two shooters had been bullied and otherwise victimized by particular subgroups of other students, especially athletes. In the incident, so the reporting said, athletes were singled out for revenge—a perversion of justice.

However, this is not what happened. None of those killed were singled out because they were athletes;¹⁶ and, as the journals and videotapes the boys left behind demonstrate in disturbing detail, their motive was a perverted version of glory. Their explicit goal was to outdo Timothy McVeigh (who was responsible for 168 deaths in the Oklahoma City bombing); the boys easily would have done this had their bombs not malfunctioned. Their goal was to be remembered forever—perverted glory.

As will be drawn out in the chapter on perverted glory, the Columbine tragedy illustrates a fundamental property of murder-suicide, at least as viewed here. The evidence clearly suggests that the boys' suicidality formed first, well before plans for

the shooting. Suicide was primary for both boys; homicide—and in their distorted view of it, glory—came later. This represents a general principle applicable, I will argue throughout the book, to all true murder-suicides. Suicide is always primary; it is decided on first and thus becomes part of the “first principles” assumptions that perpetrators of murder-suicide make.¹⁷ In the case of the Lupoes, their logic about their children’s future flowed from the primary decision that the Lupoes themselves would not be around to fend for the children, because the Lupoes had decided on suicide—the note they left makes this clear. Demographic research on murder-suicide affirms this view, in that those who enact murder-suicide have demographic profiles that resemble those of suicide decedents more so than they do those of murderers.¹⁸ As will be drawn out in a later chapter on the applied implications of the model developed here, if it can be shown that suicide is fundamental in murder-suicide, then suicide prevention is also murder-suicide prevention.

As alluded to already, there is a category of incidents in which people purposefully kill others and then kill themselves, but which, according to the view articulated in this book, do not qualify as genuine murder-suicide. The “Santa Claus” killer fit this type.¹⁹ In December 2008, Bruce Pardo donned a Santa Claus suit and went on a shooting rampage at a party, killing his ex-wife, her parents, and several others. As he was shooting, he sprayed racing fuel throughout the house and set it ablaze. His body was later discovered approximately 25 miles from the scene; he had died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The description of this incident thus far makes it sound like a “justice”-type murder-suicide; perhaps Pardo was intent on his own death but believed that if he were to die, it would only be fair for others who had wronged him, such as his ex-wife and her family, to die too. But there is a key difference between “justice”-type murder-suicides and the incident perpetrated by Pardo. In genuine “justice”-type incidents, the perpetrator plans his suicide and, as a consequence thereof, plans others’ deaths. But Pardo didn’t plan his suicide; he planned his escape (to Canada) following the killings.

His plans went awry; in the course of spraying the house with racing fuel, he accidentally soaked his Santa Claus suit with the fuel. The fuel in the suit ignited, searing it into Pardo’s skin and causing third-degree burns. He was injured severely enough that escape to

Canada became impossible. He had a backup plan, and that involved death by a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Suicide emerged in the mix of Pardo's planning, but it was secondary to escape. If things had gone according to his preferred (and horrible) plan, suicide would not have entered into it at all. He appeared to use an "if-then" kind of reasoning, along the lines of "if I perpetrate these murders and if escape fails, then I will take things into my own hands and kill myself." It is the "take things into my own hands" impulse—and its corollary "avoid dealing with public scorn, the authorities, and prison"—that I suggest puts this category adjacent to but outside the realm of true murder-suicide. It is adjacent because a virtue and its perversion can be discerned; namely, self-control or autonomy in the "take things into my own hands and die" line of thought (a line of thought, as we will see, that can be involved in genuine murder-suicides involving the perversion of justice). It is outside the realm, though, because unlike true murder-suicides, these incidents prioritize murder, and also because, to the degree that a distorted virtue is involved, it is a self-focused, non-interpersonal virtue.

Genuine murder-suicides, the present perspective asserts, start with the decision to die by suicide, which leads to the perversion of an interpersonal virtue, which leads, in turn, to murder. The interpersonal nature of the implicated virtues is expanded upon throughout the book; to briefly foreshadow this aspect of the argument, the distortion of specifically *interpersonal* virtues is involved in part because murder is involved, and murder, of course, is interpersonal, intimately and horribly so.

The "Santa Claus" incident illustrates another theme that will recur throughout the chapters that follow. Although my claim is that all murder-suicides can be classified within a taxonomy based on distorted virtue and most fit cleanly within one category, some events span categories. The Pardo incident would not have included suicide at all if not for his failed escape plan and his invoking self-control in his decision to kill himself, and so it belongs outside the category of true murder-suicide. But there are clear elements as well having to do with Pardo's distorted sense of justice. He meted out revenge—his version of justice—on his ex-wife and her family. Indeed, had Pardo's awful plan worked, the incident would have been like most murders—killings perpetrated in anger for the sake of revenge...²⁰

another reason to ultimately classify this incident as outside the realm of murder-suicide *per se*.

Nature can be like that—even true categories have fuzzy edges, and occasionally the edges of adjoining categories overlap.²¹ This speaks to a potential advantage of the taxonomy that this book will propose and defend: despite nature’s fuzzy edges, virtually all murder-suicides fit neatly within the proposed categories. Of course, it is also possible that the fuzziness has to do not with nature, but with a weakness of the framework developed here, a possibility explored further in this book’s final chapter.

The Virginia Tech killer fits well within one of the four core areas of true murder-suicide, but with some undertones of a second core area. His primary motive, he genuinely believed, was justice, but there were undertones of glory in his way of thinking as well. As with Columbine, the true motives in the Virginia Tech incident have been obscured somewhat by the media’s coverage and interpretation of the event, and, also as with Columbine, reference to the virtue-based typology proposed here would bring the killer’s motive into clearer focus.

In the videos he recorded and in his suicide note, Cho voiced his contempt for wealthy people, complaining about his peers as “rich kids” and “deceitful charlatans” and as regularly engaging in “debauchery.” In those same materials, Cho compared himself to Jesus Christ, in that, by killing the “rich kids,” he would become “the savior of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the poor, and the rejected.”²²

In his comparison of himself to Christ, and in some of the other materials Cho sent to NBC, references to the virtue of glory can occasionally be detected. But, in Cho’s mind, the reason he would receive glory is because he would deliver justice; the virtue of justice was primary for him (and grossly perverted by him).

The panel that investigated the incident foreshadowed the prevailing theme of this book. They wrote of Cho, “his thought processes were so distorted that he began arguing to himself that his *evil* plan was actually doing good.”²³ President Obama said much the same thing about the Ft. Hood psychiatrist who, in 2009, killed 13 people (apparently expecting that he too would be killed in the process; he nearly was, but survived). The President characterized the incident as involving “twisted logic”—stated differently, the perversion of virtue.²⁴

The Definition of Genuine Murder-Suicide

What is a murder-suicide; what is its technical definition? This may seem an achingly obvious question—it is simply an occasion when someone perpetrates one or more murders followed by his/her own suicide, right? The opening quotation to Hervey Cleckley's²⁵ *The Mask of Sanity*—a work to which we will return—is “Non teneas aurum totum quod splendet ut aurum,” attributed to Alanus de Insulis, and translated “Do not hold as gold all that shines as gold.”

In some ways, “a murder followed by a suicide” is a quite true and serviceable definition, but it nevertheless glosses over some important details and thus can be viewed as fool's gold. For example, what of the legal distinction between murder and, for instance, unpremeditated homicide (or for that matter manslaughter)? What of circumstances in which an individual kills others, and then dies by suicide a year later...or ten years later?

I have already alluded to one characteristic of promising intellectual ideas—they surprise and quickly thereafter produce the thought “of course, how could it be otherwise?” My claim is that viewing murder-suicide as a perversion of virtue has this characteristic, a claim I will attempt to deliver on in the pages and chapters that follow.

Another feature of promising intellectual ideas is that they are born into a sea of problems that they themselves help to solve—they serve as a lever in the Archimedean sense of “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.”²⁶ A very satisfying example from the history of science involves the unusual orbit of Mercury. In the last half of the 19th century, this anomaly was recognized as a serious problem for Newtonian physics, which expected an elliptical orbit for Mercury (and for the other planets too)—and there were additional problems for Newtonian physics beyond Mercury's puzzling orbit. Einstein's theory of general relativity was born into this sea of problems and in quick order solved many of them. Why is Mercury's orbit unusual? What, from a Newtonian perspective, is befuddling is, from Einstein's theory, not only explicable but predicted: the Sun's strong gravity has many effects, including the curvature of space. These effects are especially strong “locally,” and Mercury, the closest planet to the Sun, is local. One consequence for Mercury of being local is a noticeable

alteration in its orbit. The effects of the Sun's gravity, of course, do not stop at Mercury; the orbits of the other planets are altered, too, but they are far away enough from the Sun that the effects are difficult to detect. Einstein's theory, developed in the early 1900s, can precisely predict alterations in celestial objects' orbits, such as those of the dwarf planets Pluto and Eris, which were not discovered until decades later. Powerful theories thus not only solve problems that have puzzled people for years or decades, but they also lay in wait to solve problems of which people are not yet even aware. Einstein's work is a towering example of a theoretical model's explanatory power (and of imperfection even in towering work, as subsequent work in physics has shown regarding some of Einstein's views).

I am not aiming to explain the mysteries of the universe, but nevertheless, can the model I am proposing here solve some of the problems it was born into, like the definitional ones involving the legal distinction between murder and unpremeditated homicide, and the "time lag" problem?

I believe it can, although it is also bound to have its own imperfections. If, as this book contends, suicide is always decided on first in murder-suicide incidents, and thus is a point of departure from which perpetrators of murder-suicide plan others' deaths, then the question of premeditation is solved. Murder-suicides are inherently premeditated. "Murder-suicide" is thus a defensible term; expanding the term—as some have suggested—to something like "homicide-suicide" is not only unwieldy but could also be viewed as inaccurate.

It is interesting to consider the premeditated nature of murder-suicide in light of Meloy's²⁷ distinction between predatory and affective violence.²⁸ Affective violence, according to this perspective, is emotional and reactive, involving high autonomic arousal, and with threat reduction as a main motive. Predatory violence, by contrast, is relatively unemotional and is planned and purposeful (this account is compatible with those that emphasize instrumental/proactive vs. reactive forms of violence).²⁹ The present perspective on murder-suicide includes both affective and predatory elements. The emphasis is on premeditation, a key aspect of the predatory type; however, because of the involvement of virtue and its perversion, emotion runs very hot, a key aspect of the affective type.

This perspective also illuminates, and perhaps solves, the "time lag" problem. Any murder that is planned as an antecedent to suicide,

and that in the process perverts virtue, qualifies as a murder-suicide incident according to this book's perspective, and this is true irrespective of the time interval between the murder and the suicide. Given the contingent nature of suicide and murder in these incidents, and given that both are tied together in perpetrators' minds by a perversion of virtue, it is no surprise that the time interval between murder(s) and suicide is almost always on the order of minutes or hours.

But it need not be. This framework allows for the rare possibility of an interval of days or even longer. For example, the following scenario would qualify as a murder-suicide, despite a week-long interval. A man living in California decides on suicide and plans his death for a specific California location. But, in a perversion of the virtue of justice, he believes his ex-wife, now living in New York, should die too. The man travels to New York, perpetrates the murder, and takes several days traveling back to California. Once there, he spends two days attending to final affairs and then dies by suicide as planned, a full week after his wife's death. The time lag in this example, though considerable, does not alter the essential nature of this incident as a murder-suicide: premeditated murder occurred and was preceded by plans for death by suicide, all in the name of virtue as understood by the perpetrator.

Death by Suicide, Far from Being Impulsive, Is Premeditated, as Is Murder-Suicide

Time elapsed between murder and suicide is thus not a fundamental aspect of the definition of murder-suicide. This is a refrain of a related truth regarding suicide *per se*, a truth that is very widely misunderstood, and one that I will dwell on here because it informs an understanding of murder-suicide as well. Understanding suicide *per se* is essential to the argument of this book for many reasons, including that the framework developed here views murder-suicide as a subset of suicide in general.

Many people assume, quite wrongly, that suicide occurs literally impulsively, on a whim, in true "spur-of-the-moment" fashion. Consider, to take just one of many possible examples, the following passage from a book that is otherwise well done; the passage is discussing the nature of suicide: "For some, it is a daring recreational

maneuver that goes a little too far, often in the setting of drunkenness or a drug high. Momentary desperation impels others to jump off a cliff, a building, or a bridge or in front of an oncoming train or bus. If one is faced with a lethal opportunity in the here and now, death can be achieved impulsively, courtesy of an instantaneous decision."³⁰ This is just not so; if it were, one would expect the majority of suicide decedents to have alcohol or drugs of abuse in their systems at the time of death as revealed by toxicology reports. But the clear minority do—another surprising and underappreciated fact and one that will be expanded upon later in the book.

Compare the foregoing passage on "impulsive suicide" to the following account from *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison,³¹ about her own experience with suicidal behavior: "for many months I went to the eighth floor of the stairwell of the UCLA hospital and, repeatedly, only just resisted throwing myself off the ledge."³² Eric Wilson's³³ memoir *The Mercy of Eternity* contains several passages on suicidal thinking that also ring true and, not coincidentally, also contradict the notion of "suicide on a whim." For instance, describing the many times he had imagined his death by hanging, he wrote, "I witnessed myself hanging from one of the rafters in our basement. I was swaying dead from side to side, the wood squeaking slowly. A naked lightbulb glared on my shocked blind eyes."³⁴

These are the true signatures of serious suicidal behavior: a long (months-long in Jamison's and Wilson's experience) process of thought and behavior, in complete contradistinction to the notion of death by suicide on a mere whim.³⁵

A similarly informative example, and one that is particularly haunting and tragic as well, occurred in the Boston area. A man in his 30s approached Harvard Yard, scaled the steps of Memorial Church, and fired one gunshot into his temple. One might conjecture that the man impulsively decided to enact his death on this particular day, but such supposition could not be more contradicted by the facts. For the previous five years, the man had worked on his suicide note, which, when finished, totaled 1,905 pages and contained 1,433 footnotes and a 20-page bibliography.³⁶ An essential point is that, as extreme as the preparation of a books-length note is, it is far *more* representative of death by suicide than is the notion that suicide occurs on a whim (a true example of which I have been challenging audiences to point me to for years, and to date I have been persuaded of no such cases,

while all the while cases involving deliberation and planning happen daily). Imagine, incidentally and hypothetically, that the man's very long suicide note had never been discovered, and that he had disclosed his years-long suicidal process to no one. His death, under that scenario, could appear to have been impulsive, when it was no such thing.

In actual fact, death by suicide—like the phenomenon of murder-suicide—is an extremely fearsome and daunting thing and thus requires considerable thought, planning, and resolve. And even when these have occurred, even when people are, by all accounts, expressly and deeply suicidal, even then, many people back away from death at the last moment. Or, people wish they could back out at the last moment but cannot because they have already initiated a sequence that should lead to their deaths, as the accounts of the very few people who survive a jump from the Golden Gate Bridge show. These lucky few report a profound regret at their decision, in mid-air, during the four seconds the fall takes (and this fact illustrates one of the many deep tragedies of suicide, because it indicates that a large proportion of those who die likely regretted their decision too).³⁷ This is only as it should be in creatures evolved to be self-preserving.

The myth that suicide occurs impulsively in “spur-of-the-moment” fashion is deeply entrenched in the public mind. I anticipate, therefore, that a similar misunderstanding exists regarding murder-suicide, and thus it is worthwhile to explore this issue in some depth at this juncture, first as regards suicide *per se* and then using that discussion as a lens through which to understand the same issue as applied to murder-suicide.

People view death by suicide as occurring rashly for a few reasons. First, suicide can genuinely surprise decedents' loved ones, seeming to come completely from “out of the blue.” “Spur of the moment” and “out of the blue” have an understandable conceptual compatibility in people's minds: things that come from “out of the blue” impinge on our awareness suddenly, and suddenness is a feature of true “spur-of-the-moment” phenomena. An essential distinction, however, is between the suddenness of the phenomenon in question and the suddenness with which it enters our awareness. Small meteors come literally “out of the blue” and quite suddenly enter the awareness of happenstance observers, but it is inaccurate to describe them as “spur-of-the-moment” things (especially considering the

eons-long journeys of many of them). Similarly, death by suicide can shock a decedent's loved ones *and* be planned for weeks, months, or even years. This is because of the human capacity, quite stunning in some cases, for privacy and secrecy.

Thus, a first reason that the "impulsive suicide" myth persists is that people cannot believe that a loved one planned something so momentous as death and kept the process private. A second and closely related reason is that it can be extremely disconcerting for family members to consider that they did not know *everything* about their loved one, now lost to suicide. I have spoken to bereaved people who are absolutely certain that suicide is an inherently impulsive act, because to think otherwise is to allow that their loved one harbored life-and-death thoughts and kept them private. This understandable reaction occurs in many but especially in the parents of female teens or young women who have died by suicide; like many (but certainly not all) parents of girls, they came to expect an openness about even very sensitive things. They assume—alas, wrongly, I am afraid—that this openness would attach to every last thing, to include plans for suicide. This assumption of complete openness is, of course, theirs to include as they wish as part of the narrative of their loved one's death; some seem to find considerable comfort in the view, and those bereaved by suicide need comfort (and are often denied it).

A similar assumption is held by some clinicians who have lost a patient to death by suicide. They believed that the therapeutic work was going well, and they noticed their patient making future plans for things big and small, including scheduling next week's therapy appointment. The fact that the patient was dead by suicide before next week's appointment indicates to them that the death was impulsive and, further, inherently unpreventable.

But clinicians should know of people's capacity for secrecy, and also for simultaneously planning contradictory things, like suicide and attending next week's therapy appointment. Moreover, to insist on unpreventability as a general principle is a breach of practice standards, not to mention a public health menace. Even further still, there is at least one health plan in the United States that has adopted a "zero suicide" policy—a policy in which the stated goal is to prevent all suicides within the system. This program claims zero suicides over the course of 30 months or so, and this among a large, at-risk population.³⁸ The details of this claim are, to my knowledge,

not publicly available and therefore are hard to evaluate, it should be acknowledged. But apart from the essential question of effectiveness, notice the difference in attitude between clinicians who insist on unpreventability, on the one hand, and a sizable health plan in the United States, on the other hand, that views suicide as preventable enough that they are striving for complete elimination of deaths by suicide among their patients.

The proper attitude, then, is to promote prevention, which saves lives every day, to rigorously adhere to clinical standards, and also to acknowledge that the mental disorders that spur suicide are forces of nature, strong enough that in our battle with them, we may lose on occasion (as happens in cardiology, oncology, and many other areas of health care). But we will win many, too, and the crucial thing is we do not know in advance which are winnable and which are not, and so we have to fight all of them as if they are winnable. There are few things more tragic than a fight against misery that is both winnable and unfought.

One understands why assumptions like transparency of intention crop up—they provide a kind of comfort and solace—but these kinds of assumptions are untenable. As already alluded to, such assumptions construe humans as transparent creatures, with every thought or feeling readily apparent to others. A moment's reflection on one's own mental experiences, and how many of them are kept private even from very close intimates, will rapidly undo this assumption.

“Flash-in-the-Pan” Suicidal Thoughts, Including When on a High Place

I have delved into this issue of suicide being misunderstood as “spur of the moment” because the issue informs murder-suicide too; I am suggesting in this book that, like suicide, murder-suicide, far from being impulsive, is planned well in advance of the act. I will return to murder-suicide shortly, but there is yet another informative aspect of suicide that deserves attention. Still another source for the myth that death by suicide is an inherently impulsive act comes from the phenomenon, relatively widely experienced in the general population, of “flash-in-the-pan” suicidal thoughts, often when on a high place. A surprisingly high proportion of people report the impulse to jump as they cross a bridge, or are on the balcony of a high building.

It is important to emphasize that a majority of people who have this experience are neither depressed nor suicidal at the time.

This experience has been used to defend a view that I think is not only in error but also confused (bringing to mind the Baconian dictum that truth emerges more readily from the former than from the latter;³⁹ I believe Sir Karl Popper would agree)—namely, that we all have a little death wish in us. This folly, although it started with or at least was greatly popularized by psychoanalysts, has crept far beyond psychoanalytic or even academic-clinical circles to influence the wider culture. A representative example appeared in the May 2010 issue of *GQ*, in an article on a man in China who patrols bridges in an effort to prevent suicides therefrom. The article's author, in a meditation on suicide in general, wrote, "One's reasons for being on the bridge belonged to the mysterious underworld in all of us... what would it feel like to fly, to prove you could? The mere glimmer seemed almost too dangerous to consider. If you let it in, is that when you started to feel the pull of this other force? Could it be stopped?"

A "death force" *can* be stopped, easily, as can most things that do not exist in the first place (I resist saying "everything that does not exist can be stopped," because, alas, many falsehoods have virus-like staying power). The notion of a death force is implausible, and in this, Hervey Cleckley agreed. In his book *The Mask of Sanity*, he wrote, "The concept of an active death instinct postulated by Freud has been utilized by some to account for socially self-destructive reactions. I have never been able to discover in the writings of Freud or any of his followers real evidence to confirm this assumption."⁴⁰ Moreover, to imagine a generalized death wish is to misunderstand, among other things, one of the most important ideas in history, evolution by natural selection.⁴¹ What is really happening, then, when a person in a more-or-less normal state of mind walks across a high bridge and finds herself inexplicably concerned with jumping?

An example from a different context may be illuminating. Those who work in the wild in settings with lots of snakes regularly report the following experience. They are strolling along, when their body all of a sudden reacts, for example, by leaping backward; only then, after a half-second or so, does the snake enter into their conscious awareness. An excerpt from Percy Fawcett's journals, published posthumously in 1953, and cited in Lynne Isbell's 2010 book *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent: Why We See So Well*, gives an account of

this intriguing experience: “What amazed me more than anything was the warning of my subconscious mind, and the instant muscular response. [These snakes] are reputed to be lightning strikers, and they aim hip-high. I had not seen it till it flashed between my legs, but the ‘inner man’—if I can call it that—not only saw it in time, but judged its striking height and distance exactly, and issued commands to the body accordingly.”⁴²

We have evolved some systems of perception and thought that are extremely fast and automatic but are “dumb” in the sense that they cannot be modulated, that they are not subject to conscious control. And we have other systems too, which, while relatively slow, are “smart” because they can be subjected to reflection and thus can be modulated.⁴³ Like a lot of evolved systems, the interplay of these two sets of systems is quite workable (fit enough to have survived, thus their current existence) but not 100% harmonized.

Concern about jumping from bridges represents an instance when these systems are not optimally harmonized. To put it somewhat crudely, I believe this experience stems from one’s amygdala, the brain’s fear-processing center, sending a message in its usual rapid and terse way along the lines of “high place, back up, you might fall.” And the person does back away, even before the thought enters awareness—this is how our brains are wired to work under conditions of danger. The person is perplexed; from her experience, her body backed away and then there was a thought in her head about “you might fall,” just as the field researcher leaps first and then is aware of the snake.

People doing research in the wild and who confront snakes there tend to be educated about evolution, nature, brain systems, and the like, and they tend not to buy into ideas like death wishes and psychoanalysis. And so to my knowledge, they never experience a line of thought like “my body reacted to a snake even before I had the image in my head, and then the image was there and I viewed it with fear...that must mean that I have a death wish involving snakes.” They would endorse the motto of one of George Orwell’s favorite childhood teachers: “No one can understand difficult things like their own lives unless they understand simpler things like animals and birds first.”⁴⁴

People walking across bridges are a more varied lot, not on average trained in evolution and brain systems and the like, and are quite

subject to general notions floating around in the culture like unconscious death wishes as a part of human nature. They therefore are prone to lines of thought like “I flinched and was suddenly aware of the possibility of falling; but of course I can’t fall, there’s a railing and I’m feet from it... this must mean that I have a death wish involving heights.” Because the thought seems to arise suddenly, it tends to encourage the unfortunate idea that suicidal phenomena are inherently impulsive.

The bridge-walker’s mistake is to imagine that the ancient fast-path fear reaction should be subject to reason, should care that there’s a railing. But it doesn’t care; it is, in a sense, “dumb” and cannot handle rational information like “no need to worry, the railing will protect me.” Railings did not exist hundreds of millions of years ago, when this module evolved in mammals and became very sensitive and attuned to vision in certain primates, including our ancient ancestors. The bridge-walker is hearing her amygdala but misattributing it to a death wish.

This phenomenon of “high place suicidal impulses” has been speculated about often, but with scant data to rein in or inform speculation. A study by Hames and colleagues⁴⁵ aimed to redress the lack of data on the “high place phenomenon.” Over 400 college students were asked questions like “When standing on the edge of a tall building or walking past a bridge, have you ever had the urge to jump? How often has this happened in your lifetime?” and “When you are inside a tall building have you ever imagined jumping out a window? How often has this happened in your lifetime?” The students responded using the following rating scale: 1 = never; 2 = very rarely; 3 = rarely; 4 = occasionally; 5 = frequently; 6 = very frequently.

Across all such questions, the *lowest* percentage of people who endorsed experiencing the “high place” phenomenon of the urge to jump was 25%. For some questions, the corresponding percentage was 50%. More than 10%, on average, endorsed undergoing this experience “occasionally,” “frequently,” or “very frequently.” It is plainly not a rare phenomenon. What is more, these high percentages rule out the possibility that suicidal people are the ones endorsing the items; the percentages are too high for this to be plausible. To make this especially clear, analyses were conducted on people who, on a distinct measure of general suicidal ideation, indicated that they experienced absolutely no suicidal ideation. Among these

non-suicidal undergraduates, the “high place” phenomenon was common, occurring in, at minimum, 23% of them.

Implicit in my approach to the “high place” phenomenon and in the questions Hames and colleagues posed to participants is the idea that all of us humans are wired to be afraid of a fall from a high place. If this were so, one might expect that everyone would overestimate the distance of a fall, viewing it as more dangerous than it actually is. And this is, in fact, the case. Writing of research on this topic in his book *On Second Thought*, Wray Herbert⁴⁶ states, “on the most fundamental level, we’re all afraid of falling; it’s a basic heuristic-driven survival mechanism, engrained over eons of evolution. It’s a cognitive strategy for safety and self-preservation.”⁴⁷ The cognitive strategy Herbert refers to is very rapid, virtually automatic. Its message is “danger!” It is a misinterpretation—one characteristic of aspects of our culture obsessed with death and sex—to view this safety signal as a death wish.

A similar—and similarly reasonably common—phenomenon occurs in religious settings, when someone about to kill himself hears the voice of God telling him not to (a thing, as we shall see in the chapter on murder, that also occasionally occurs when a person is about to kill someone else). The book *Salvation on Sand Mountain*,⁴⁸ which, interestingly enough in the context of the current discussion, is about snakes—more specifically, snake-handling in religious settings—includes an example. One of the people described in the book reoriented his entire life toward religion and snake-handling after an incident in which he was desperately suicidal and resolved to shoot himself. As he began to lift the gun to his head, he heard the voice of God telling him not to, to turn instead to religion and snake-handling. I believe he heard a voice, but I do not believe it was the voice of God; it was the voice of his amygdala, misattributed to God. It is interesting in this context, incidentally, how frequently snakes and religion are intertwined, from the Garden of Eden to snake-handling. These phenomena make one wonder if the amygdala’s “voice” is the very source of religion itself.⁴⁹

Should you care to test out this ancient fear module in yourself, and furthermore, should you wish to prove to yourself that it is operative beyond just high places, take a trip to the zoo. Place your face near the glass of a snake enclosure, and try to control your reaction should one of the snakes strike at you. You will likely fail, as did

Darwin himself. He reported in his 1872 book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, “our reason telling us that there is no danger does not suffice. I may mention a trifling fact, illustrating this point, and which at the time amused me. I put my face close to the thick glass-plate in front of a puff-adder in the Zoological Gardens, with the firm determination of not starting back if the snake struck at me; but, as soon as the blow was struck, my resolution went for nothing, and I jumped a yard or two backwards with astonishing rapidity. My will and reason were powerless against the imagination of a danger which had never been experienced.”⁵⁰

Darwin was interested in snakes and if asked would probably say that he even “liked” them; his amygdala, however, saw things differently, as indeed it was designed to do. By direct contrast, a woman described in the December 2010 issue of *Current Biology* stated that she “hated” snakes and spiders.⁵¹ Yet, when researchers accompanied her to a local pet store, she made her way directly toward the snake terrariums, and when asked by an employee if she would like to hold one of the snakes, she readily agreed. She touched the snake’s flicking tongue and looked on in delight as the snake slithered through her hands. Employees had to frequently warn her from touching other snakes that were venomous, as well as a high-risk arachnid. The researchers also accompanied the woman to a haunted house during Halloween. Not only was she unafraid of the hidden monsters who popped out to scare her, she even scared one of the monsters by poking it in the head out of curiosity.

Charles Darwin would say he “likes” snakes, yet cannot control his automatic fear response to them; the woman says she “hates” snakes and yet shows no fear in their presence (and no fear of anything else). What is the difference between them? In a phrase, an intact amygdala. Presumably, Darwin’s amygdala functioned normally; by contrast, the woman had experienced bilateral damage to hers (due to Urbach-Wiethe disease, a rare congenital genetic disorder). The woman experienced other emotions normally, but her fear reactions were very blunted if not altogether absent. There can be a natural and normal disharmony in people such that fast and automatic systems override more deliberate ones; in this woman, there is an unnatural disharmony—she “hates” snakes but behaviorally is attracted to them—due to impaired amygdala functioning. Virtually all the people I know who have reported the inexplicable

urge to jump from a high place are people with alarmist amygdalae. They are temperamentally fearful and have a lot of fears, including of course of heights.

In this book, and in my previous ones, my suspicion of psychoanalysis is readily apparent. This does not mean, however, that I think that every utterance issued forth from the mouth or pen of a psychoanalyst is incoherent or absurd. In my opinion, the individual psychoanalyst who most regularly said revealing and helpful things was Harry Stack Sullivan (not exactly an orthodox psychoanalyst for his time, a fact that I believe is not coincidental; D. W. Winnicott is in Sullivan's league on this dimension of insightful coherence, and he, too, was not particularly orthodox). I have already quoted Sullivan's statement that "we are all much more simply human than otherwise,"⁵² a phrasing that I think combines parsimony with beauty. He said something else as well: "The [suicidal] revery studies danger, personal probabilities, with, as an unwitting goal, a goal that is not noticed by the person who is entertaining the suicidal fantasy, the prevention of this very act of self-destruction. The prevention of the hostile-destructive act is the unwitting goal, the unnoticed goal, of the revery process."⁵³ Sullivan argued that what is *experienced* as an urge toward death *begins* as an impulse toward safety.

Which, then, is the more believable account of the "high place" phenomenon? Do you think it is that we all, each and every one of us, have something inside that harbors a secret wish to die? Or do you think it is a perspective that in one form or another was written about and personally experienced by Charles Darwin, is expectable based on modern neuroscience, explains phenomena in settings as diverse as urban bridges and the snake-infested wild, is compatible with the theory of evolution, and was independently arrived at by Harry Stack Sullivan?

I think it is the latter, and this is one front in the assault I am making on the idea that suicide—and murder-suicide—are impulsive, spur-of-the-moment things, subject to whimsy much as is the casting off of peanut shells at the ballpark. The idea is ludicrous⁵⁴ and obscures genuine understanding of phenomena like murder-suicide.

In May 2011, a murder-suicide occurred in Florida; a man and his wife, both in their 20s, were visiting the home of relatives. Police concluded, after interviews with the relatives and with neighbors, that an argument between the man and his wife occurred during which

the man shot his wife multiple times and then died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. A neighbor interviewed by local media expressed surprise that the incident occurred while the couple were visiting relatives, rather than, for example, at the couple's own home. A police spokesperson remarked, "This is a crime of passion."⁵⁵

These two details—the neighbor's surprise at the death's location and the spokesperson's comment on "crime of passion"—intimate that this event occurred rashly, without forethought, in the heat of an argument. A point of my work is to show how exceedingly unlikely this is. After all, the man had his weapon on him, and media reports revealed that he had threatened to shoot his wife before. The couple's relationship was marked by many disputes, including those involving escalating violence.⁵⁶ Further still, the man had very likely pondered his and his wife's death many times before. Had he not, he would be, I assert, simply unprepared to enact something as fearsome and daunting as killing someone else and then facing his own death.

Proper Terminology, the Primacy of Suicide in Murder-Suicide, and the Time Lag Problem

To return to murder-suicide's precise definition, the preceding discussion has set us up to reiterate a key point: Suicides in general, as well as a subset of them—murder-suicides in particular—are *premeditated*. We are not discussing manslaughter here, nor are we discussing homicide generally. According to the framework developed in this book, it is murder, plain and simple, premeditated and planned out to satisfy a virtue—either mercy, justice, glory, or duty (virtues about which, it should be remembered, people can be passionate indeed). The virtue is perverted, true, but in the mind of the murderer (and soon the suicide decedent), it is a virtue nonetheless.

I therefore suggest that the term "murder-suicide" is the most apt description.⁵⁷ A rival contender is "suicide-murder;" the advantage of this latter term is that it gets the mental sequencing right.⁵⁸ A disadvantage of this term, of course, is that it does not reflect the behavioral sequencing. That is, needless to say, the murder occurs first, then the suicide; thus the term "murder-suicide."⁵⁹ I am satisfied with either term, as long as the primacy of suicide in mental sequencing is acknowledged. Since it is an established term of art, I use "murder-suicide" throughout this book, from the title onward.

The primacy of suicide in murder-suicide suggests that if the murder rate changed and the suicide rate remained steady, the murder-suicide rate might also remain level. In fact, this very pattern has emerged in the United States. Evidence suggests a considerable decrease in murders over the last 20 years,⁶⁰ whereas the suicide and the murder-suicide rates have not decreased. The primacy of suicide in murder-suicide can also be glimpsed in day-of-week patterns: murder occurs more frequently on Saturdays and Sundays;⁶¹ by contrast, suicide⁶² and murder-suicide⁶³ are more likely to occur on Mondays and Tuesdays.

The primacy of suicide in the contemplation of murder-suicide can also be seen in the ruminations of a young man in England, described in the biography *Stuart: A Life Backwards*.⁶⁴ “there are times regular when I sit in this flat and I look around, and I look what’s here in my life—do I really want to be here? If I’ve got my drink inside me I sit here having mad conversations with meself, talking about mutilating myself, killing myself, killing those who I think have done me wrong.”⁶⁵ The mention of suicide precedes the mention of murder, not coincidentally I assert. This young man changed his mind about murder, but not about suicide—in an act that was anything but impulsive, he died in his 30s by stepping in front of an oncoming train.

In the usage of the term “murder-suicide,” I both agree with and dissent from a 1992 statement from Marzuk and colleagues that appeared in the illustrious *Journal of the American Medical Association*. They said, “we continue to use the term murder-suicide in accordance with the predominant nomenclature in the literature...” With this portion of their statement I agree. But they continue, “...although we recognize that generically homicide-suicide is more applicable. Murder is a degree of homicide defined by statute in each of the United States.”⁶⁶ “Homicide-suicide” would indeed be more applicable *if* some involved unpremeditated killing followed by suicide. But, it is argued here, the essence of genuine murder-suicide involves a premeditated appeal to perverted virtue. If so, the term “homicide-suicide” is inaccurate.

To get a further sense of the importance of this distinction, consider an incident that occurred in Wyoming in November 2011. A young man had decided, according to all of the available evidence, to die by driving his car into oncoming traffic. He did exactly this and

killed himself and four other people in the process. The young man was traveling nearly 100 miles per hour at the time of impact; he did not brake the vehicle at all; there were no skid marks left by the vehicle; and the young man had sent numerous text messages about personal problems in the hour or so before his death (he was not texting as he was driving, however). On this basis, the coroner quite reasonably decided that the manner of the young man's death was suicide. A law enforcement officer remarked, again quite reasonably, "He picked the next vehicle that was coming down the road, is what it looked like to us."

If it is true that the young man "picked the next vehicle that was coming down the road," did he commit murder? Clearly he killed people, but did he do so with "malice aforethought" (a common definition of murder)? The Wyoming coroner ruled that he did, and this is a clearly defensible decision, in part because wanton recklessness can qualify under the law as malice aforethought, and the young man's actions were certainly reckless. But I would like to suggest a different possibility: that the young man's attention was so focused on his own death that he did not attend to anything else, including harming others. *Should* he have thought of others? Obviously. But did he? I doubt it. On this view, this incident would represent a different phenomenon than do clear murder-suicides in which the perpetrator plans out a specific individual's death because he believes it is the virtuous thing to do. That this latter possibility is not only viable but likely to be true is a point that I will develop throughout the book.⁶⁷