

Deliberate taking: the author, agency and suicide

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Abstract

In the essay, 'What is an author?', Michel Foucault (1984, pp. 118–119) contended that 'the author does not precede the works'. If this is the case, then what happens when the notion of the author as never outside discourse is grafted to suicide? What happens when suicide – most commonly defined as a deliberate taking of one's life – is read through the idea that the one who is doing the taking does not precede it? Does this not obliterate agency in suicide: the key ingredient necessary to marking the individual as the sole author of their death? I respond to these questions by first considering what Foucault's contention might offer to understanding the constitution of agency in the act of suicide. I then draw on elements of Judith Butler's work to consider a way of thinking of suicide that furthers Foucault's contribution. I suggest that positioning suicide as already part of discourse does not undermine the individual as the author of death, or make the act of taking one's life any less deliberate. I conclude with a comment on Foucault's position on death being power's limit, and what this might mean for understanding suicide.

Suicide is commonly understood as an explicitly individual choice and act. In this paper I will focus on suicide as an act that takes place in private. My aim is to render an understanding of the act of suicide as never outside discourse. If the act of suicide appears as outside discourse, it is because its intelligibility and authorship are already part of discourse.

For explanatory purposes, a common understanding of suicide can be articulated as follows. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, for instance, defines suicide as ‘the deliberate taking of one’s life’ (2004, p. 3). In this manner, suicide is situated as an explicitly individual act where the individual, as the author of the act, is solely responsible for the act. At the centre of the act stands an individual to whom the decision to die belongs. As such, the deliberate choice decided by the agent appears to be determined largely by the activities of a disembodied mind, and the absent presence of a body which does the taking of life. The latter is not identified directly, even though it is the necessary site of activity. Yet suicide is an explicitly individual act not because a person is automatically responsible, but because they are hailed as being responsible. By having responsibility attributed to them, the individual is situated as the original source for the intention to suicide. At the same time, suicide is marked by a ‘doing’, made apparent by the taking of life that expresses an outcome. It is unclear what the outcome will be, other than there must be one to signify the taking. What is made clear is that the intention behind the taking must be deliberate in order to have the outcome recognised as a suicide.

What happens to understanding suicide as an explicitly individual choice and act, if, as Foucault (1984, pp. 118–119) contended, ‘the author does not precede the works’? How can someone be an author of their act of suicide if the one who is doing the taking does not precede it? Does this not obliterate agency and intention in suicide: the key ingredient necessary to marking the individual as the sole author of their death? My initial answer is a ‘yes’ to all questions, not only because the individual does not come before the act, and thereby cannot be its author, but also because the individual, as the origin for the expression of the act, appears to be absent.

My response can be substantiated by further drawing on Foucault’s position. For Foucault (1984), the individuality of the author is questionable. Foucault (p. 105) suggested that authors as individual writers – those who hold a priori status – have disappeared. Instead, what is left of the author is a name that serves to represent modes of being via particular

practices that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, p. 49). Thus, the author's name projects the individual as a coherent source of expression to neutralise the normative yet contradictory workings of power relations in a way that their workings remain foiled (Foucault 1984, pp. 108, 113). In this sense, authors are never located outside discourse. If they are prediscursive, then this is only 'if one admits that this prediscursive is still discursive, that is, that they do not specify a thought, or a consciousness, or a group of representations' (Foucault 1972, p. 76).

To graft Foucault's line of thought to suicide, it would seem that the individual is less likely to be the sole author of their death. With this lack of authorship, it seems that the wilfulness to take one's life deliberately is in doubt, since the individual as the source of expressing the act is suspended by something outside them. If a 'taking' is taking place in the act, then this taking does not belong to the individual and, presumably, the act of death is not theirs, nor the agency required to enable the deliberateness behind the act. To settle for this resolve, however, would be a mistake, since Foucault's position can offer more to understanding the constitution of agency in the material act of suicide. To get there, I want to draw on elements of Butler's work on performative and performativity, as it enables a more nuanced reading of suicide, through which it is possible to gain insight into the macro discursive mechanics of Foucault's contribution to understanding the author and authorship.

In her work on sex and gender, Butler (1990, p. 25) re-articulates Nietzsche's view that there is no doer behind expressed deeds, as the doer and the deeds are constituted by expressions themselves, rather than the doer being the original source for constituting the expressions. In this sense, gender as performative is 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance' of sex as the natural and original source of expressing gender rather than being a discursive effect like gender (Butler 1990, p. 33). Butler builds on this position later by contending that performativity can be seen as a reiterative and citational practice through which discourses of sex and gender produce the effects they name. Gender is repeated and ritualised through actions that precede, constrain and exceed the doer, whether it is through particular bodily gestures, speaking or being hailed by bodies and actions of others (Butler 1993; 1997). The trick of power is to make the doer and the deed look like the deed belongs to the doer as the sole author of the deed.

Suicide can be read as performative in that it can be seen as a 'doing'. Suicide has a performative representation – a set of repeated bodily acts. These produce the effect of the individual as being the author of taking their own life – as being deliberate in and through the taking. To draw heavily on Butler, suicide is constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results. Across the surfaces of the suicided body suicide is produced and rendered visible by rituals that condition the deliberateness in the taking of one's life. For the sake of clarity, I will situate these as a set of interrelated imagined 'movie stills', bearing in mind that these may or may not lead to particular outcomes. The taking of life by someone might consist of: a) thinking about suicide, b) imagining possible outcomes, c) writing a note, d) gaining access to specific means to do it, e) estimating what might be lethal, or perhaps what is a culturally and socially 'appropriate' method, f) planning the location of the act, g) performing the actual act, e.g. pulling the trigger or swallowing the pills, and h) awaiting the loss of consciousness unless it has already happened, providing no one has intervened. In other words, suicide materialises on the basis of these particular rituals and corporeal gestures that bring into existence the taking of one's life. These gestures are bodily acts, already part of the activities of the mind, even if they appear disengaged from the mind.

Yet suicide as performative does not rest with the individual alone. Whether someone lives or dies, different bodies of knowledge and their discursive sites of practice such as coronial inquest findings, medical autopsy reports and/or psychiatric assessments, become part of interpreting if the outcome is a suicide, and, in particular, if the individual was deliberate in their intentions. From another perspective, is the individual capable of taking their own life, without prior knowledge of something called 'suicide' – knowledge that in turn is shaped by experts, individual experiences and society at large? It is clear, for instance, that something other than the individual taking their life already exists. If this was not the case, then patterns of suicide, be it in relation to gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, or suicide methods, could not be documented by the ABS (1994; 2004), or understood at a macro level. In this sense, suicide can be read as a reiterative and citational practice, made possible through norms, meanings, assumptions and knowledges identified within existing historical conditions and patterns, through which something about the act can be hailed and understood as a deliberate taking of one's life.

What then might we say of agency? If much of what constitutes the act resides outside the act, then how can the deliberate taking exist? The issue here, however, is not about

attempting to disavow the presence of agency in the act of suicide. Instead, my point is to say that agency has a layered history on which the deliberateness in the taking depends. What constitutes one's authorship is dependent on something other than the individual without the act ceasing to belong to the individual's choice to kill oneself. This is what makes the idea of deliberateness, and authorship, possible. One can take one's life, and be deliberate about it, precisely because such a taking is shaped by repetitive conditions and prior takings, re-articulated when the taking occurs. Butler (2004a, p. 32) suggests that we come into the world on the condition that the social world is there, which means that we cannot be ourselves without being preceded and exceeded by something other than ourselves. To follow on, we cannot depart from this world, or at least try to, without something paving the way for the deliberate taking to take place – which for some leads to death. In this sense, it is possible to read suicide as relational – as never being outside discourse – without undermining the individual as the author of the act, or making the act of taking one's life any less deliberate. In so doing, it might enable thinking about what conditions the deliberate in the taking, and the taking itself, who and what is part of the process of interpretation, and whose interests the interpretations serve.

Foucault put forward the view that 'death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it' (1978, p. 138). Butler disagrees with Foucault's claim by arguing that 'in the maintenance of death and of the dying, power is still at work and that death is and has its own discursive industry' (1996, p. 71). In relation to suicide, death is not power's limit, since norms, meanings and assumptions and the processes that are part of making sense of suicide will constitute knowledge of suicide before, during and after the act of taking one's life. The fact that an understanding of suicide as an explicitly individual choice and act exists indicates that there is what can be referred to as an 'afterlife of words' (Butler 2005a, p. 29) – an afterlife that precedes and exceeds individual deaths and their authors. Dead or alive, it may not be possible to be free of operations of power, as a result of the effects such operations materialise. What might be possible, however, is that someone may no longer literally suffer from unbearable circumstances if they are no longer breathing. This, however, does not curtail the production of truths concerning their deaths, whether true or false.

My position on understanding suicide as relational, and thereby as never outside power relations, raises a serious question: is it not possible to be completely free of power at least in death, especially if death for some becomes the means of resisting circumstances and

experiences deemed unbearable? I cannot answer this question here, other than to suggest that something about suicide's intelligibility remains out of reach since the material act tends to take place in private. And so there may be a limit to the way power operates: a threshold enfolded by what is said and known of suicide and, importantly, what remains unsaid and silenced. To borrow from Agamben (1995; 2002), it might be useful to consider the possibility of a zone of indistinction, through which it is not possible to summon the exact truth about the act of taking one's life, yet something of the truth about the act remains, caught between those who 'have explanations for everything', and those who 'refuse to understand', and instead generate explanations that offer so little to those who remain to grieve for, and remember, the dead (Agamben 2002, p. 13). Maybe then, as Foucault would have it, knowledge can become 'a means of surviving by understanding' (Foucault 1988, p. 7). Guided by the heuristic tools offered in Foucault's (1985; 1986), Butler's (2000; 2004b; 2005b) and Agamben's (1995; 2002) works, perhaps this zone is what needs attention next to better understand the author, agency and suicide.

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