The Ethics of Suicide: A Historical Sourcebook, Continued

The Ethics of Suicide: A Historical Sourcebook is an extensive collection of global and historical ideas about the ethics of suicide. The sourcebook is a logical extension from Dr. Battin's contemporary work in the ethics of suicide in the medical context. It is intended to provide a philosophical backdrop to show the vastly different ways humans have understood suicide as an act of cowardice, courage, sin, duty, or something else entirely.

As a continuation of the project, our work has built on our previous discoveries. Among all the progress made this semester, three highlights should be noted.

The first relates to "The History of the Yorubas" by Rev. Samuel Johnson, the most impressive find of last semester. The African tradition, like other oral traditions, are difficult to document. But this difficulty has been diminished, as we have discovered a collection of recent historical criticism evaluating the historical validity of Johnson's text. These papers, edited by Toyin Falola, do not hold Johnson up as the perfect historian, but do identify his book as the "standard text" of Yoruba history, allowing us to confidently include Johnson's work in the proper historical context.

The second is an elaboration of a find we made at the very end of the previous semester's work. It is from the memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, a close advisor to Napoleon. Here, the general recounts Napoleon's failed suicide attempt after losing a major battle. The narrative is particularly interesting and relevant to the modern debate in the ethics of suicide because it concerns the assistance of prepare a more potent drug to ingest, claiming it was the physician's duty. The physician refused, claiming it contradicted his duty to do no harm. This scene is one common to the modern debate, but this discovery adds a surprising historical context to the issue.

The last is the most recent and perhaps one of the most interesting. It comes from Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk deeply involved in the peace movement both currently and during the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In a letter to Dr. King entitled "In Search of the Enemy of Man" Nhat Hanh explains that the Buddhist monks who burned themselves to death were not committing suicide. His view is particularly complex and interesting. He states that "self-destruction is considered by Buddhism as one of the most serious crimes." But these monks do not seek their destruction from a loss of hope or a lack of courage, instead they wish to gain the attention of and seek help from the people of the world. To deliberately end one's existence would be wrong, on Nhat Hanh's view, but these monks are not doing so because "Life is not confined to