

SOCRATIC SUICIDE*

Abstract: When is it rational to commit suicide? More specifically, when is it rational for a Platonist to commit suicide, and more worryingly, is it ever *not* rational for a Platonist to commit suicide? If the *Phaedo* wants us to learn that the soul is immortal, and that philosophy is a preparation for a state better than incarnation, then why does it begin with a discussion defending the prohibition of suicide? In the course of that discussion, Socrates offers (but does not necessarily endorse) two arguments for the prohibition of self-killing, at least in most circumstances, which have exerted a long and powerful influence over subsequent discussion of the topic, particularly in theist contexts. In the context of the *Phaedo* itself, however, this introductory conversation plays a crucial role in setting the agenda for the remainder of the dialogue and offering an initial discussion of the major concerns of the argument as a whole. In particular, the discussion of the nature of suicide is intimately bound up with Socrates' conception of true philosophy as a 'preparation for death', the relationship between soul and body, and the immortality of the soul. My intention is to provide a reading of that passage (61e-69e) which asks whether the *Phaedo* can offer a philosophically satisfying distinction between suicide and philosophy and how it relates to other ancient philosophical attitudes to self-killing. I argue that Socrates does not think that being dead is always preferable to being alive, and that the religious views expressed in the passage are consistent with his general stance on the benevolence of the gods.

I

ANCIENT ethical philosophy is essentially concerned with the identification and provision of a good life (*eudaimonia*). In the course of this investigation it often turns to consider the contrast between living and being dead, and in particular it often asks the question: When does a life become no longer worth living? By offering a recipe for a good life, it can also identify unsatisfactory lives. Of course, it is possible to claim that life is never not worth living; life *per se* is always good. That is not to say that there can be no contrast between merely living and living a good life, but it is always better to be alive than not. If this is accepted, then suicide is irrational and should be prohibited. However, ancient philosophers do not tend to claim that life *per se* is good. They are often quite prepared to consider the possibility that on occasion a life is not worth living. On those occasions suicide may become a rational course of action.¹

Let me outline two possible positions from which it can immediately be inferred that one should commit suicide.

- A Being dead is the best state possible.
- B Being alive is the worst state possible.

These are extreme positions. Each is compatible with post mortem survival (of the soul, spirit or something similar) but neither requires it. Note that it is not sufficient to argue merely that death is a good thing, or that life is miserable. It remains possible in these cases that life is better than death (however good death is), and that death is worse than life (however bad life is). Between the extremes of **A** and **B** is a much more common intermediate position which asserts a comparison between living and dying rather than a superlative assessment (negative or positive) of one or the other.

- C Being dead is better than being alive.

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¹ Consider the famous Socratic maxim: ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπων, *Apol.* 38a5-6, and compare *Crito* 47e7-48a2. Aristotle *EE* 1215b15-

1216a10 has a discussion of circumstances under which a life is not worth living. This passage probably originates in Aristotle's *Eudemus* (see Aristotle *ap. Plut. Cons. ad Apoll.* 115B-E).

C also is compatible with but does not require some sort of post mortem existence. It invokes a comparative assessment of being alive and being dead and comes down in favour of the latter. It allows that living might be a good thing (but being dead is better) and also that being dead may be a bad thing (but being alive is worse). C may be further divided into two claims:

C1 Being dead is *always* better than being alive.

C2 Being dead is *sometimes but not always* better than being alive.

C1 follows from A or B but not *vice versa*. C2 is incompatible with A and B. From C1 one can infer that it is always rational to commit suicide. From C2 one can infer that it is rational to commit suicide only when it is indeed the case that being dead is better than being alive. Unsurprisingly, C2 is by far the most common standpoint from which rational suicide is justified. Of course, it leaves for further analysis just what the pertinent conditions may be, and on that question different ethical theories will give different responses.

The notion that life is essentially a miserable state to be in is familiar in Greek contexts, particularly in tragic drama.² The particular difficulty faced by Platonism, however, is that it appears to promote a version of C1. After all, some of the main tenets of Platonism that appear in the *Phaedo* itself include the preferability of the soul over the body, of the intelligible over the perceptible, and – most important – of the discarnate soul over the incarnate soul. In that case it seems that the immediate course of action for any committed Platonist should be suicide. Yet famously in the *Phaedo* Socrates places an almost total prohibition on killing oneself.

This prohibition begins to look even more peculiar when the Platonic stance is contrasted with that of another of the philosophical heirs of Socrates, Stoicism. Perhaps more than any other ancient school, the Stoics – particularly of the Imperial Roman period – are associated with the acceptance and practice of rationally calculated suicide. This acceptance was derived from their agreement with my position C2 above. Even more peculiar, the loudest voice in condemnation of suicide in Hellenistic philosophy comes from the Epicureans, who are themselves famous for arguing that ‘death is nothing to us’ (*Kyria Doxa* 2). This position is dependent on their decidedly un-Platonic anti-eschatology. Death for the Epicureans is annihilation. No good or bad can be perceived by a subject after death; indeed there is no subject to do any perceiving after death.³

II

Readers familiar with the *Phaedo* will know that it will be argued that the soul is immortal and that when released from the body it can enjoy a better state of being. Socrates can therefore drink the hemlock without thinking that he is being harmed by death. But here there arises the problem which I outlined above, a problem which also seems to be prompted by Christian notions of the afterlife, the soul, and the physical world: Platonism, like Christianity, may be thought to invite and encourage suicide.⁴ Both Platonism and Christianity hold out the promise of a better existence after death (in heaven, amongst the Forms), and this makes it seem a good idea not to spend any longer than necessary living a life here on Earth. Perhaps we should all, on finishing the dialogue, reach for the hemlock and race to join Socrates.

² See e.g. Hom. *Il.* 22.481; Eur. *Troades* 636-7, and generally the material collected in Stobaeus 4.52b: ΕΠΙΑΙΝΟΣ ΘΑΝΑΤΟΥ. Glover (1977) 173-4 emphasizes the difficulties in making any assessment that one’s future life will not be worth living. Compare Feldman (1992) 217-23.

³ The Epicureans’ argument has not always won approval. An influential recent criticism can be found in Nagel (1979), which has provoked a great deal of discussion. For an introduction to the modern literature, see the essays collected in Fischer (1993).

⁴ Pabst Battin (1982) 29, 64-5.

This problem can arise for any theory which tries to argue that there is nothing terrible in death. I am not claiming, of course, that the fear of death is the primary motivation behind the Christian idea of heaven or the Platonic idea of the release of the soul from the body at death, but it is the case that if it is agreed that death (in the sense both of ‘being dead’ and of ‘being mortal’) is not a bad thing for humans, and if it is in addition shown that living a life is painful or promotes ill-being in general, then it is difficult to see why it would not be better all round to end one’s life as quickly as possible. This is the major reason why it is thought peculiar for the Epicureans to prohibit suicide quite as vociferously as they did. They agree with Plato that there is nothing to be feared in death (though for quite un-Platonic reasons) and also think that life can be full of pain and misery – which they identified as the only true evil. If so, we might ask, why is not the rational step to commit suicide? In brief, the Epicurean answer is that it *is* sometimes acceptable to commit suicide provided that it is otherwise impossible to continue to live a good life (see Sen. *De Beata Vita* 19.1 and contrast Sen. *Ep. Mor* 30; this is again an acceptance of **C2**). Otherwise suicide is interpreted as a sign of an inability to regulate one’s life properly and well.⁵ The explanation of an acceptable suicide is like that offered by the Stoics, a school known to have engaged closely with the *Phaedo* and to whom I will return below for further comparisons.

Apart from this section of the *Phaedo* there is another Platonic context in which such arguments are made prominent. In the Pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus* Socrates is called to try to soothe the eponymous character’s fears about death. At first Socrates tries to offer some remarkably Epicurean-sounding arguments but these do not comfort the old man. What eventually proves to be effective, however, is an approach which emphasizes both the miseries to which the body is subjected during life (366d-369a), and the benefits of discarnate existence. This is a heady combination of my positions **A** and **B**, and therefore **C1**.⁶

Socrates: ‘And while the soul is forced to share with the sense organs their diseases and inflammations and the other internal ills of the body (since it is distributed among its pores), it longs for its native heavenly aether, nay, thirsts after it, striving upwards in hopes for feasting and dancing there. Thus being released from life is a transition from something bad to something good.’

Axiochus: ‘Well, Socrates, if you think that living is bad, why do you remain alive? Especially since you puzzle your brain about these things and you’re much cleverer than most of us.’ (Ps.-Plato, *Axiochus* 366a6-b4; trans. J.P. Herschbell)

Axiochus’ question is a good one. It is the question which prompts the discussion of suicide in the *Phaedo* since, as Cebes well appreciates, this particular strand of thought seems to encourage suicide and is therefore in tension with the general disapproval of taking one’s own life. Axiochus exclaims that as a result of hearing Socrates’ arguments he no longer fears death, and even yearns for it (370e).

Later sources seem to be well aware of this tendency in Platonism – or at least the tendency that some might understand Platonism in this way. Cicero includes a story of a certain Cleombrotus in his first *Tusculan Disputation* (1.84):

⁵ Cf. Englert (1994), Cooper (1999), Warren (2000) 242 and n.34. Williams (1976) 207-8 tries to answer from the opposite perspective why we go on living. He suggests that people have ‘categorical desires’ which propel the agent to take an active interest in the future. Of course, if it is known that all one’s categorical desires cannot be fulfilled, then suicide may indeed be the rational course of action. Such a life is indeed not ‘worth liv-

ing’. See also Williams (1973) esp. 85-92 for further discussion of such a model.

⁶ As such, therefore, it seems reasonable to interpret the *Axiochus* as a post-Epicurean Platonist criticism of and response to Epicurean arguments. They are shown to be therapeutically ineffective, and much less useful than the Platonist perspective. For a discussion of the *Axiochus* and its relation to Epicureanism, see Furley (1986).

There is a certain epigram by Callimachus about Cleombrotus of Ambracia, who he says having read Plato's book threw himself from a wall to his death although nothing bad had happened to him.⁷

Augustine also tells this story (*Civ. Dei* 1.22), and specifies that Cleombrotus had been reading the *Phaedo* (*lecto Platonis libro ubi de immortalitate animae disputavit*). Augustine further points out that Plato himself would have done the same and hurled himself to his death on completion of the work had he not realized that suicide was prohibited.

It should therefore be clear why the *Phaedo* might begin with a discussion of the permissibility of suicide. Not only will Socrates at the end of the dialogue drink the hemlock and so precipitate his own death,⁸ but the general conclusions of the dialogue might be thought to encourage suicide. There are therefore both dramatic and philosophical reasons for the discussion beginning as it does.

After *Phaedo* has introduced the dramatic scene of the dialogue, the conversation he narrates swiftly turns to the question why Socrates has begun to write poetry now that he has been imprisoned. Socrates answers that a dream vision had encouraged him to 'practise and cultivate the arts' (μουσικὴν ποίει καὶ ἐργάζου, 60e6), and that although he has a strong suspicion that this means that he should continue to practise philosophy, he thought it best to try the other arts as well, and therefore has been setting some fables of Aesop to verse. He ends by telling Cebes to inform one Evenus (who has been inquiring after Socrates' new poetic endeavours) to hurry to follow him when he 'leaves' Athens later that day. By 'leave Athens' Socrates means 'die'.⁹

Simmius is taken aback by this, and asks Socrates to explain what he means by this apparent encouragement to Evenus to hasten his own death. The cryptic answer is that if Evenus is a philosopher he will be willing to do this, although it is generally thought that suicide is wrong. This comment sets up the subsequent discussion in which Cebes poses a question for Socrates. How can he claim both that a philosopher will be willing to follow someone who is dying, and also that suicide is wrong?

It is worth pausing to see how much the opening conversation has already achieved by adumbrating or alluding to what will follow. First, Socrates' dream, much like a similar dream reported in the *Crito* (44a-b), a dialogue set dramatically only two days before the *Phaedo*, offers divine sanction of some sort for Socrates' actions. Later, it will be remarked that suicide is not permitted until the gods send some sort of 'necessity' (62c7). This will form part of Socrates' eventual story of the purification of the soul during life, and the eventual final separation of body and soul at death (67a6).

Second, Socrates has already in this opening exchange introduced the notion of the practice of philosophy, and has more importantly implied that there are right and wrong ways to engage in it. It is not therefore incidental that when telling Simmius that Evenus will indeed follow him, he specifies that this is the case for all those who 'partake worthily' of philosophy (πᾶς ὄτῳ ἀξίως τούτου τοῦ πράγματος μέτεστιν, 61c8-9). This is, of course, one of the central themes of the entire dialogue, namely that the true and correct practice of philosophy is a 'preparation

⁷ Cf. Cic. *Pro Scauro* 4-5. In the *Tusculans* this follows Cicero's story about a certain Cyrenaic called Hegesias, who had such a pessimistic view of the chances of human happiness that those who listened to him often immediately went off to commit suicide. As a result, Ptolemy Philadelphus banned him from giving public lectures. The story of Cleombrotus appears in a number of other sources, perhaps first in a poem of Callimachus (*AP* 2.471 = Callim. 53 Gow and Page). For a discussion of the history of this story, see Williams (1995). Cf. Griffin (1986) 71. Riginos (1976) 180-3 gives references

to all the appearances of this anecdote. Note also that Cato is said to have been spurred on to suicide by reading Plato: *Sen. Ep. Mor.* 24.6, Riginos (1976) 183.

⁸ On the question whether Socrates can be said to have committed suicide, since of course he is ordered to drink the hemlock by the Athenians, see Frey (1980).

⁹ ἄπειμι 61b9 is not just a euphemism. Socrates will later try to demonstrate that at the point of death his true self, namely his soul, will 'leave' this place. Compare the use of ἀποδημεῖν and its cognates at 61e1-2 and 67c1.

for death' since it is the practice by which one purifies and liberates the soul from its bodily incarnation.¹⁰ This too will be relevant to the arguments for the permissibility or otherwise of suicide, the first of which begins with the thought that the soul is 'imprisoned' within the body.

III

Let us now turn to the particular arguments about suicide which appear in the *Phaedo*.¹¹ Socrates is responding to Cebes' worry that he is simultaneously promoting the benefits of death, and recommending it to all true philosophers, and also subscribing to the general disapproval of self-killing. His first response is famously difficult to interpret.

But perhaps it seems astonishing to you if this alone of all others is simple, and it never turns out for a human, as other things do, that at some times and for some people it is better to be dead than alive. Perhaps it seems astonishing to you if for those men – the ones for whom it is better to be dead than alive – it is not holy for them to do themselves a favour, but that they must wait for some other assistant. (62a2-7)

There are many difficulties in assessing this passage.¹² In general, however, it can be agreed that Socrates is trying to offer reasons for Cebes' difficulties with what he has just declared. First, he suggests that Cebes is astonished that 'this' admits no circumstantial qualifications. But what is this 'this'? Various candidates have been proposed, including the injunction not to commit suicide, or the proposition that it is better to be alive than dead, or simply 'death' itself. In essence, however, the exact referent does not alter to any great extent the overall meaning of the passage.

Socrates first suggests that Cebes is amazed at the apparently absolute nature of the prohibition. In general such blanket declarations are subject to qualifications and exceptions – indeed, Socrates himself is notorious for insisting on such qualifications to the various ethical claims made by his interlocutors. Here, however, no possibility of qualification has been canvassed. The categorical nature of the prohibition is also the source of Cebes' worry that Socrates is inconsistent. There would be no tension whatsoever between the philosopher's practice for death, and the disapproval of suicide if it is the case that in some circumstances it is in fact better for a person to die rather than live – since the philosopher may be one of those exceptions.

The second possible source of astonishment has tended to be under-emphasized in discussions of this passage, which are more interested in identifying the possible readings of the first 'source of astonishment'. However, I think that this second suggestion will offer more help in clarifying the problem of distinguishing these two desires for death – the one belonging to the suicide, the other that of the philosopher.

The second source of astonishment is a conflict between the general principle that one should always act in one's own interests and the prohibition on suicide. These two conflict if it is sometimes the case that it is in fact in an agent's best interests to be dead rather than alive (my C2 above), but nevertheless suicide is prohibited. In his exposition of this worry Socrates repeats the idea that it is sometimes better to be dead than alive (hence, perhaps, the repetition of οἷς δὲ βέλτιον τεθνάναι at 62a5), but nevertheless claims that suicide is prohibited even in those cases.

¹⁰ There are repeated references to true or correct philosophy and true or correct philosophers in this passage: 63a10, 64a4-5, 64b4-5, 64b9, 66b2, 67d8, 67e5.

¹¹ There is another discussion of suicide at *Laws* 873c-d, specifically wondering about the penalties appropriate for a suicide. It is made clear that the cases under consideration exclude circumstances such as Socrates',

who is ordered to die πόλεως ταξάσης δίκη (873c5), and circumstances where suicide is provoked by shame or unavoidable misfortune. The emphasis is on the correct ritual and purificatory measures to be taken. On this and other mentions of suicide in the *Laws*, see Cooper (1999) 523-6.

¹² Gallop (1975) 79-85 has a long discussion.

Independent grounds are offered for the prohibition – namely that suicide is not ‘holy’. In all other cases of the assessment of the rightness of an action, that assessment must take note of context and circumstance. What might promote the agent’s well-being in one circumstance could be unhelpful in another. But the case of suicide is different. Under no circumstances should it be attempted (because of some divine command), even if it would on occasion promote self interest.

Socrates suggests that someone who thinks it better to be dead rather than alive may have to wait for some ‘other assistant’ (62a7). This implies that what is unholy about suicide is precisely that the agent kills his or herself.¹³ It is the self-reflexive nature of suicide which in this case sparks suspicions of contravening divine law. This particular characteristic of suicide is repeatedly emphasized in the surrounding text. At 61d4 Cebes asks what Socrates means by saying that it is not right (θεμιτόν) to do violence to oneself (τὸ μὴ θεμιτόν εἶναι ἑαυτὸν βιάζεσθαι), and at 61e5 Cebes again asks why people think it wrong to kill oneself (κατὰ τί δὴ οὐδὲν ποτε οὐ φασι θεμιτόν εἶναι αὐτὸν ἑαυτὸν ἀποκτείνουσαι;) here emphasizing his point by using both the normal and reflexive forms of the pronoun.

More tellingly, at 62a6, during Socrates’ explanation of the second source of worry, he echoes this phrasing when he formulates Cebes’ difficulty as follows:

Perhaps it seems astonishing to you if for those for whom it is better to be dead than alive it is not holy for them to do themselves a favour ...

Both the reference to what is holy (here ὅσιον, but this is not I think relevantly different from the force of θεμιτόν in Cebes’ expressions) and the self-reflexive construction (αὐτοῦς ἑαυτοῦς εἰ ποιεῖν) parallel the constructions which Cebes used to express why suicide may be thought wrong. But here Socrates is not describing someone ‘doing violence’ to himself, but rather someone ‘benefiting himself’. This alteration distils the problem at hand, since it has become clear that on some occasions to kill oneself might in fact be the course of action which does most benefit the agent. But whereas the reflexive nature of promoting one’s own self-interest is not thought in the least problematic, it suddenly threatens to become so if we fill in suicide as the particular course of action in question. If indeed the grounds for the religious proscription of suicide is the fact that the subject kills *himself* then this cannot be compatible with the thought that any agent should always act to produce what is best for himself.¹⁴

In this brief exchange already a serious difficulty has been outlined. It is already clear that once it is agreed that on occasion being dead is preferable to being alive then a prohibition on suicide can only be sustained by reaching for an independent source of justification. More important still is the particular source that Socrates uses: divine displeasure. Suicide is unholy. At this early stage we already have in place the necessary elements for the subsequent problems about humans’ relationship with the gods. On occasion the gods prohibit us from doing what is best for us. Can the gods therefore always be intent on fostering our best interests?

¹³ There is a possible ambiguity here. Does someone commit suicide only if the fatal act is self-inflicted, i.e. only if the agent himself slits his own wrists, or pulls the trigger of the gun? It is surely possible that a death can be other-inflicted and still count as suicide (e.g. Agent X points a gun at Agent Y and forces Y to kill him). In fact, it is notoriously difficult to define suicide in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. See Frey (1980) and Windt (1980). The United States Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention define suicide as a ‘death from injury, poisoning, or suffocation where there is evidence (either explicit or implicit) that the injury was self-inflicted and that the decedent intended to kill himself/herself’.

¹⁴ Bostock (1986) 19 ‘It is certainly *consistent* to hold both that some people would be better off dead and that no one ought ever to commit suicide, but in that case one cannot also hold that the sole basis of morality is self-interest.’

So much for the opening exchanges. Socrates has said nothing yet about his own attitude to suicide, but has merely been offering possible diagnoses of Cebes' astonishment. Cebes himself certainly seems to approve of these suggestions as possible causes of astonishment – if that is the force of his exclamation at 62a8 – and the argument proceeds on the basis that these are the problems which it must solve.

IV

Socrates gives two possible reasons why suicide might be prohibited, each in the form of an analogy. The first suggests that humans are, when alive, in some sort of prison from which it is not permitted to escape.¹⁵ This likening of incarnation to imprisonment has obvious resonances with the setting of the dialogue. Socrates is imprisoned and preparing to die. But if incarnation itself is a certain sort of imprisonment, then Socrates' current position is relevantly like that of all mortals – and in this way Socrates' actions and attitudes can serve generally as a model for all human actions and attitudes. We are all incarcerated and must approach that imprisonment accordingly. But, having raised this possible justification of a prohibition on suicide, Socrates rapidly moves on, remarking that this picture is 'impressive, and not easy to understand in full' (62b5).¹⁶ Indeed, the picture of bodily imprisonment seems to raise more questions than it answers. No justification is provided for our imprisonment, nor is it explained why it is not permitted to run away.¹⁷ It is certainly possible to construct the sort of reasons required. Perhaps we have all been imprisoned justly because of some deep moral failing or terrible act committed in a previous life which requires expiation. But this sort of thinking leads rapidly into further troubled waters. Who is punishing me? What exactly is the crime, and is it not questionable whether 'I' committed it – since I surely cannot remember ever committing such an act, and it is agreed that the crime was committed before my birth?

This image of bodily incarceration can be compared with a similar Platonic image of the body as a tomb (σῶμα σῆμα). Both convey some idea of incarnation as a less desirable state than what came before or after, and both imply that there is a further kind of existence in which we are liberated from the prison or tomb and can live freely. However, Socrates presumably uses the prison

¹⁵ The word used for prison here, φρουρά, can also mean 'guard post', and some commentators have taken this to be its meaning here. Gallop *ad loc.* finds problems even with this understanding, since if the idea is to brand suicide an act of cowardice, it seems nevertheless possible to imagine cases of brave self-sacrifice. Even so, the clear and immediate link between Socrates' current position, and the idea of incarnation as imprisonment seem to me to tell against this understanding of the word. Cf. Cooper (1999) 522, Rowe *ad loc.* There are ancient references to this section of the *Phaedo* which also retain the notion of imprisonment: Cic. *Tusc.* 1.74: *vincla carceris*; *Rep.* 6.14: *e corporum vinclis tamquam e carcere*; 6.15: *corporis custodiis, in custodia corporis* (although *custodia* too can also mean 'guardpost', here Cicero writes of god 'liberating' someone from the body); Aug. *Civ. Dei* 1.22.

¹⁶ It is often pointed out that there may be Orphic or Pythagorean roots for this image. If so, then Socrates' comment about it being 'lofty and impenetrable' might be a further swipe at Philolaus' lack of clarity about matters of the soul and eschatology (61e6-9). Sedley (1995) 11: '[W]hat we see in the *Phaedo* is the paradoxical spectacle

of Socrates having to persuade the Pythagoreans of the truth of their own doctrine'. Huffman (1993) 327 argues that no doctrine can be securely ascribed to Philolaus on the basis of this section of the *Phaedo* besides the assertion that suicide is prohibited (cf. 408-10).

¹⁷ Bostock (1986) 18 calls this idea a 'non-starter, just because it has no implications about the basis of morality'. Presumably it could have the required implications, but only if it were spelled out exactly why we had been imprisoned and how we might serve our appointed sentence. Rowe *ad* 62b1 suggests that the image of incarceration recurs at 67d1-2, 81e2, 92a1 and also that this idea is not pursued at this early stage since Socrates has not yet outlined the relevant opposition of body and soul. But his parallel texts refer only to the soul being 'bound into' the body, not imprisoned, and while these two ideas are clearly related I think that it is the problem of explaining the judicial implications of imprisonment which causes most difficulty for the incarceration image. The notion of 'binding' could just as well be linked with the next proposed justification: that we are slaves and possessions of the gods.

motif here since only that can give the required notion of an *obligation* to remain in this particular state. The ‘body as a tomb’ view conveys well the idea that what we presently call ‘life’ is in fact merely an inferior state when compared with the true life we will enjoy, paradoxically, after (what we call) death. This chimes well with the general and familiar Platonic notion that the physical world is inferior to the intelligible world inhabited by discarnate souls. By inverting the unreflective notions of life and death, it also effects a radical inversion of a traditional Greek motif which saw the souls after death inhabiting a shadowy and inferior world. Perhaps most relevant here is the complaint of Achilles’ ghost when summoned to speak with Odysseus. He claims that he would prefer to be a lowly bondsman on earth than the king of all the dead (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.488-91). The eventual Platonic picture painted by the *Phaedo* will be quite the opposite – the present perceptible world of the ‘living’ is a world of images and shadows.¹⁸ But this, of course, merely reinforces the problem being posed for Socrates. If our present life is so miserable in comparison, and philosophers are desperately trying to free themselves and ‘die’, then why is suicide not the quickest and most reasonable route?

Socrates then offers an alternative justification. We are the possessions, indeed the slaves, of the gods. Just as we would reasonably be angered if one of our possessions were to destroy itself, so would the gods be if we were to commit suicide (62b6-c4). Such anger would reasonably bring punishment.¹⁹

Socrates at least thinks that this is better expressed than the preceding argument (62b7), but once again problems rapidly surface. Damascius’ commentary on this section (1.20) points out well that the notion of punishment already implies the immortality of the soul, or at least that something relevantly punishable will survive suicide. However, if the idea of *punishment* for suicide is the major force of this argument, then the analogy between the gods as our masters and mortal slave owners threatens to break down. It may be possible for a god to punish a dead person for committing suicide, but how is a mortal slave owner supposed to punish a dead slave? The answer, of course, is that it is not possible for human masters to punish suicidal slaves, but Socrates is perfectly aware of this and phrases the question accordingly. Socrates asks Cebes the following (62c1-4):

If one of your possessions were to kill itself, without you indicating that you wanted it to die, would you not become angry with it, and punish it if you could?

He asks Cebes to consider whether he *would* punish the slave *were this possible*. And the answer to this is certainly affirmative.²⁰ Socrates asks Cebes to imagine himself in the role of one of the gods, whose slaves we are agreed to be, and who certainly are able to exact punishment from those who commit suicide by dealing in a particular manner with their discarnate and immortal souls.

It is possible to object to the master–slave analogy by suggesting that it must be permissible for a slave to commit suicide if his life is so miserable that it becomes literally intolerable.²¹ In other words, there are limits to the obligations imposed by being someone’s slave – and if one’s

¹⁸ Cf. Hom. *Od.* 11.475-6: ἔνθα τε νεκροὶ ἰάφραδέες ναίουσι, βροτῶν εἶδωλα καμόντων.

¹⁹ Pabst Battin (1982) 39-41 provides a number of parallels for arguments which try to show that suicide is not permitted by claiming that our lives are the gifts of god(s), or that we are the children, slaves, possessions of god(s).

²⁰ We might begin to speculate over whether this question implies that it was thought acceptable for an Athenian slave-owner to command the suicide of his own

slaves, but what evidence there survives seems to run counter to this suggestion. In Athens, unlike Sparta, it seems to have been accepted that a master was obliged not to kill his slave. See Todd (1993) 184-92.

²¹ Pabst Battin (1982) 47: ‘[A]lthough a well-treated slave might have some obligation to remain, a mistreated slave does not. Analogously, the person who escapes from an unusually cruel servitude in life cannot be said to have done wrong.’

master is particularly cruel then the status of being a slave does not preclude escaping as intolerable life. Whether or not this is an appropriate objection to the institution of chattel slavery at Athens, it is clear that Socrates is assuming throughout a benevolent master – since only this would produce the relevant analogy with the gods. Cebes' and Simmias' next objection also makes it clear that this is Socrates' assumption.

As for what you were saying, that philosophers should be willing and ready to die, that seems strange, Socrates, if what we said just now is reasonable, namely, that a god is our protector and that we are his possessions. It is not logical that the wisest of men should not resent leaving this service in which they are governed by the best of masters, the gods, for a wise man cannot believe that he will look after himself better when he is free. (62c9-d7)²²

In describing how suicide is wrong, Socrates' argument has made our lives so good (since we are looked after by the best masters), and has made our lives so clearly not our own to dispense with at will (since we belong to the gods), that *any* decision to end one's own life now looks like utter foolishness. Cebes cleverly point out here that the particular people we are interested in, namely the philosophers, are surely the very people best capable of seeing the benefits and the duties of continuing to live in the gods' care. So they should wish to die least of all. But Socrates claims that the very mark of a philosopher is his desire to die, since philosophy on his conception is a practice for death.²³

Socrates' answer to this worry is to allow that Simmias' and Cebes' objection would be powerful indeed if there were not 'better' masters waiting for us after death and were Socrates not convinced that he is going to meet better men once he is dead than those he meets generally during life (63b4-c7). This then generates the remainder of the dialogue, which is prompted by Simmias' request that Socrates should try to convince the others of the truth of this claim.

Of course, Socrates' insistence on the preferability of the gods and company he will meet after death does not of itself help him to maintain his prohibition on suicide, since once again it looks as if it promotes the benefits of post mortem existence without any reference to the manner in which one has lived or died. But surely this is what Socrates ought to be insisting upon. If anything has emerged from the brief exchange on the various possible justifications for a prohibition on suicide, it is precisely that if they make no reference to the *manner* of death or the manner in which one has lived but merely insist upon an obligation to remain living, or a particular comparative evaluation of death and life, then no relevant distinction can be maintained between the philosopher's practice for death, and the suicide's hasty departure from life.

In essence, any form of argument which makes living a good or a necessary state of affairs will seem both to prohibit suicide and also to contradict Socrates' claim that a philosopher should desire and practise death. Conversely, any argument which makes living undesirable, or being dead preferable to being alive will be consonant with Socrates' conception of the aims of the true philosopher, but will seem to recommend suicide more generally to non-philosophers too.

²² Simmias offers the same sort of consideration at 63a4-10.

²³ Olympiodorus in *Plat. Phaed.* A.2.1 casts Cebes' objection in the form of two syllogisms: (a.) The philosopher wishes to die; he who wishes to die flees good mas-

ters; he who flees good masters is a fool; so the philosopher is a fool. (b.) The philosopher flees the good (*sc.* by wishing to die); but no philosopher flees the good, since he aims always at the good; so the philosopher is not a philosopher.

V

Thus far, the prohibition on suicide rests on the assertion that it is ‘unholy’. Two possible ways of understanding just what this means in terms of the relationship between humans and gods (that we are prisoners and that we are slaves) have proved to be unhelpful. Nevertheless, something positive does emerge from that discussion.

Just as it is permitted for one of Cebes’ slaves to commit suicide, provided Cebes indicates that he should, so it is permitted for us to commit suicide, provided that our masters – the gods – make some sort of indication that that is what they wish us to do. Suicide committed on the basis of divine orders is certainly acceptable, indeed is the exception to the general prohibition on self-killing. Socrates immediately draws this conclusion. It is nevertheless permissible to commit suicide ‘if god sends some necessity’ (62c7-8). If the prohibition on suicide was based on it being unholy, this exception is perfectly reasonable. What the gods command is surely never ‘unholy’. What form such ‘necessity’ may take or how it is to be recognized is not stated, but Socrates’ question to Cebes asks if a slave could commit suicide if the master gives some *sign* that this is his wish (σημῆναντος, 62c2). This suggests that the god’s direction might not be in the form of a direct command. Some less obvious hint or gesture may suffice. If Socrates does consider himself to be about to commit suicide, we must presume that he thinks that he has had some such message or allowance – whether that came in the form of the Athenians’ judgement or the dream he recounts at the beginning of the *Crito* (44a5-b5). The *Phaedo* itself offers a possible example of such a sign. Socrates’ dream at 60e, by telling him to practise the arts, will also be recommending that he die, if it is understood that the specific art in question is philosophy and philosophy is a preparation for death.

The Stoics, perhaps the most renowned advocates of rationally considered suicide in the ancient world, agree with Socrates that on occasion god will provide a sign that it is time to give up life. It is quite plausible that the Stoics took this section of the *Phaedo* as the starting point for their own reflections on the timing and permissibility of suicide.²⁴ There is also a story that Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, committed suicide after tripping over a pebble. He responds by quoting from Euripides’ *Niobe*: ‘I’m coming! Why are you calling me?’ (DL 7.28, 31).

This connection with the *Phaedo* is straightforward. However, the Stoics differ markedly from Platonic theory in one major regard. They do not hold that there is an immaterial soul which after death communes with gods or Forms or similar incorporeal things. The souls of Stoic sages do – it seems – survive death but are destroyed at the next conflagration. (Some sources report than Cleanthes thought all souls were similarly robust; the restriction was probably made by Chrysippus).²⁵ But the Stoics do not make this post-mortem survival of the soul a factor in the decision whether to commit suicide. Their justification for a rational suicide (εὐλογος ἐξαγωγή) is not the promise of a better state after death. Rather, in Stoic ethics the only good is virtue; life is merely an ‘indifferent’, like wealth, health and so on. Suicide can be the ‘appropriate’ (καθῆκον) thing to do just as other actions can be so viewed. It is appropriate if it is in accordance with the usual rules of Stoic good action – if it can be given a rational justification (εὐλογον ἀπολογισμὸν, see DL 7.107) which accords with the proper evaluation of the various choices available (see also Cic. *Fin.* 3.60-1). Since *kathēkonta* can be performed by both the virtuous sage and non-sages, both will commit suicide if it is recognized as the appropriate thing to do, but since sages always do the right thing they will *always* commit suicide if it is appropriate. Non-sages can be mistaken.²⁶

²⁴ Cf. Epict. 1.29.29. For a suggestion that the Stoics read the *Crito* in this light, see Sedley (1993).

²⁵ See DL 7.156-7 and Hoven (1971) 44-65.

²⁶ Rist (1969) 239-42 worries unnecessarily about the suicides of non-sages. If they can and should perform *kathēkonta* and suicide is sometimes *kathēkon* then they can and sometimes should commit suicide.

Diogenes Laertius (7.130) tells us that the Stoics allow suicide ‘for the sake of one’s country or friends, and in the case of intolerable pain, handicap, or incurable disease’. This offers two sorts of justification. First, suicide can be a positively beneficial altruistic act; sometimes it is the appropriate thing to do to benefit one’s country or friends by killing oneself. Second, suicide can be beneficial for the agent himself; it is appropriate if the alternative is a continued life of suffering. Suicide can either promote preferred natural indifferents (e.g. the well-being of one’s friends) or remove dispreferred indifferents (e.g. pain, handicap). The Stoics’ immanent divinity, the *logos* of which human reason is a part and with which human wishes should be aligned, can give a sign when suicide is appropriate. Indeed, the circumstances which must obtain for suicide to be appropriate may themselves be interpreted as this divine sign.²⁷

The significant point for the present discussion is the following. In Stoicism, due to the absence of any post mortem world and due to the harmonization of human and divine reason, there is no possibility of any conflict between what god commands and what is beneficial for the human agent. A virtuous human will be in complete agreement with a divinity that is provident and benevolent. The problem in the *Phaedo* is the apparent dissonance between the notion of a preferred post mortem state inhabited by provident gods, and the apparent prohibition on suicide made by those gods even when it is agreed that continued life is not preferable to death. Further, Socrates’ exception to the rule – the divine sign – seems a purely arbitrary means by which gods may or may not allow someone to do what will benefit them. The gods of the *Phaedo* risk looking like slave owners who deal with their possessions on a whim.

In order to avoid these pitfalls, Socrates must still show how philosophy as a preparation for death is relevantly unlike suicide, and also how this divine exception relates to that distinction. This should ideally also allow the gods to act always with a view to humans’ best interests. He does achieve this, I think, but in order to do so he first explains what he means by making philosophy ‘a preparation for death’.

VI

Let me pause at this point to discuss two more unsuccessful attempts to make the required distinction between two kinds of death offered by two ancient commentators on this section of the *Phaedo*.

The story of Cleombrotus, as told by Callimachus’ epigram, is cited by Ammonius in order to illustrate how someone might misunderstand the characterization of philosophy as a preparation for and practice of dying. Ammonius (*in Porph. Isag.* 5,21 ff.) distinguishes between ‘natural’ (φυσικός) death, which is merely the separation of the soul and body, and ‘chosen’ or ‘intentional’ (προαιρετικός) death.²⁸ Only the latter is sought after by the true philosopher who actively tries to separate the soul from the body. However, of itself the introduction of the notion of volition does not help a great deal, since the required distinction is not between death *per se*, and the philosophical practice of death, but between the voluntary death of suicide (as for example, achieved by Cleombrotus), and the voluntary philosophical desire to separate soul and body.

A similar distinction is made by Olympiodorus in his commentary on this section of the *Phaedo* (A 1.12). He insists on distinguishing ‘killing oneself’ (τὸ ἐξάγειν ἑαυτόν)²⁹ and ‘wish-

²⁷ Griffin (1986) 72: ‘[T]heir doctrine can be described as an internalisation of Socrates’ divine necessity so that it becomes a dictate of man’s own reason, which tells him when life according to nature is no longer possible. This modification of Platonism was made possible by the Stoic belief that the divinity of the world is immanent.’ For more discussion of Stoicism and suicide, see Rist (1969) 233-55, Englert (1994). Cooper (1999)

524, 532-6 contrasts the Stoic position with that of Plato’s *Laws* 854a-c.

²⁸ This distinction is also made by Olympiodorus *in Plat. Phaed.* A 3.11.

²⁹ Literally, of course, ‘leading oneself out’. Perhaps the metaphor is supposed to recall the escape from a prison, as if one is acting as one’s own jailer.

ing to die' (τὸ ἐθέλειν ἀποθνήσκειν). The first of these, he claims, is what is strictly prohibited, whereas the second is the object of the philosopher's mode of living. Indeed, the exact phrase used by Olympiodorus here (τὸ ἐθέλειν ἀποθνήσκειν) is used in the *Phaedo* to describe what philosophers do (62c10). It is difficult, however, to see the exact contrast Olympiodorus intends. Like Ammonius he stresses the voluntary nature of the true philosopher's death, but unphilosophical suicide is presumably voluntary in a sense also. Perhaps by stressing that the philosopher 'wishes' to die, Olympiodorus implies that he has an aspiration towards the separation of body and soul but does not immediately rush to tear apart the two through suicide. But still, this philosophical aspiration should nevertheless be manifested in some sort of action, namely the concentration on psychic rather than bodily concerns. What is required is a distinction between the unphilosophical short cut to the separation of body and soul and the gradual philosophical purification of the soul and removal of bodily concerns which occurs throughout a life. In fact, just such a distinction is, I think, provided by the *Phaedo*, but in a somewhat roundabout way.

VII

In the *Phaedo* the appeal to gods as our guardians or masters has not proved to be particularly helpful in securing the required distinction between suicide and philosophical striving for death. So Socrates tries a different tactic, and the conversation from 63b4 takes a new turn by trying to explain to Simmias and Cebes just how it is that a philosopher practises dying. This sets aside for a while the discussion of the prohibition on suicide, but in outlining what he means by this conception of philosophy, Socrates will be able indirectly to set out a relevant distinction between the philosopher's desire for death and the suicide's abandonment of life.

After a brief interlude in the conversation during which Crito informs Socrates that the jailer advises that he should talk as little as possible, Socrates explains that most people are unaware that true philosophers are 'nearly' dead even when they – the philosophers – are living (64b5: θανατῶσι; the present tense emphasizes that this is an ongoing process of gradual death).³⁰ This produces an interesting reaction from Simmias, who (perhaps a little tastelessly given the circumstances) suggests that Socrates' conception of philosophers striving for death will be shared by lots of people who do indeed think that philosophers are 'nearly dead' and in fact deserve to be so (64a10-b6). This prompts Socrates to make explicit that it is necessary to distinguish between kinds of death (οἴου θανάτου, 64b9). First Socrates sets out a working definition of death as the separation of the soul from the body:

Therefore, is it anything but the separation of the soul from the body? And is then death the following: the body itself being separate and apart from the soul and becoming by itself, and the soul itself being separate and apart from the body and being by itself? So is death anything other than this? (64c4-8)

This working definition is perfectly compatible and indeed is supposed to include what happens at the point of death. When someone's life ends, the soul and body (now a corpse) separate entirely. The body and soul continue to exist but apart from one another – a model which Socrates' Pythagorean companions would not find objectionable in the least.³¹ However, in what follows Socrates sets in place the considerations necessary to allow a new alternative understanding of this description of death. This understanding will allow that the separation of body and soul can occur – albeit to a limited degree – within one's lifetime.

³⁰ Cf. Olympiodorus in *Plat. Phaed.* A 3.3: ἀποθνήσκει μὲν γὰρ θάνατον μελετῶν ὁ καθαρτικός, καθαίρων ἑαυτὸν τῶν παθῶν, τέθνηκεν δὲ ἤδη ὁ θεωρητικός, κενώρισταί γὰρ τῶν παθῶν.

³¹ This definition of death was also accepted by the Stoics. See e.g. *Plut. De Stoic. repug.* 1052C.

First, Socrates describes certain pleasures (of food, drink, and sex) as bodily. The philosopher is then agreed not to be concerned with such pleasures and therefore in general not to be concerned with bodily matters. Instead his attention is directed towards the soul (64e4-6). This concentration is swiftly characterized as a desire to ‘release’ the soul from bodily concerns (65a1) and therefore it can quickly be concluded that the person who pays no attention to bodily pleasures is striving as far as possible for death. So Socrates is relying on the definition of death described earlier, but has managed to enrich our understanding of that definition by insisting that the ‘separation’ involved need not be purely physical. A concentration on the soul rather than the body and a corresponding neglect of the latter also fit this description.

Socrates draws a contrast between the philosopher who is concerned with the soul, and the person who is concerned entirely with the body. He points out that the majority of people would consider those who pay no attention to bodily concerns and pleasures not to be worthy of living, and indeed to verge on being dead (65a4-7). These people are therefore working with a conception of true living quite opposed to that of the philosophers. For the majority, truly to live is to indulge in pleasures and passions. Philosophers avoid these, and so are not on this account truly alive. But also in the philosophers’ own terms, they are ‘dying’, since by this the philosophers mean that they are trying to separate the soul from the body. For the philosophers this is a positive process, tending toward the goal of a free and purified soul. So the philosopher and ‘the many’ agree that a life of philosophy is a pursuit of death, and the pursuit of bodily pleasures is properly called ‘living’. But they disagree in their assessments of the relative value of living and dying.³²

Here, however, a problem surely arises. How can Socrates maintain that in one case the concentration on psychic concerns counts as a separation of body and soul, and therefore death, but a concentration on bodily concerns does not? If it were the case that the mere wholehearted emphasis on one of the body–soul pair would count as a case of separating and dividing the body and soul, then the true philosopher has no more claim to be engaged in a ‘practice of dying’ than the person entirely consumed with the pursuit of physical pleasures. Both would fit the definition of death outlined in 64c4-8.

The distinction between these two is spelled out in the subsequent text, in which Socrates implies that rather than forcing a separation of body and soul, the pursuit of bodily pleasures forces the two to become more tightly bound together. He describes at length the troubles that assail the soul as a result of its incarnation through perception, pleasure and pain (65a-67a). The upshot of this ability of the body to trouble the soul is that a focus on bodily concerns does not in fact leave the soul alone. In order to pursue and maximise physical pleasures, we need to engage psychic capacities of perception, planning and the like. Indeed, not only does such a process bind the soul and body together, it reverses the proper hierarchical relationship between the two. The soul becomes a tool or instrument, indeed a slave, to the body, aiding and abetting the search for corporeal delight. So rather than effecting a separation of body and soul, concentration on the body requires the two to become more closely fused, and therefore further from the separation which constitutes death. Indeed, on this score Socrates can agree with those who think that only this pleasure-filled pursuit is truly ‘living’ (65a6). It is clear that bodily concerns infect and pollute the soul, just as we learn that philosophical study purifies the soul.

So doesn’t this purification turn out to be what we said in the argument a while ago, namely the separation as far as possible of the soul from the body, and the training of the soul to gather and collect itself in from every part of the body, and live as far as possible both in the present and in the future in itself, freed from the body as though from bondage? (67c5-d2)

³² Cf. Burger (1984) 40.

Armed with this account of the interaction between body and soul, Socrates now at last returns to the possibility of some divine indication to end one's life. (62c7). When giving his full account of the philosopher's life of purification, Socrates makes it clear that a philosopher will not pre-empt the final separation of body and soul at 'natural' death until *god himself* releases him from the prison of the body (67a6). This is now closely linked to the notion of purification and the implicit message must be that the philosopher is not ready for this divine release until the soul has been purged sufficiently of residual bodily concerns. Socrates repeatedly describes the practice of separating soul from body while still alive as a practice the philosopher will engage in 'so far as it is possible' (καθ' ὅσον δύνανται: 64e5, 65c5-9, 67c5). There is a scale of achievement. Some souls are more inextricably linked with the body they currently inhabit than others, and the effects of the degree of contamination by bodily concerns taint the soul after it has been released from the body at the end of a life.

This is the final attempted resolution of the worries I canvassed earlier over the role of divine sanction. The clear implication is that god does not allow us finally to separate body and soul through suicide (and make that allowance clear through a signal) until the philosopher has sufficiently purified the soul of bodily concerns. Suicide before that time is 'unholy', perhaps because if the soul is released at that point it is still polluted by incarnation. That pollution is potentially harmful to the soul itself, since such bodily taint compromises its chances of success in the cycle of reincarnation or – as it is expressed in other dialogues – the vision of the Forms.³³

Let us return, then, to Cebes' second source of astonishment which first expressed the inconsistency Socrates must overcome.

Perhaps it seems astonishing to you if for those men for whom it is better to be dead than alive it is not holy for them to do themselves a favour, but that they must wait for some other assistant. (62a5-7)

Now there is a new difficulty. If god sends a divine sign only when the philosopher is sufficiently purified to die properly it is no longer the case that there are people for whom it would be better to be dead but who are not permitted to die. Unless the soul is properly purified it is not better to be dead, it is in fact better to stay alive and try to purify it. In retrospect, therefore, it looks as if Socrates must mean that there are in fact no exceptions to the rule that one should do what is of benefit to oneself. Those *who think* that it would be better to die than be alive, and who do not receive a divine sanction are just mistaken in their assessment – like Cleombrotus. The benefit of this explanation is that it no longer requires divine allowance to be a whim. It is only granted as and when a soul is sufficiently purified, and therefore the gods are indeed benevolent. Their divine prohibition on other cases of suicide is a preventative measure which tries to ensure that as few people as possible die like Cleombrotus with polluted souls.

There is one significant obstacle to this reading. At 62a Socrates does not express any doubts about the fact that for the particular people under consideration it is in fact better for them to be dead than alive (indeed as I mentioned above this assessment seems to be emphasized by repetition). This premise is what created the dissonance with the benevolent gods' disapproval of suicide. If the gods are indeed benevolent, then it ought to be the case that on reflection it is not better for these people to die than be alive – if it were, the gods would send a sign to that effect. The obstacle might be evaded if not removed entirely by emphasizing that Socrates is at this point offering to Cebes a diagnosis of Cebes' own view, and therefore need not, I think, be himself endorsing this assessment. It should also be noted that the reason given for the absolute prohibition on suicide at that early stage was that suicide is 'unholy'. It may now have been

³³ Consider the consequences for the fate of the soul as related in the myth at 113d1ff.

revealed that suicide is not unholy provided the gods will it and indicate that it is to be done. Divine approval and command on specific occasions will cancel the grounds originally offered for the blanket prohibition. Nevertheless, it must be agreed that it would certainly have clarified the argument if it had been made explicit at some later point that suicide is in fact, and contrary to Cebes' initial astonishment, prohibited only for those for whom it is not beneficial – as must be the case if the argument is to be consistent.

VIII

The upshot of all this is that the stance taken in the *Phaedo* on the rationality of suicide is based upon yet another version of position C2 which I outlined at the very beginning. Despite Platonism's emphasis on the superiority of the soul over the body, of the intelligible over the perceptible and of the discarnate over the incarnate, the ability of the soul and body to interact and the fact that incarnation itself pollutes the body makes it impossible for a Platonist to claim on the basis of the *Phaedo* that being dead is *always* better than being alive. Only when a soul has been properly purified is it rational to separate the soul from the body, not before. This is not merely an arbitrary whim of the gods – it is for the good of our souls, and therefore our real selves. There is also no reason to conclude that those people who are not philosophers are better off dead. First, their impure souls may not fare very well once released. Also, suicide cuts off the only possibility of improving this fate – namely, beginning to think philosophically. According to the *Phaedo*, therefore, the Socratic maxim that 'an unexamined life is not worth living' is not a call for all non-philosophers to commit suicide (so Cleombrotus was indeed mistaken); it is a call to begin examining our lives.³⁴

JAMES WARREN
Magdalene College, Cambridge

³⁴ This view should be contrasted with that of Brickhouse and Smith (1994), who on the basis of the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias* conclude (211) that 'Socrates believes that in some way or another everyone will be better off dead' (my position C1). However, they agree that some people may be better off in death than others. Philosophers will be especially well-off, whereas the vicious will only be benefited because in death they can commit no more vicious acts and therefore can do their souls no more harm. The question remains why

anyone would continue living once this is realized. Brickhouse and Smith note the religious prohibition on suicide (211 n.6), and also speculate that suicide might be itself an unjust – and therefore harmful – act. Compare Cooper (1999) 535 on the Stoics: 'So it is no improvement in the goodness, or diminishment of the badness, of an agent's life to shorten the time he is morally bad; the only improvement in its goodness or diminishment in its badness there can be is for him to take steps to make a better person of himself.'

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