

PLATO ON SUICIDE (*PHAEDO* 60C–63C)

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I. THE PROBLEMS

THE CENTRAL THEME of the *Phaedo*, death and immortality, comes to the fore at 63c, preceded by a puzzling exchange on the subject of suicide. Replying to the poet and sophist Evenus, who had inquired about his reasons for writing poetry while in prison awaiting execution, Socrates offers this shocking piece of advice: tell him (he instructs Cebes) “if he is sensible, to come after me [into death] as quickly as he can (ἂν σωφρονῇ, ἐμὲ διώκειν ὡς τάχιστα)” (61b8). It soon becomes apparent (cf. 61c6) that the conditional clause might be glossed as “if he is a philosopher”; for when Cebes replies, “He’ll hardly be willing to obey” (61b4–5), Socrates asks, “Isn’t Evenus a philosopher?” (61b6). The implication is clear: (1) at least some men, namely the wise or wisest (a class that includes, and may even be restricted to, philosophers) are willing, perhaps even eager, to die. This is the claim Socrates will be challenged to uphold in the mock defence speech or *apologia* that forms the next portion of the dialogue (63b1–69e5). However, he goes on to cite, with apparent approval, a bit of typically Pythagorean lore to the effect that (2) no man ought to commit suicide (οὐ γάρ φασι θεμιτὸν εἶναι, 61c10), that is, it is unlawful, contrary to divine law (cf. 62a6: μὴ ὄσιον), unless the gods themselves “send some necessity” (62c7–8), as in Socrates’ present predicament. So Socrates advises Evenus to die soon, if possible, but not to take his own life.

One might legitimately wonder whether those Socrates describes in (1) are in fact just (a) willing to die, that is, prepared to depart this life in circumstances in which the alternative—say, wickedness or dishonour—is worse than death; or whether they are (b) willing to die in any circumstances; or whether they are (c) eager to die as soon as possible, regardless of circumstances. The first interpretation is rendered attractive by the fervent avowal of the Socrates of the *Apology* that death or any other misfortune is a lesser evil than moral wickedness (cf. 32d). Later, one is put in mind of the Socrates of both the *Apology* and the *Crito* by the ambiguous suggestion at 62b2–6 that we are stationed here by the gods, so that suicide would be tantamount to desertion of one’s battle-station (cf. *Apol.* 28b–e); or, alternatively, that we are imprisoned in the body by the gods, so that suicide would be unlawful escape from a punishment justly imposed.¹ But it must be borne in mind that the *sole* condition attached to Socrates’ advice to Evenus is his being a philosopher; his other circumstances are quite irrelevant. This is surely decisive against (a).

¹ For the Pythagorean background that renders “prison” the likelier meaning of φρουρά in this context, see Cooper 1989: 34, n. 7.

As for (b), it is true, of course, that on their own the verb ἐθέλειν (61c8 and d4) and the adverb ἐκὼν (61c5) may or may not signify eagerness. Yet when at 62c9–10 Cebes repeats (1), he inserts the word ῥαδίως, at which Socrates does not balk in any way. On the most natural reading of the Greek, this surely suggests that (b), though stronger than (a), is still too weak.² Translation by “gladly” suggests itself quite naturally here. Furthermore, in the context of the *Phaedo*, where death—defined at 64c4–8 as the separation of soul and body—is alleged to be the goal of philosophy (64a6) rightly pursued (ὁρθῶς at 64a4 and ἁξιῶς at 61c8), it seems clear that the men Socrates has in mind strive after death and so (if they are consistent) *desire* their departure from this life. Moreover, (b) seems intolerably weak faced with Socrates’ claim (cf. 64a1–2) that the true philosopher has good reason to expect “the greatest benefits” (μέγιστα ἀγαθὰ) after death.

Thus, (c) remains. If (c) is indeed the correct interpretation, the implication is only that (i) while death may not be preferable to life for all men in all circumstances, it is so for the philosopher, who, if clear-sighted and consistent, desires it irrespective of circumstances. That it is sometimes desirable for others as well—for example, in the case of incurable, debilitating illness of body (cf. *Resp.* 405c8–410a4) or of soul (cf. *Laws* 854c3–5)—is not actually stated in the *Phaedo*. As for the stronger claim that (ii) death is preferable for all men in all circumstances, this is nowhere unequivocally asserted, either in the *Phaedo* or elsewhere.³

On the strength of (1)(c)(i), Socrates advises Evenus to hasten after him, but warns him against taking his own life on account of (2). On hearing this odd counsel, Cebes, who is admired by Socrates as a lover of argument (cf. 63a1), quickly gets on the scent of a contradiction. “How can it both be forbidden to do violence to oneself,” he asks, “and be the case that the philosopher would be willing to follow the dying (ἐθέλειν δ’ ἂν τῷ ἀποθνήσκοντι τὸν φιλόσοφον ἔπεσθαι)?” (61d3–5). But do these two statements imply any contradiction: (1) the philosopher is eager to die; and (2) no man ought to commit suicide? Gallop (1975: 80) thinks so:

² Gallop (1975: 6) translates neutrally (“philosophers should be willing to die lightly”), as do both Fowler (1971: 217) and Hackforth (1955: 39: “ready and willing to die”). Yet to do so is to stifle the note of eagerness recognized by Schleiermacher (1974: 19: “gern . . . sterben wollen”) and Cooper (1989: 17: “welcomes”). Speaking of the conclusion of the immediately following apologia, even Gallop uses “welcome” to describe the philosopher’s attitude toward death (see Section IV below).

³ Dorter (1982: 17–18) marshals the evidence for it, but then hedges his bet, speaking only of “death’s desirability, *whether generally or at least for the philosopher*” (my emphasis). In support of the stronger claim he cites (among other passages) *Apol.* 40b7–41a8 at length. It is worth noting, however, that neither (i) nor (ii) is consistent with the frank agnosticism concerning death displayed by the Socrates of the *Apology* (cf. 29a–b, 35a, 37b, 42a). This indicates that we are far removed from the historical Socrates of the early dialogues, though, as we shall have occasion to argue in what follows, not yet entirely outside his orbit.

Cebes will find it paradoxical that those who would be better off dead may not dispatch themselves but must wait for someone else. It would seem “unreasonable” (cf. 62b1–2) to prohibit suicide in cases where it is in the agent’s own interest. This is, indeed, the basic point in the whole speech. For it is precisely the apparent contradiction between a veto upon suicide and the belief that death may sometimes be for a person’s own good that Socrates will now try to resolve.

This is, on the whole, fairly cautious. Translating ἄλογον as “unreasonable” suggests something less than outright contradiction, as does the use of “paradoxical.” Later, Cebes describes (1) only as ἄτοπον or “odd” (62d1). When Socrates urges that (2) is οὐκ ἄλογον, employing the Pythagorean argument that the gods are our owners or masters, so that we, their possessions or servants, may not kill ourselves or run away without incurring their just anger (cf. 62b6–c8), Cebes shows that the same argument could be turned against (1), in which case “it is unreasonable (οὐκ ἔχει λόγον) that the wisest of men not be resentful at quitting this service” (62d4–6), and the man who does so gladly is acting ἀλογίστως, irrationally (62e3). From this it is reasonably clear that the “contradiction,” if there is one, does not involve logical contradictories in the strict sense of two statements whose meaning requires that exactly one be true and one false. Nor, however, is Cebes’ problem just that (1) and (2) *severally* are ἄτοπον or ἄλογον—and therefore probably false, or at least in need of supporting argument. Whatever else may be troubling him, the wording of his initial query at 61d3–5 points to a difficulty concerning the *conjunction* of two statements which, as logical contraries, cannot both be true. Thus, if either is true (something Cebes may have doubts about), the other would have to be false, and Socrates, Cebes realizes, cannot without inconsistency affirm both.⁴

Now the talk of an “apparent contradiction” implies that what seems contradictory to Cebes may not really be so. On this most commentators agree; controversial is only the exact nature of the contradiction and precisely how it is dispelled by Socrates. But if we examine the text closely, is there even an apparent contradiction in what Socrates actually says here? Or is the seeming inconsistency that is worrying Cebes owing to certain assumptions that he and presumably all those present quite naturally make, given all they know of the moral outlook of Socrates from elsewhere—assumptions Plato quite reasonably expects the reader of the *Phaedo* to make as well? This is the first problem to be dealt with in what follows. Should careful examination of the text fail to turn up anything to justify the talk of “apparent contradiction,” it may be appropriate to look further afield for the Socratic doctrines that render (1) and (2) inconsistent.

What of Gallop’s other contention, that Socrates sets out to “resolve” the apparent contradiction? This too is almost universally assumed to be the case. Yet,

⁴This is at least the sense in which Gallop (1975: 76) speaks of an “apparent contradiction,” and it is in this sense that “contradiction,” “contradictory,” “logical inconsistency,” and “inconsistent with” will be used throughout this article. It will be argued presently that (1) and (2) are *not* inconsistent, that is, not contraries at all.

if anything, Socrates actually exacerbates the problem in the ensuing discussion, while it is Cebes who tries to dispel it. This is particularly evident in regard to (1). Cebes attacks, while Socrates defends, the claim that the philosopher should not resent death. As for (2), Socrates first introduces it (cf. 61e9) not as his own conviction, but rather as hearsay (ἔξ ἀκοῆς); yet in discussion he immediately goes on to develop an argument in support of it, so that his endorsement, even though qualified, becomes, if anything, stronger in the course of the debate. True, the argument he adduces is only “the reason given in the mysteries on the subject” (ὁ . . . ἐν ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος περὶ αὐτῶν λόγος, 62b2–3); it is drawn from Orphic/Pythagorean sources, unlike the genuinely Socratic moral teachings to be discussed in the next section. But its effect is not to resolve so much as to reinforce the contradiction, or (if that seems to beg the question at this point) whatever it is that Cebes is on about.⁵

But does Socrates use the argument from the mysteries to bolster (2)? Cooper (1989: 16) suggests that it is really an attenuation of his commitment to (2): “Socrates himself sees in this theory, once questionable eschatological assumptions are pared away, the good idea that we are possessions of the gods and under their care or tendance.” It is true enough that the harsh Pythagorean notion of a φρουρά from which we may not free ourselves or run away is given a benign turn; Socrates declares its meaning obscure (οὐ ῥάδιος διιδεῖν), opining that it has a good sense (εὖ λέγεσθαι) if it means that the gods are our guardians (ἐπιμελούμενοι) and we their κτήματα or property (62b1–9). Cebes presents it in an even more favourable light when he speaks of escaping from the gods’ θεραπεία (62c9–d6). However, the striking fact remains that this “attractive” idea is used by Cebes to dispel the tension that Socrates employs it to heighten; for Cebes uses it to argue against (1), Socrates to shore up the prohibition in (2). Of course, it is characteristic of the Socrates of the early dialogues to increase his interlocutor’s perplexity, genuine *aporia* being the first step toward the solution of a problem. Is this what is going on here? Whether, as most commentators assume, Cebes’ difficulty is resolved in the *Phaedo*—whether indeed there is even an *attempt* to resolve it—is the second problem to be addressed in this article.

II. THE APPARENT CONTRADICTION

On the face of it, (1) and (2), far from being contradictory, are in fact logically unrelated; not only does neither entail the other’s denial, but neither, if true, entails anything at all about the truth value of the other. This is so if (1) is a normative statement having no *moral* force, since (2) is unmistakably a moral

⁵ There is evidence in the text that the specific source of the “hearsay” is the noted Pythagorean Philolaus (cf. Cooper 1989: 41–42); for Socrates goes on to ask: “Why Cebes, haven’t you and Simmias heard about such things through being with Philolaus?” (61d6–7). Cebes replies that he “certainly did hear from Philolaus, when he was living, and earlier from several others, that one ought not to [take one’s own life]” (61e6–8, my italics). So it appears that the ban was in fact fairly familiar Pythagorean teaching. Yet its justification is unclear, for Cebes adds: “but I have never heard anything definite (σάφές) about it from anyone” (61d8–9).

prohibition. It may indeed *seem* inconsistent to suggest that death is a good thing for a certain type of man, and yet death by his own hand bad; however, there is in fact no contradiction here if the first statement concerns the non-morally good life, that is, *having* a good life, while the second has to do with moral goodness or rightness, that is, *leading* a good life. Given the (admittedly un-Greek) opposition between inclination and duty posited by Kant's moral theory, and given the sharp wedge relentlessly driven by the Greek sophists between the just and the advantageous, this may even be the most natural way in which to view (1) and (2), now as in Plato's day.⁶

"Happiness" in the Greek sense encompasses all that makes life worth living, all that goes to make up a good (rich, fulfilling, satisfying) life as opposed to leading a good life in the moral sense—though the question that so exercised the Greek moralists was precisely the relation between moral virtue and happiness. Some, like certain Cynics and Stoics, identified the two; others, like the Epicureans, regarded the role of virtue as merely instrumental in the attainment of happiness or the good life. For Plato and Aristotle, on the other hand, the role is constitutive: virtue is not a means to, but part of, happiness, and hence desirable for its own sake. As Vlastos has persuasively argued, virtue is not identifiable with happiness for Socrates; yet while not the only, it is the "sovereign" good (1991: 209 *et passim*), so that with it alone one cannot fail to be happy, even in the absence of all non-morally good things, while without it none of those things (health, beauty, wealth, social position, success in war, and so on) that enhance a virtuous life would be "goods" at all. The plain consequence is that, for Socrates, nothing can be non-morally good (part of, or conducive to, happiness) that is achieved by means that are morally evil. But that all morally bad things are *ipso facto* non-morally bad as well (destructive of the agent's happiness) is not something that can simply be taken for granted, any more than that leading a morally good life is sufficient or even necessary for a happy life. Given the objections of the sophists, this is something to be established by argument, rebutting sophistic counter arguments to the effect that the wicked tyrant who escapes retribution has attained the pinnacle of human enlightenment and happiness, while the just man whom he tortures on the rack is both wretched and foolish.⁷ No such argument is found in the *Phaedo*; and if it were, the contradiction between (1) and (2) would still not be a matter of logic alone but based on a certain type of moral theory.

Prior to adoption of a particular moral theory, then, all manner of actions may consistently be asserted to have non-morally good consequences for the agent and yet be morally wicked. Eudaemonistic theories, like that of Socrates, which render

⁶ The terms "having" and "leading" a good life are borrowed from Frankena 1973: 62. To have a good life is to achieve εὐδαιμονία. The word is notoriously hard to translate: see Cooper 1975: 89–90, n. and Vlastos 1991: 200–203 on the inadequacies of the customary translation, "happiness." Of the various translations proposed, that suggested by Cooper, following Anscombe (1958), namely, "human flourishing," comes closest to the Greek sense of the word.

⁷ Cf. the exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus in *Republic* 1.

this an impossibility are, whatever else may be said of them, not just a matter of logic. So the assertion that some action is non-morally good or advantageous and yet morally wicked, unjust, or impious is *prima facie* not even apparently contradictory, unless we presuppose a certain type of moral doctrine not actually found or alluded to in the *Phaedo* itself.

In a Greek perspective, moreover, “what is good or bad for a person is an objective matter” (Cooper 1989: 12), so that (1) asserts that death is good for a philosopher, whether or not he realizes it—though being wise he presumably does realize this. His doing so entails, first of all, that (a) he quite reasonably *desires* death, since not to desire what he knows to be in his own (objective) best interests would be “wrong” in the non-moral sense of “foolish” or “irrational.” Furthermore, (1) entails that (b) to *act* on this desire by taking his own life is at least the non-morally “right” course of action for the philosopher to take.⁸ This same action is, however, according to (2), wrong in the moral sense. And again, it is objectively so, since the gods themselves prohibit it. Thus, (1) and (2) are both perfectly objective truths; but since one is a statement about non-moral, the other about moral goodness, they cannot be said to conflict.⁹

In speaking of an “appearance of contradiction,” however, Gallop is not wrong; he is just taking certain things for granted that it is very natural to presuppose in the dramatic setting of this dialogue, whose death scene contains a remarkably life-like depiction of the historical Socrates. A couple of rather glaring contradictions emerge as soon as we make explicit certain familiar teachings of that same Socrates, doctrines assumed as well known by those assembled in his prison cell. Together with these teachings, which the Socrates of the *Phaedo* nowhere mentions, but which Plato might well expect his readers to have in the

⁸Throughout this article, (1) is interpreted as carrying implications (a) and (b), so that even when abbreviated as “death is good for the philosopher” or “the philosopher is eager to die,” it still means that the philosopher would be acting in accordance with enlightened self-interest were he to fulfil his desire to die by committing suicide.

⁹Whether Plato would have recognized the distinction between moral and non-moral goodness as ruling out logical inconsistency between (1) and (2) is hard to say; but it is at least not obviously anachronistic to expect (1) to have the right sort of normative force if it is to be, or, more to the present point, to be felt by Cebes to be, the contrary of (2).

Anachronism arises not simply from applying the distinctions of a later age to the thought of an earlier one, but from ascribing one’s own *tools of analysis* to those whose ideas and theories are made clearer by them—sometimes much clearer than they could have been to their first discoverers. Thus, it is hardly anachronistic to distinguish a factual and a normative side of the Heraclitean *logos* (cf. Robinson 1987: 182–183)—though this distinction was, by general agreement, first sharply drawn much later, and the terms “factual” and “normative,” now generally in use, are of still more recent origin. By contrast, it would be grossly anachronistic to suggest that Heraclitus himself actually drew, or would have seen any need for, a distinction of this kind. So too in our case. It is not obviously anachronistic to suggest that this passage contains no overt contradiction and that Plato might even have been alive to this fact at some level, even if he certainly would not have analyzed it in terms of the impossibility of logical contradiction (in the absence of further premises) between non-moral and moral normative statements.

backs of their minds, (1) and (2) each has *consequences* that are clearly logically inconsistent in the straightforward manner Cebes' reaction leads one to expect. In fact, not only do we get a contradiction between two moral injunctions; there is another at the level of the philosopher's non-moral good as well. It is with these unstated doctrines that the next section of this article is concerned. To the extent that the interpretation goes beyond the text of the *Phaedo* itself, the reconstruction of the contradiction is obviously conjectural. Yet this may be warranted where, as here, the text provides less than is required to make good sense of the passage just on its own terms.

III. THE UNSTATED DOCTRINES

A good deal of effort has been expended on the task of stating Cebes' difficulty clearly. Dorter elaborates three, Gallop some five interpretations based on different readings of the notoriously difficult Greek sentence at 62a2–7:

ἴσως μέντοι θαυμαστόν σοι φανέεται εἰ τοῦτο μόνον τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων ἀπλοῦν ἐστίν, καὶ οὐδέποτε τυγχάνει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, ὥσπερ καὶ τὰλλα, ἐστὶν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον <δὼν> τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν, οἷς δὲ βέλτιον τεθνάναι, θαυμαστόν ἴσως σοι φαίνεται εἰ τούτοις τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μὴ ὅσιον αὐτοῦς ἑαυτοὺς εὖ ποιεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἄλλον δεῖ περιμένειν εὐεργέτην.

Perhaps, though, it will seem a matter for wonder to you if this alone of all things is unqualified [that is, true without exception, true in all circumstances] and it never happens, as other things do sometimes and for some people, that (1) it is better for a man [namely, a philosopher] to be dead than alive, and for those for whom it is better to be dead, perhaps it seems a matter for wonder to you if (2) for these men it is not holy to do good to themselves, but they must await another benefactor.¹⁰

According as "this alone of all things" is taken to mean *either* that (a) death is always preferable to life (Bluck and Dorter) *or* that (b) life is always preferable to death (Burnet, Hackforth), *or* that (c) suicide is always wrong (Loriaux, Tarán, Gallop himself), different translations and/or interpretations of this passage result. Each has its difficulties.¹¹ The problem they share is the exact nature of the supposed inconsistency of (1) and (2); but, as was argued in the previous section,

¹⁰ Cf. Dorter 1982: 11–19; Gallop 1975: 79–83. Each if-clause introduces a "matter for wonder," while (1) and (2) are those key tenets in terms of which the consistency problem was posed in the preceding section. On the difference between "dying" (ἀποθνήσκειν) and the state of "being dead" (τὸ τεθνάναι), see Gallop 1975: 226, n. 4. Philosophically, the difference is of no significance, although morally, of course, there may be a very great difference between dying (or being dead) and dying by one's own hand. See below, 252–253.

¹¹ Cf. Dorter 1982: 16: "Ultimately it seems to come down to a question of whether or not one believes that Plato regarded death as superior in some sense to life. To those who believe this, the traditional interpretation [defended by Bluck] seems the most natural although not grammatically straightforward; those who do not believe it prefer the second or third *and are similarly willing to live with the difficulties they present*" (italics mine). To Dorter it seems that "the traditional interpretation would be the most natural" (17). Still, he is wisely cautious. See above, n. 3.

if one leaves all particular moral theories aside, (1) is a non-moral normative statement about (actions conducive to) εὐδαιμονία, while (2) is a normative statement about moral right and wrong; if they are to contradict one another, or at least be felt to do so by Cebes and the others present, other statements or doctrines must be in play. What, then, are those other views together with which (1) and (2) lead to consequences that are in fact (and quite clearly) inconsistent at both normative levels?

To begin with, everyone present on this occasion, and most certainly Cebes, might safely be expected to have heard Socrates espouse the doctrine that (3) all rational (or wise) human action aims at the good (or at least at obtaining the better and avoiding the worse). This is one way of putting the basic tenet of eudaemonism, some form of which was common to most Greek moralists, so that it would have been familiar even if those present had not heard it from Socrates' own lips. It is expressed by Socrates in earlier dialogues like the *Meno* and the *Apology*, and Cebes is most definitely portrayed as one familiar with Socrates' teachings.¹² Thus, when Meno advances as a general definition of virtue: "Virtue is to desire beautiful [or good] things and to have the power to provide them" (77b4–5), Socrates gradually brings him round (at 78b4–5) to the view that "all men desire [what are or seem to them to be] good things" (77c1–2), that is, things they *believe* will make them happy. This leads to a reformulation of the definition in which the words "to desire beautiful things" are dropped, since everybody, even the wicked man, desires such things. That every rational agent seeks his own happiness or, negatively, that no rational person does anything to harm himself or impair his happiness finds clear expression in the *Apology* as well. Coaxing Meletus into making his second charge (that Socrates corrupts the youth *intentionally*) more specific, Socrates advances certain other propositions, of which the third is again the basic principle of eudaemonism: (i) to live among good people is beneficial and among bad ones harmful to oneself; (ii) to make others around one worse is to (be likely to) suffer harm oneself; (iii) no one deliberately acts so as to suffer harm; hence either (a) Socrates does not make the young people worse at all or (b) he does so unintentionally (cf. 25c–26a).

This may suffice to suggest that those present might reasonably be assumed to have heard (3), probably from Socrates himself, perhaps on many occasions, and to be at least somewhat familiar with the particular version of eudaemonism espoused by Socrates. The same holds for this further point: (4) the gods want (and always command) what is best for mankind. This is the doctrine of divine goodness or benevolence given clear expression by Socrates in the *Euthyphro*. Not only does he state without qualification that "there is no good that we do not receive from the gods" (15a1–2); he declares himself unable to believe the traditional myths about gods murdering, castrating, and so on, to which the zealot

¹² At 72e3–7 Cebes refers to the Theory of Recollection (as espoused in the *Meno* at 80d–86c), while Simmias needs to be reminded of the doctrine.

Euthyphro appeals in justifying his decision to prosecute his own father (5e–6c). This refusal is the cornerstone of Socrates' moral theology: pious and reverent toward the beliefs of his ancestors for the most part, he nevertheless cannot accept anything that goes against the dictates of his own reason. If the gods are indeed superior to mankind, then it stands to reason that they are morally superior as well, and it is contrary to reason to accept uncritically the stories of violent passions and vengeful actions whose authority the religious enthusiast Euthyphro invokes.¹³

Now the statement (1) for wise men (philosophers) it is death that brings "the greatest benefits" (64a1–2), together with Socrates' eudaemonistic moral theory, that is, a version of (3) according to which the man who acts wisely or rationally, securing what is really most to his advantage, can never commit moral evil, logically entails (5), it is morally permissible for philosophers to choose death by their own hand rather than life. Having the strongest motive of self-interest, they are permitted, as wise or rational moral agents, to end their lives; and yet just this is proscribed, also on moral grounds, by the ban on suicide in (2). Thus, (2) and (5) conflict.¹⁴ Does Cebes just fail to see that the normative force of (1) differs from that of (2)? Or is he taking (3) for granted, interpreting (1) and (2) in the

¹³ It "stands to reason," although, strictly speaking, *Euthyphro* 5e–6c only commits Socrates to the claim that (1) the gods do not act immorally. From here it is a further step to (2) the gods do no harm, and another to (3) the gods always desire and command what is beneficial (and indeed best) for humankind. On the relation between wrongdoing and doing harm, see Pl. *Crito* 49c10–11. For an argument that moves effortlessly from (1) "the god is good" to (2) "nothing good is harmful" to (3) "the good is beneficial" (and hence the god beneficent), see *Resp.* 379a–d.

Indirect support for the move from (1) to (3) is provided by the *Apology*, where service to the city of Athens figures prominently alongside service to the god Apollo in Socrates' defence of the philosophic life. Why should Socrates consider his mission as gadfly beneficial (and himself "a gift") to the city (cf. 30d), while clearly recognizing that his fellow-citizens, individually and collectively, are anything but gratified? Presumably, because he believes that the god would not command him to do what was in fact harmful (and therefore wrong) or indeed that what the god commanded must be positively beneficial. This he could only assert confidently in the particular case of the divine command to carry out his mission if he were relying on some unstated general principle of moral theology according to which the gods always act for the greatest good of mankind.

On the moral superiority of the gods (and their offspring), see also *Resp.* 408c3–4: "If he [Asclepius] was the son of a god, he was not avaricious, we will insist, and if he was greedy of gain, he was not the son of a god."

¹⁴ Note that what is required is *Socrates'* theory as a particular version of (3). The general principle of eudaemonism covers a wide variety of theories. Neither the general principle nor just any eudaemonistic moral theory will do as the content of (3). Interpreted in the light of the Socratic teaching of the "sovereignty" of moral virtue (see above, 247–248), (3) means, roughly: no one acting in a manner that is really conducive to his own εὐδαιμονία will knowingly act immorally (loss of virtue being the greatest calamity one can suffer, worse even than death). From this it follows that as long as the philosopher acts in a manner he *rightly* believes to be in his own best interests, he cannot (logically) be acting in a way that is *morally* culpable. Taking this as its content, (3) together with (1), death is really a good thing for the philosopher (who, realizing this, is eager to die), entails (5). (5) accordingly states that it is not wrong for the philosopher to choose death by his own hand rather than that he should do so; in other words "right" here has the weak sense of "permissible" rather than the strong sense of "obligatory." That is all that is necessary for it to conflict with (2).

light of a moral theory he knows well, and therefore sensing, though perhaps only vaguely, that (1) and (3) entail (5), the denial of (2)? If the latter, this may be all that is bothering him. But there may be more. Before the backcloth of (3), Socrates' eudaemonism, it is surely impossible that a morally vicious act conduce to the non-moral good, the εὐδαιμονία, of the agent. Thus, if (2) death by one's own hand is always morally wrong, then, given (3), Socrates' moral theory, it follows that (6) death by suicide is never to anyone's advantage, never good, which contradicts (1). For it is the same sense of "good" (namely, "beneficial," "advantageous") in (1) and (6).¹⁵ But that may not be all either. The moral theology of (4), if Cebes is even dimly aware of it, should reinforce his discomfort. For the veto (2), "it is unlawful" or wrong to commit suicide (the gods prohibit it), together with (4), the doctrine of divine benevolence (roughly: the gods always command what is advantageous and prohibit what is harmful for men) also entails (6), death by suicide is never to anyone's advantage. Yet, according to (1), it may be so sometimes. So Cebes, if he is at all familiar with the teachings of Socrates referred to as (3) and (4), has ample cause for θαῦμα.

IV. THE UNRESOLVED CONTRADICTION

Thus far it has been argued that without the twin Socratic tenets that the gods are morally good and hence benevolent, always commanding what is truly to men's advantage, and that he who acts so as to secure his own true happiness never acts wrongly, there just is no inconsistency, not even an apparent one, between the divine interdict upon suicide and the belief that death, as the separation of the soul and body, is of very great benefit to the philosopher. *With* those Socratic doctrines, however, (1) and (2) give rise to a whole nest of inconsistencies, and these may be the real source of Cebes' perplexity without his actually realizing it. If there were an inconsistency between (1) and (2), then we should expect to find Socrates trying to palliate it by rescinding or revising either the claim that (1) death is advantageous to the philosopher or his approval of (2), the absolute prohibition on suicide. Yet in fact he does neither, but instead underscores his commitment to both. This brings us to Gallop's other contention, that Socrates sets out to "resolve" the apparent contradiction.

It will be difficult to argue for the relaxation or abandonment of (1). If, in 62a2–3, cited above, "this alone of all things" refers to the vulgar assumption that life is always preferable to death, (1) is corroborated by the first part of that passage, the sense of which is: *as* with other good and bad things, *so* with life and death; while life is *usually* better than death, death may yet be better for some people at some times. After all, why should life and death be the only

¹⁵ Cf. above, n. 8 on the full meaning of (1). Only when understood in the manner spelled out there does the contradictoriness of affirming both (1) and (6) emerge clearly. Otherwise, admittedly, "death is advantageous for the philosopher" and "suicide (death *by one's own hand*) is never advantageous for anyone" appear quite consistent.

exceptions to the rule that circumstances may make a difference? (1) states that they are not exceptions—death is preferable to life for those who philosophize rightly—and so gains support from this passage. Moreover, according to the subsequent apologia, death is non-morally good for the philosopher as such, and not just as an alternative to loss of virtue or irremediable physical suffering. While Socrates' attitude toward death changes markedly from the *Apology* to the opening conversation of the *Phaedo* (above, note 3), there is no such change in the transition from the conversation on suicide to the subsequent apologia. True, this section of the *Phaedo* brings to bear a different moral outlook from that of the *Apology* (cf. the treatment of the virtues at 68a–69e); by means of the Pythagorean-inspired, un-Socratic ethic of cleansing the soul of the taint of the body, moral virtue, non-moral (intellectual) virtue, and happiness are all made to coincide. But far from being attenuated in any way, (1) is retained and receives a striking philosophical development in the sequel to the opening conversation.

As for (2), the only other persuasive reading of the difficult passage cited above takes “this alone of all things” to refer to the prohibition on suicide (cf. Gallop 1975: 79–81; and Dorter's demurrer, notes 3 and 11 above). On any interpretation that has Socrates reaffirming his own view rather than (*pace* Gallop) formulating a doubt in Cebes' mind, the meaning of the opening gambit is: while it may seem surprising that the ban on suicide, unlike other prohibitions, admits of no exceptions, it is nonetheless so. Later, Socrates' adherence to (2) is reinforced by a “reason given in mysteries.” Of course, it is not the moral theology of the historical Socrates (the moral superiority of the gods and divine benevolence), but the new moral theology of the Orphic/Pythagorean mysteries (although in a more benign form) that is brought in to prop up (2); the moral theology of Socrates is actually inconsistent with it, since divine benevolence rules out a veto upon suicide in cases where it is in fact beneficial. At this point Cebes, not Socrates, mounts an argument *against* the claim that (1) death is a good thing for the philosopher. It is akin to the argument just introduced by Socrates in support of (2) in that both arguments display a similar Pythagorean moral theology, the same language of “the mysteries,” and the same benign rendering of the traditional doctrine. Cebes' argument runs: (Premise 1) “god is our guardian and we are his possessions,” that is, he is our master, we his servants; (Premise 2) “it is not reasonable that the wisest of men (φρονιμώτατοι) should not resent leaving this service in which they are governed by the best of masters, the gods”; hence (Conclusion) “the sensible man would always want to remain with [be the servant of] one better than himself [a god],” that is, “the wise man would resent dying, whereas the foolish would rejoice at it” (cf. 62c–e). By this argument Socrates is challenged to mount a rebuttal of Cebes' denial of (1), that is, a defence of his own claim that the philosopher, if consistent, will not resent death but warmly welcome it.

Here we indeed have a contradiction. Premise 1, employed by Socrates to bolster (2), is used by Cebes to establish the denial of (1). But is this what Cebes jibbed at when Socrates first proffered his advice to Evenus? Again,

Gallop thinks so. His commentary on Socrates' defence speech (63e8–69e5) is introduced by a general description of its (a) content, (b) purpose, and (c) conclusion in these terms: "This section [a] contains a passionate apologia for the philosophic life. It [b] resolves the contradiction with which Socrates had been faced. The philosopher's whole life is a preparation for death. He should therefore [c] welcome [!] death when it comes" (Gallop 1975: 86). But is this "the contradiction with which Socrates had been faced"? *That* was presumably "the apparent contradiction" between (1) and (2); this is the contradiction between (1) and the conclusion of Cebes' argument. If Gallop in fact means the latter, then to say that Socrates "resolves the contradiction" seems odd when he merely attempts to establish the falsity of Cebes' conclusion. If, on the other hand, what is meant is "the apparent contradiction" of 61d4–5, then Socrates' defence speech hardly resolves it by elaborating an *a priori* argument *for* (1).¹⁶

In arguing against Cebes' conclusion, Socrates' apologia strengthens the case for (1). This much seems indisputable. As for (2), it was reinforced in the argument based on the mysteries, possibly also (if "this alone of all things" refers to the prohibition upon suicide) by the difficult passage at the beginning. It is nowhere abandoned or attenuated in the defence speech. Yet the logic of the situation is clear: in order to remove the contradictions that arise from the conjunction of (1) and (2) with the other doctrines just outlined, (1) or (2) must be abandoned, for (3), Socrates' peculiar form of eudaemonism, and (4), his belief in divine benevolence, are not even mentioned, let alone discussed, in the *Phaedo*. In fact, however, it is (3) and (4) that have been given up *by Plato*, supplanted by un-Socratic, Pythagorean-style teachings, though Cebes and the others are understandably puzzled by this, given what they know of the moral outlook of Socrates. This leaves the way clear for Plato to devise still further quasi-Pythagorean arguments for (1) and (2) in the later portions of the *Phaedo*. Of these something will be said in the Conclusion. The point just now is that they are not attempts to "resolve" even an apparent contradiction.

V. CONCLUSION

It is tempting to assume that in the exchange on suicide Socrates first makes a pair of statements that appear contradictory, proceeding to show that they are not so in fact, after characteristically intensifying his interlocutor's perplexity as a prelude to resolving the difficulty. This general pattern of argument is familiar enough. Owing to the ambiguities of the text of *Phaedo* 62a2–7 (above, 250), the precise reasons for "wonder" are in dispute; but that Cebes is needlessly puzzled,

¹⁶The argument turns on a certain definition of "death" and a certain definition of "philosophy" (properly practised). Since the definitions coincide, it would be quite irrational for one who practises philosophy aright to shun or fear the good after which he has spent a lifetime striving—contrary to what Cebes has maintained.

while Socrates clears up his confusion, would seem to follow from the principle of charity toward a great dead author.

There is, moreover, no shortage of attractive solutions to Cebes' alleged difficulty. Even though, from a purely private or individual point of view, death may be preferable to life for the philosopher, rational preference may be overridden by (i) a divine and/or (ii) a public calling that supports an absolute veto upon suicide. Opting for the former solution, Dorter speaks of "the superiority of death to life from a personal point of view (a superiority that disappears from an impersonal, selfless, point of view, resulting in the prohibition on suicide)" (1982: 17). These opposed perspectives are grounded ultimately in the "two vocations" of the soul, "one toward fleeing the body to be with the forms, the other toward animation of body that obstructs its impetus toward the form The opposition was already anticipated in the argument against suicide," where "the apparent paradox that even if it is *right* to die rather than live, it is not *right* to kill oneself" is founded on "the opposition between the philosopher's desire that the soul flee the body (death) to be with the forms and the soul's obligation (to 'the gods') to continue to animate the body (life) . . ." (Dorter 1982: 45; my italics).¹⁷ For a solution of the other kind, based on an opposition between private and public good, one might look to the *Republic*. Human society needs philosophers in order to flourish; hence the obligation not just to live, but to go back down into the cave.

What has been argued in the foregoing is, first of all, that there is no contradiction, not even an apparent one, in the text itself, so long as the eudaemonistic ethical theory and moral theology of the historical Socrates are left out of the equation; that it requires a backward glance at the historical Socrates of several earlier dialogues to understand why Cebes (and we) should even think otherwise; and that Socrates, far from applying therapy to alleviate Cebes' and our discomfort, actually renders it more acute by underscoring his commitment to each of the statements whose conjunction with certain unstated doctrines seems so baffling. For, as shown above, the thoroughly Orphic/Pythagorean (1) together with (3), the moral eudaemonism of Socrates, entails (5), that the philosopher is morally permitted to take his own life, which contradicts (2), the divine prohibition on suicide. Moreover, (2) and (3) entail (6), that death is never profitable, as do (2) and (4). Yet (6) is inconsistent with (1). Strictly within the confines of a quasi-Pythagorean puritan ethic and moral theology of the *Phaedo*, that is, in the absence of (3) and (4), there just is no logical inconsistency between Socrates' initial statements, not even an apparent one. For on the most natural reading, (1) concerns non-moral and (2) moral goodness. That actions non-morally good or beneficial for the agent may nonetheless be morally wrong is

¹⁷ Notice the use of "right" in Dorter's statement of the paradox as cited above. "Right" means *morally* right in both occurrences. If, on the other hand, the first use is non-moral ("prudential" in Kant's sense), the tension between inclination and duty does not seem paradoxical at all.

not a problem; it is exactly what one should expect in the absence of a particular moral theory that renders it an impossibility. And this is precisely the effect of the moral theory that contrasts individual happiness with divine or cosmic duty in the later portions of the *Phaedo*. That theory does not render (1) and (2) consistent, since they are not inconsistent in the first place. Where an inconsistency is in fact addressed, in the apologia that follows the exchange on suicide, it is not this but another inconsistency. If this is correct, then the real source of Cebes' difficulty concerning (1) and (2) must be the uneasy juxtaposition of the Pythagorean and the Socratic in this dialogue. It is a problem that the Plato of the early middle period faces as he steps out of the shadow of his great teacher; and it confronts every reader coming to the *Phaedo* from the early dialogues.

Once we work out, by supplying the relevant unstated doctrines, the likely nature of the inconsistency or inconsistencies worrying Cebes, it appears that Plato is wrestling here, as most everywhere in the *Phaedo*, with the tensions between his Socratic inheritance and his own Pythagorean/Orphic religious entanglements, struggling to reconcile them through a philosophical synthesis that still eludes him. While the moral outlook of the last part of the Affinity Argument, for example, comes down to a curious amalgam of Pythagorean purification doctrine and Socratic intellectualism (the latter modified in accordance with the Platonic Theory of Forms), it is apparently the eudaemonistic ethics and moral theology of Socrates that play out against hatred of the flesh and subservience to divine masters in the passage that concerns us. All this is apt to be obscured by attempts to present the Socrates of the *Phaedo* as successfully dispelling a difficulty that Cebes only imagines to arise from an approving reference to Pythagorean doctrine.¹⁸

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