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MORI LUCRUM:
PAUL AND ANCIENT THEORIES OF SUICIDE

by

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Chicago

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” These are the famous opening words of Albert Camus’ essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.¹ Whether true or not, Camus’ remark is at least descriptive of the extensive philosophical debates about suicide in Greek and Roman antiquity. As is well known, suicide was regularly practiced throughout antiquity and was justified by many as an obvious means of deliverance from all sorts of affliction and oppression.² In general, ancient society did not discriminate against suicide, nor did it attach any particular disgrace to it, provided there was sufficient justification for the act. This, of course, was an issue to which the philosophers turned their attention. What seems to have concerned them more than the act itself was the context in which it was performed.

For a number of reasons, some of them valid, it has been customary to regard the philosophical discussion of suicide in antiquity as a uniquely Stoic phenomenon. However, this should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that nearly all the philosophical schools of the Graeco-Roman period had worked out their own positions on the theory and practice of suicide. Admittedly, in the

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (ET New York: Vintage Books, 1955) 3.

² The classic study of suicide in antiquity is still R. Hirzel, “Der Selbstmord,” *ARW* 11 (1908) 75-104, 243-84, 417-76 (reprinted separately as *Der Selbstmord* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967]). For a full bibliography, see Y. Gris , *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* (Collection Noesis; Montr al: Bellarmin, 1982) 299-308, to which should be added: E. Benz, *Das Todesproblem in der stoischen Philosophie* (TBA, 68; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1929); and A. Ronconi, “Exitus illustrium virorum,” *RAC* 6 (1966) 1258-68. Still useful is M. M. von Baumhauer, *ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΥΛΟΓΟΥ ΕΞΑΓΩΓΗΣ: Veterum philosophorum praecipue Stoicorum doctrina de morte voluntaria* (Trajecti ad Rhenum: N. van der Monde, 1842).

Roman period, many of the more famous suicides were Stoics, and in the writings of Seneca in particular suicide is extolled as the greatest triumph of an individual over fate. But by no means was the practice limited to Stoics. There is a measure of truth in the remark of E. R. Dodds, that "in these centuries a good many persons were consciously or unconsciously in love with death."³ Indeed, as A. D. Nock has observed, the first century witnessed the rise of what can only be described as a suicide cult.⁴

Although the theoretical discussion of suicide is not attested in early Christian literature until Augustine, who condemns the practice, there is at least one passage in the apostle Paul's letters in which he appears to consider the possibility of suicide as a legitimate option for himself and presumably Christians in general. In this paper I propose to examine this passage, as well as Paul's general fascination with death, in light of the ancient discussion of suicide. The investigation proceeds in the following way. The first part of the paper will explore some of the theories in antiquity regarding suicide. Here it will be argued that the statements attributed to Socrates in the *Phaedo* (61D-62C) exerted a marked influence on the philosophical discussion of suicide, and were used, paradoxically, as a justification for and as a way of moderating against the practice. The second part of the paper will then examine Paul's remarks in Phil. 1:21-26 in light of these theories. I shall try to demonstrate that Paul's yearning for death in this passage is best explained as his reflection on the possibility—indeed, the desirability—of suicide. More specifically, it will be argued that Paul's statements are reminiscent of those of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, especially as the latter were interpreted by the Stoic moralist Epictetus.

I

While accounts of suicide can be found in Greek literature as early as Homer (e.g., Epicaste in *Od.* 11.271-80), it is really Plato's *Phaedo* which provides the starting point for and remains central to

³ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 135.

⁴ A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) 197. Cf. the list of Roman suicides compiled by Gris , *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* 34-52. By far the greatest number occur between 100 B.C. and A.D. 100.

the philosophical discussion of suicide in antiquity. In the *Phaedo* the condemned Socrates argues that the philosopher will welcome death, since he may expect to attain “the greatest blessings in that other land” (64A). In fact, Socrates goes so far as to urge every person with a worthy interest in philosophy “to come after me as quickly as he can” (61BC). Realizing the provocative nature of this remark, Socrates quickly issues a disclaimer: “Perhaps, however, [the philosopher] will not take his own life, for they say that is not permitted” (οὐ θεμιτόν, 61C). This apparent contradiction only serves to confuse the issue among Socrates’ hearers. One of them, Cebes, therefore asks: “What do you mean by this, Socrates, that it is not permitted to take one’s life, but that the philosopher would desire to follow after your dying?” (61D)? Socrates responds by appealing first to the Pythagorean doctrine that an individual is placed in a kind of prison (the body) from which he must not set himself free or run away (62B).⁵ Socrates confesses, however, that this “secret doctrine” is too obscure for him to be certain of its meaning. In its place therefore he offers a simpler principle: “The gods are our guardians and we humans are the possession of the gods. ...If one of your possessions should kill itself when you had not intended that you wished it to die, would you not be angry with it and punish it if you could?” (62BC)? By this Socrates implies that an individual, who is one of the gods’ possessions, ought not to take his own life because that means usurping a privilege which belongs only to the gods. Yet, as J. M. Rist and others have observed, Socrates leaves one point obscure, and this point remained at the center of the philosophical discussion of suicide throughout antiquity. Socrates concludes,

Then perhaps from this point of view it is not unreasonable to say that an individual must not kill himself until god sends some necessity [ἀνάγκη] upon him, such as has now come upon me (62C).⁶

⁵ Socrates attributes this view to the Pythagorean Philolaus (61 DE; cf. Diels-Kranz 44 B 14). The idea implied here is that the soul is placed in the body as a punishment for sins committed in a previous existence. Suicide is therefore an unjustified revolt against god on the part of the individual who must wait until god sets him free. Cf. L. Edelstein: “Among all Greek thinkers the Pythagoreans alone outlawed suicide and did so without qualification. ...Even in later centuries the Pythagorean school is the only one represented as absolutely opposed to suicide” (*Ancient Medicine: Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein* [O. and C. L. Temkin, eds.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967] 17).

⁶ J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 234; cf. Hirzel, “Der Selbstmord” 245 n. 2. By this Plato seems to suggest that

The importance of this account for the subsequent discussion of suicide should not be underestimated. As we will see, the death of Socrates became for many the paradigm of the death of the philosopher.

In the *Phaedo* Plato concedes the legitimacy of suicide only when god brings some compulsion to bear on an individual. Elsewhere Plato defines more precisely what he means by this ἀνάγκη. In the ninth book of the *Laws* (873CD) he outlines the appropriate punishments to be inflicted on the corpse of an individual who takes his own life for the wrong reasons (that is, out of mere indolence or cowardice). At the same time, however, Plato recognizes at least three circumstances in which suicide is permissible: 1) if one has been ordered to do so by the *polis*; 2) if one has encountered devastating misfortune; or 3) if one is faced with intolerable shame (873C). As Rist comments, “these reasons are, in fact, the ones commonly invoked by most Greeks who speak of suicide, and they are mentioned by historical as well as fictional characters as providing grounds for their acts of self-destruction.”⁷ For our purposes it is important to note that Plato condemns the taking of one’s life only when such an act is performed without sufficient justification, or without god bringing some necessity. Then, and only then, has a crime been committed which the state has the right to punish.

Aristotle adopts a similar position in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1138a9-13) by insisting that the man who kills himself in a fit of anger is guilty of a crime punishable by the state. But again this should not be construed as a condemnation of suicide *per se*. Aristotle’s special regulations have been correctly explained by Hirzel as directed against those who committed suicide when still able to bear arms.⁸ Moreover, Rist has suggested that Aristotle, like Plato, also appears to recognize circumstances in which suicide is permissible, and perhaps right. Since elsewhere Aristotle is concerned to point out that taking one’s life to escape poverty, passion, or pain is

Socrates’ drinking of the poison was truly a voluntary death despite his having legally received the death penalty. In similar fashion the author of the Fourth Gospel has Jesus say; “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn. 10:18). This of course raises the whole question of the use of the word “suicide,” which is generally pejorative. Cf. the perceptive remarks of Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 234-35. We will return to this issue below.

⁷ Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 236.

⁸ Hirzel, “Der Selbstmord” 264, 271; *contra* A. W. Mair, “Suicide,” *ERE* 12 (1921) 30.

cowardly (*N.E.* 1116a12-14), it seems that he would have endorsed “the normal Greek view” that there are other situations in which suicide is permissible.⁹ In other words, both Plato and Aristotle maintain that the question of suicide must be evaluated finally in the light of an individual’s civic responsibilities.

When we turn to consider the views of the Cynics a different perspective emerges, due perhaps to the change in political scene. Absent is the mention of civic duty as a restraining factor in the matter of suicide. Indeed, the Cynics are prepared to recommend suicide for seemingly trivial reasons. As Diogenes says, “For the conduct of life we need either reason or the noose” (λόγος ἢ βρόχος).¹⁰ Crates likewise asserts that if passion cannot be curbed by fasting or the passage of time, then the noose is always available.¹¹ In general, however, the texts which survive offer little evidence that the Cynics possessed a fully worked out theory of suicide. Although there are many famous examples of Cynic suicides, none of them presents an explicit theoretical motivation other than the practical one of inability to preserve a Cynic way of life.¹²

When we move on to examine the attitude of Epicurus and his followers we discover that, although they had the reputation for opposing suicide, they did not reject the practice altogether. Among the collection of Epicurean maxims preserved by Diogenes Laertius there is the following injunction: “Even when [the wise man] has lost his sight, he will not withdraw himself from life” (10.119). Yet, instead of condemning suicide, the Epicureans seem to have concerned themselves with pointing out the foolishness of taking one’s life for the wrong reasons. According to Lucretius, “for fear of death men are seized by hatred of life and of seeing the light, so that with sorrowing heart they devise their own death, forgetting that this fear is the fountain of their cares.”¹³ The point here, as in the

⁹ Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 236. Cf. especially Aristotle, *N.E.* 1169a19-26.

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius 6.24.

¹¹ D.L. 6.86.

¹² Diogenes died voluntarily by holding his breath (D.L. 6.76-77, though there are several different accounts of his death); Metrocles choked himself (D.L. 6.95); Menippus hanged himself (6.100); and Demonax starved himself (Lucian, *Demonax* 65). The self-immolation of the Cynic Peregrinus (Lucian, *De morte Peregrini* 25) suggests that the death of Herakles may have served as a model for some Cynics (cf. Hirzel, “Der Selbstmord” 283). Peregrinus’ followers, however, thought he was emulating “the Brahmins” (25, 38).

¹³ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 3.79-82.

saying of Epicurus just quoted, is that suicide should not be undertaken for trivial reasons, such as physical infirmity or fear of death. It is not the case, however, that suicide *per se* is condemned. On the contrary, there are circumstances in which an individual may legitimately take his own life. This is confirmed by another saying of Epicurus: "It is wrong to live under constraint; but no man is constrained to live under constraint."¹⁴ Cicero, moreover, offers the following paraphrase of Epicurus' position on this matter:

For my part I think that we should observe the rule which is followed at Greek banquets: "Let him either drink," it runs, "or go [ἢ πῖθι ἢ ἄπιθι!]" And rightly; for either he should enjoy the pleasure of drinking with the others or get away early, that a sober man may not be a victim to the violence of those who are heated with wine. Thus by running away one can escape the assaults of fortune which one cannot face. This is the same advice as Epicurus gives.¹⁵

Elsewhere Cicero reports that the Epicureans permitted suicide as a last resort in cases of extreme pain.¹⁶ The fact that Epicurus chose to endure the agonies of his final illness is probably the main reason why Epicureans had a reputation for being against suicide.¹⁷

When we turn to the Stoics it quickly becomes clear that they also endorse the normal Greek view: suicide is a legitimate option which human beings have the right to exercise.¹⁸ What concerned them more than the act itself was the context and manner in which it was performed. Suicide, if undertaken, must be done rationally (εὐλόγως). Diogenes Laertius reports that the Stoics "tell us that the wise man will for reasonable cause make his own exit from life [ἐξάξειν ἑαυτὸν τοῦ βίου], on his country's behalf or for the sake of friends, or if he suffer intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease" (7.130). There is little that is new or surprising here; indeed, this list is very similar to the one Plato gives in the *Laws*.¹⁹

In considering the Stoic position on suicide it is instructive to examine their biographies as evidence for their views. According to

¹⁴ Seneca, *Ep.* 12.10: "Malum est in necessitate vivere; sed in necessitate vivere necessitas nulla est" (fr. 487 Usener).

¹⁵ Cicero, *Tusc. disp.* 5.118 (fr. 397 Usener).

¹⁶ Cicero, *De fin.* 1.49 (fr. 397 Usener).

¹⁷ D.L. 10.22 (fr. 138 Usener).

¹⁸ Cf. the fragments collected by J. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903) 3.757-68; also Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 238-45; and Gris , *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* 180-84, 193-223. Our discussion is indebted to Rist at several points.

¹⁹ Similar lists are found elsewhere, cf. *SVF* 3.768.

the doxographic tradition, Zeno and Cleanthes both took their own lives when old age and ill health came upon them. The account of the death of Zeno deserves special attention.²⁰ At an advanced age Zeno was leaving his school one day when he fell and broke his finger (or toe). Striking the ground with his fist, he quoted the following line from Timotheus' (lost) tragedy, the *Niobe*: "I am coming; why do you call me?" He then killed himself by holding his breath. Adolf Bonhoeffer was probably correct when he observed that Zeno interpreted this "accident" as a divine summons; hence the quotation from the *Niobe*.²¹ Zeno supposed that he had received the signal to depart, perhaps because his philosophical work was complete, or because he was no longer capable of living according to nature. In any case, the account of Zeno's death echoes the rationale of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. Zeno believed, like Socrates, that god gives the sign for an individual's departure.²²

The account of the death of Cleanthes admits of a similar interpretation. He refused to resume eating after an inflammation of the gums led to a two-day fast. "Declaring that he had already gotten too far on the road, Cleanthes went on fasting the rest of his days until his death at the same age as Zeno's."²³ This adaption by the Stoics of the Socratic (or Platonic) view of suicide is understandable when we remember that for them the cosmic deity is the Logos of which human reason partakes. An individual's *logos* therefore will allow him to determine the divinely appointed time for his exit from life.

The views of the later Stoics betray much more clearly the influence of the *Phaedo*.²⁴ Here we must rely on Cicero for evidence, and in particular on the *Tusculan Disputations* and the *De officiis*. Cicero seems to have considered the Stoic and Platonic views of suicide to

²⁰ D.L. 7.28.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Die Ethik des Stoikers Epictet* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1894) 38-39. Cf. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 243: "Now it may seem to us...that Zeno's action was grotesque, but it looks like a grotesque parody of what happened to say, as is often said, that Zeno killed himself *because* he broke his toe. The truth is more probably that he thought he had received a sign that his hour had come."

²² So Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 243.

²³ D.L. 7.176. I do not mean to imply that Zeno and Cleanthes necessarily held this particular view of suicide. Rather, it should be attributed to those who composed and transmitted these biographical anecdotes.

²⁴ For the purposes of this essay we can largely abstain from a consideration of the complexities of Chrysippus' views on suicide. On this, see Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 239-42.

be analogous in certain respects. In *Tusc. disp.* 1.71-75 he recounts the death of Socrates and then compares it with the suicide (or martyrdom) of Cato of Utica. The passage is worth quoting at length.

Cato departed from life with a feeling of joy in having found a reason for death; for the god who is master within us forbids our departure without permission; when, however, god himself has given a valid reason [*causam iustam*] as he did in the past to Socrates, and in our day to Cato, and often to many others, then with certainty your true wise man will joyfully pass forthwith from the darkness here into the light beyond. All the same he will not break the bonds of his prison house, the law forbids it, but as if in obedience to a magistrate or some lawful authority, he will pass out at the summons and release of god. For the whole life of the philosopher, as the same wise man says, is a preparation for death.²⁵

Cicero holds that an individual may depart from life only when a signal to do so has been received from the deity. When such a sign is given, however, death should be entered into joyfully since it is a haven and a refuge from life's troubles. This understanding of suicide appears in a later section of the *Tusculans*, although Cato is not mentioned (1.118). A similar view is expressed in the "Dream of Scipio" (*De republica* 6.15-16) where the question is again raised, as in the *Phaedo*, if death is a gain why not die at once? The answer is much the same: until god permits, a person must continue his earthly tasks. Finally, we should consider a passage from the *De officiis* (1.112). In it we have Cicero's portrayal of Cato as the ideal Stoic sage and martyr, and the justification of his suicide appears to rest solely on the ground that Cato was wise. Indeed, if others had been in Cato's position the act of suicide might have been a crime. Cicero's views on suicide therefore represent a synthesis of the Socratic and Stoic traditions.

When we move from Cicero to Seneca, however, a considerable shift can be detected. Whereas for earlier Stoics suicide was not in the forefront of the philosophical discussion, with Seneca the question of suicide moves from the wings to center stage.²⁶ As Rist points out, Seneca extols suicide as the act *par excellence* of the free man.²⁷ Instead of invoking the Socratic and earlier Stoic view that

²⁵ *Tusc.* 1.74. Plutarch (*Cato Minor* 67-68) claims that Cato himself viewed Socrates' death as paradigmatic, and that he read the *Phaedo* before taking his own life.

²⁶ A complete collection of the sources, including passages in the tragedies, is provided by N. Tadić-Gilloteaux, "Sénèque face au suicide," *L'antiquité classique* 32 (1963) 541-51.

²⁷ Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 246-50. Cf. M. T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 367-88, who is critical of Rist's interpretation. She

the wise man will not take his own life until god gives the signal, Seneca emphasizes the right to suicide in general. He repeatedly refers to suicide as the path to liberty, as proof that an individual cannot be held against his will.

In any kind of servitude the way lies open to liberty. If the soul is sick and because of its own imperfection unhappy, a man may end its sorrows and at the same time himself. ...In whatever direction you may turn your eyes, there lies the means to end your woes. Do you see that cliff? Down that is the way to liberty. Do you see that sea, that river, that well? There sits liberty at the bottom. Do you see that tree...? From its branches hangs liberty. Do you see that throat of yours, your stomach, your heart? They are ways of escape from servitude. ... Do you ask what is the path to liberty? Any vein in your body!²⁸

Like Cicero, he frequently mentions Cato as an example of how to die bravely. However, according to Seneca, Cato proved his freedom by taking his own life. And although Seneca omits (intentionally) any suggestion that god provided a particular sign indicating death, he still compares Cato with Socrates.²⁹ His famous *Ep.* 70, which to all intents and purposes is a hymn to suicide (or freedom), begins with the maxim that “the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can,” and continues by saying that the wise man will consider the possibility of suicide well before he is under extreme *necessitas* (70.4; cf. Socrates’ ἀνάγκη).³⁰ Seneca emphatically opposes philosophers who condemn suicide as those who “shut off the path to freedom” (70.14-15). Indeed, it is the deity who has arranged matters so that an individual can never be kept in this life against his will.

Above all, I [sc. god] have taken pains that nothing should keep you here against your will; the way is open. If you do not choose to fight, you may run away. Therefore, of all things I have deemed necessary for you, I have made nothing easier than dying. I have set life on a downward slope; if it is prolonged only observe and you will see what a short and easy path leads to liberty.³¹

maintains (incorrectly, in my view) that Seneca adheres to the orthodox Stoic position on suicide.

²⁸ *De ira* 3.15.3-4; cf. *Epp.* 12.10; 26.10; 66.13; 70.5, 12, 16, 23-24; 77.15. These passages overstate the importance of suicide in a way which would have been unacceptable to earlier Stoics (*pace* Griffin). As Rist comments, “to allow for suicide in certain circumstances is one thing, to exalt it is quite another” (*Stoic Philosophy* 248).

²⁹ *Epp.* 13.14; 24.6-8; *De prov.* 2.9-10.

³⁰ Note how Seneca compares the deaths of Socrates and Zeno: “alter [Socrates] te docebit mori si necesse erit, alter [Zeno] antequam necesse erit” (*Ep.* 104.21).

³¹ *De prov.* 6.7.

Thus, it is by no means contrary to the will of god if an individual chooses to end his life at any time. It is precisely because of the divine order of things that one is at all times at liberty to commit suicide. Furthermore, as Rist perceptively notes, "it seems that not only is the choice of suicide open to everyone, it is also particularly ennobling—a wholly novel concept for a Stoic. Apparently the fool can be transmuted into a sage by a well-judged and opportune death. Here indeed is the concept of the *ambitiosa mors*."³²

Seneca's emphasis on suicide as the supremely free act and his neglect of the requirement of a divine call represent a considerable alteration in the orthodox Stoic position, though the difference is perhaps more one of degree than of kind. It may be that his attitude reflects the adaptation of earlier Stoic ideas to a new time when suicide, or voluntary death, had become a cult.³³ In any case, it is not altogether clear how Seneca would have defended his own suicide as a supremely free act, since it was carried out at the command of Nero in the spring of A.D. 65.³⁴ As Tacitus remarks on the forced suicide of a certain Asiaticus during the reign of Claudius (47 A.D.), his freedom consisted only in the choice of the *means* of death.³⁵

In contrast to Seneca, Epictetus displays moderation on the subject of suicide. He is concerned more with the problem of death in general, and he insists again and again on its indifferent status.³⁶ Missing altogether is the exaggerated fascination with suicide as the free act *par excellence*. According to Epictetus, an individual ought not to give up on life irrationally or for frivolous causes. The reason for this is that the deity does not desire it. As in the case of Socrates,

³² Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 249. The reference to an "ostentatious death" occurs in Tacitus, *Agricola* 42. It should be pointed out, however, that Seneca does recognize at least some restraining factors (e.g., an individual's family and friends, *Ep.* 104.3-4); and he sharply condemns those who commit suicide for mere *frivola causa* (*Epp.* 4.4; 24.22; *De tranq. animi* 2.15).

³³ So Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* 250. Cf. Epictetus 1.9.10-17, who knows of a death-wish among young men and feels obliged to restrain it; also Seneca, *Ep.* 24.25, who speaks of a *libido moriendi*; Plutarch, *De tranq. animi* 17-18; Pausanias 6.8.4; Martial, *Epigr.* 11.55.15-16; Ignatius, *Ad Rom.* 4-6; Clement, *Strom.* 4.17.1; Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.1-16; *Ad nat.* 1.18. On the fascination of voluntary death in this period, see Nock, *Conversion* 197-202.

³⁴ The suicides of Seneca and his wife are reported in great detail by Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.60-64; cf. Cassius Dio 62.25.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Ann.* 11.3. I owe this reference to Rist.

³⁶ Epictetus, 2.1.17; 2.5.14; 2.6.8; 2.19.13; 3.22.33; 3.26.4; and cf. Bonhoeffer, *Die Ethik des Stoikers Epictet* 29-39.

Epictetus maintains that god provides the sign indicating departure.³⁷ On occasion, however, Epictetus neglects the idea of suicide at god's command and approaches the Cynic position, that if life cannot be endured one simply gives up.³⁸ In another place Epictetus likens human existence to a game in which moral principles are the rules. If one is compelled to break a rule, "to do something foolish or unseemly," then one stops playing the game.³⁹ But simple adversity is usually not a sufficient ground for suicide.⁴⁰ In general it is warranted only in cases of extreme physical suffering. This is the normal Stoic position.

Finally, Marcus Aurelius presents a number of different views on suicide, some of them contradictory. On the one hand, he quotes Epictetus and refers to death as a way out when circumstances make it impossible for an individual to live his true life;⁴¹ while, on the other hand, there are passages that speak of endurance under pain and trouble.⁴² In one place Marcus approaches the Cynic position: either reason or the noose.⁴³ In yet another passage he implies that it may be prudent to kill oneself *before* one's powers of reasoning fail.⁴⁴ In any case, if suicide is to be undertaken it should be done properly, in a dignified manner, and above all without theatrics (ἀτραγώδως). The last, according to Marcus (or a scribe), was the hallmark of the Christian martyrs.⁴⁵

The preceding survey could doubtless have been made more comprehensive,⁴⁶ but it has at least endeavored to touch on some of the major texts in which the philosophical discussion of suicide appears. Brief and attenuated as many of these passages are, they are sufficiently numerous to allow us to sketch the outlines of the

³⁷ Epictetus 1.9.16; 1.29.29. For the influence of Socrates on Epictetus in this regard, cf. K. Dörrie, *Exemplum Socratis: Studien zur Sokratesnachwirkung in der kynisch-stoischen Popularphilosophie der frühen Kaiserzeit und ihm frühen Christentum* (Hermes Einzelschriften, 42; Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979) 52-54.

³⁸ Epictetus 4.10.27.

³⁹ Epictetus 4.7.30-31.

⁴⁰ Epictetus 3.24.101; cf. 1.25.20; 2.6.22.

⁴¹ *Med.* 5.29.

⁴² *Med.* 7.33, 64.

⁴³ *Med.* 10.32.

⁴⁴ *Med.* 3.1.

⁴⁵ *Med.* 8.47; 10.8; 11.3.

⁴⁶ We have omitted from our survey the Cyrenaics, the later Academics and Peripatetics, and the Neoplatonists, as well as historical and fictional accounts of suicide (e.g., in Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Plutarch, Tacitus, the Hellenistic novels, and so on).

history of the discussion. In so doing, we have tried to indicate where many of the philosophical schools stood on the question of suicide and what significance they attached to it. Here we observed that a passage in Plato's *Phaedo* attracted considerable attention and came to serve both as a justification for and as a means of moderating against the practice. We now turn in the second part of this paper to an examination of Phil. 1:21-26, a passage in which Paul expresses his desire to die; and we will suggest that it is best interpreted as his reflection on that "one truly serious philosophical problem," suicide. The very pervasiveness of the phenomenon in antiquity would seem to demand this, yet it is astonishing that the history of Pauline scholarship has witnessed few attempts to do so. In his otherwise excellent monograph on *Paul and Seneca*, J. N. Sevenster gives careful consideration to Seneca's views on suicide; but when he compares them to Paul's remarks in Phil. 1:23 and 2 Cor. 5:8 his conclusions are entirely negative. "No immediate comparisons can of course be made," he asserts, "since Paul nowhere speaks of suicide or the possibility of it. Paul's particular message concerning God and Christ prevents even the thought of suicide from arising."⁴⁷ There can be little doubt that the barrier of Augustine, fatal to a comprehension of Paul, has obscured our view on this particular point.⁴⁸

II

In biblical literature suicide is a relatively infrequent occurrence, although there are no prohibitions against the practice and it is never condemned. The Hebrew Bible records only five suicides: Abimelech (Judg. 9:54), Saul and his armor-bearer (1 Sam. 31:4-5, 1 Chr. 10:4), Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23), and Zimri (1 Kings 16:18). The only incident of suicide in the New Testament, the

⁴⁷ J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* (SNT, 4; Leiden: Brill, 1961) 58, 61. I hasten to point out, however, that Sevenster's treatment of Seneca's views on suicide (pp. 52-58) is perceptive and basically correct. But this only sets the problem in sharper relief: if Christianity was so adverse to the propriety of taking one's life, it is astounding that a tradition could have arisen, supported by forged correspondence, that Seneca was a Christian sympathizer. See Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, 246.

⁴⁸ In a recent course on Pauline Christianity I suggested that Paul may have been thinking of suicide when he wrote "to die is gain." Almost immediately a student shot back, "That's impossible!" When I asked why, he replied, "Because Augustine said suicide is a sin." See n. 58, below.

death of Judas, is reported without comment (Mt. 27:5; Acts 1:18).⁴⁹

In Jewish literature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods pious Jews are often portrayed as willing to take their own lives rather than betray their religious principles.⁵⁰ Of particular interest are the suicide accounts in the writings of Flavius Josephus. Although Josephus himself delivers a lengthy speech on the iniquity of suicide in the *Bellum* (*B. J.* 3.362-82; his own neck was on the line!), he nevertheless praises the heroism of the Jews at Masada who took their own lives rather than submit to the Romans (*B. J.* 7.320-88). The former passage is especially worthy of note since it betrays a clear awareness of the Socratic position: "Do you not think that god is indignant when man treats his gift with scorn? For it is from him that we have received our being, and it is to him that we should leave the decision to take it away" (*B. J.* 3.371).⁵¹

When we turn to rabbinic literature, we discover numerous stories of suicide, and this despite the usual contention that the rabbis opposed the practice.⁵² For example, *b. Ketub.* 103b relates that when rabbi Judah the Prince died a *bat qol* proclaimed that all those present at his death would enjoy the life of the world to come. When a fuller, who had not called on the rabbi that day, learned of this, he committed suicide. Immediately, a *bat qol* announced that he too would live in the world to come. A similar story concerns the martyrdom of rabbi Hanina ben Teradion during

⁴⁹ In Acts 16:27-28 Paul prevents the suicide of the Philippian jailer; in John 8:22 the Jews interpret Jesus' "going away" as a suicide threat.

⁵⁰ The prime example is Razis in 2 Macc. 14:37-46; cf. 4 Macc. 12:1-19; 17:1; Philo, *Legatio* 233-36. M. Hengel has pointed to the influence on these narratives of the Hellenistic *topos* of the *exitus clarorum virorum*, and in particular to the importance of Plato's account of the death of Socrates (*Judaism and Hellenism* [ET Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974] 1.98; 2.67-68). See also U. Kellermann, *Auferstanden in den Himmel* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 95; Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk, 1979) 51-53 and *passim*.

⁵¹ See R. R. Newell, "The Suicide Accounts in Josephus: A Form Critical Study," *SBL Seminar Papers* 21 (1982) 351-69, and the literature there cited. However, Newell fails to recognize the importance of the *Phaedo*.

⁵² Typical is F. W. Young, "Suicide," *IDB* 4.454: "Later rabbinic literature cites [Gen. 9:5-6] in specifically prohibiting suicide (Gen. Rabbah 34.21b)." Cf. C. W. Reines, "The Jewish Attitude Toward Suicide," *Judaism* 10 (1961) 165: "Judaism expressed a general and absolute condemnation of suicide." Reines admits, however, that "actual cases of suicide were not unknown;" but he attributes them "to the general spiritual and social crisis, as well as Greco-Roman influence" (p. 166).

Hadrian's reign ('*Abod. Zar.* 18a). The rabbi was wrapped in a Torah scroll and set on fire; but to ensure that he would suffer, water-soaked tufts of wool were placed upon his heart. His disciples therefore begged him to breathe in the fire in order to hasten his gruesome death. The rabbi, however, refused, in words faintly reminiscent of the *Phaedo*: "Let him who gave [my soul] take it away, but no one should destroy himself." The executioner then asked whether he would enter the world to come if he helped the rabbi die sooner. When he received an affirmative response, the executioner removed the tufts of wool. The rabbi died, and the executioner immediately threw himself into the fire. Suddenly, a *bat qol* proclaimed that both had been admitted to the world to come. The story concludes: "One may acquire life in a single hour, another after many years." Suicide appears to function in these narratives as an act of sincere contrition, thereby cancelling out an individual's former sins and making it possible for him to attain eternal life. This understanding of suicide as a particularly ennobling act is analogous to Seneca's view: even the fool can be transformed into a sage by a well-judged and appropriate death.

In Christian literature before Augustine the subject of suicide is rarely discussed; but when it is, it is treated in relation to the problem of voluntary martyrdom. Clement of Alexandria, for example, criticizes those Christians whose fascination with voluntary death leads to a theatrical display.

We ourselves blame those who have rushed on death: for there are some who are not really ours but share only the name, who are eager to deliver themselves over in hatred against the creator, poor wretches, passionate for death [θανατοῶντες]. We say that these men commit suicide [ἐξάγειν ἑαυτούς] and are not really martyrs, even if they are officially executed. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of believing martyrdom, inasmuch as they have not known the only true God, but give themselves up to a vain death, as the Gymnosophists of the Brahmins to useless fire.⁵³

The popular attitude condemned here by Clement has various causes, as A. D. Nock has observed: "a sort of fascination with death, the aura surrounding voluntary death in legend and life, a desire for theatrical prominence, the very widespread idea of the body as a prison for the soul, and pessimism."⁵⁴ Of special interest

⁵³ Clement, *Strom.* 4.17.1. Cf. the example of Quintus in *Mart. Pol.* 4.1; and the Roman governor's view in Tertullian, *Ad Scap.* 5.

⁵⁴ Nock, *Conversion* 198.

to us, however, is Clement's contrast between martyrdom and suicide. In the final analysis such a distinction is rather arbitrary and depends to a great extent on the perspective of the observer. After all, Clement is describing the actions of men he considers to be heretics, those "who are not really ours but share only the name." Doubtless Clement would also have regarded as suicidal Ignatius' pathological craving for martyrdom, although Ignatius himself certainly viewed his death as sacrificial and attached great significance to it.⁵⁵ The same ambiguity applies to the deaths of Socrates and Jesus. Earlier we noted that Cicero described Cato as the ideal martyr for his well-timed suicide. In the same way Eusebius can extol as martyrs a mother and her two daughters who drowned themselves rather than suffer at the hands of Roman soldiers.⁵⁶ Depending therefore on the circumstances, or on the prejudice of the observer, the act of taking one's life (suicide) can be evaluated either positively, as a form of voluntary martyrdom or self-sacrifice, or negatively, as equivalent to (self-)murder.

The ambiguous and fluid nature of the words "suicide" and "martyrdom" is perhaps best illustrated by an extraordinary passage from the late second-century *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Condemned to death for refusing to deny their religious beliefs, these two women, along with other Christians, are led into an amphitheatre where frightening tortures await them. Throughout, emphasis is placed on the voluntary nature of their suffering. "We came to this of our own free will," they declare, "that our freedom should not be violated" (18.5). Perpetua's death is described in the following way:

The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturnus, who ... was the first to die. Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman ... could not be killed unless she herself was willing.⁵⁷

Here the concepts of suicide and martyrdom merge: they are but two sides of the same coin.

⁵⁵ Ignatius, *Ad Rom.* 4-7. Cf. the following statement of Jim Jones on the mass-suicide at Jonestown: "Take the potion like they used to take it in ancient Greece, and step over quietly; because we're not committing suicide—it's a revolutionary act" (cited by J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982] 127).

⁵⁶ *H.E.* 8.12.1-7.

⁵⁷ *Passio sanctorum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 21.8-10 (ed. Musurillo).

In considering this cluster—martyrdom, suicide, murder—Jacques Bels has recently shown that up until the time of Augustine antiquity generally considered suicide as a form of voluntary martyrdom and distinguished it from murder. Beginning with Augustine, however, the division was altered. Suicide came to be separated from martyrdom and identified instead with murder, more specifically, self-murder. Bels has further shown that the reasons for this change in attitude were largely polemical. In confrontation with the Donatists, Augustine sought to redefine the terms “martyrdom” and “suicide,” and in so doing claimed that the Donatist martyrs were in fact merely suicides.⁵⁸ As we have seen, Clement adopted the same strategy nearly two centuries earlier. For better worse, almost all post-Augustinian thought on the subject of suicide bears the stamp of this assimilation of suicide to (self-)murder.

Having overcome, or at least recognized, the barrier of Augustine, we are now in a position to return to Paul. For in his reflections on death in Phil. 1:21-26, he appears to allude to the possibility of suicide. The remainder of our discussion will be devoted to an examination of this passage.

Phil. 1:21-26 concludes a section of the letter (1:12-26) in which Paul considers the relationship between his imprisonment and the proclamation of the gospel. In the final analysis he declares that the gospel would be better served by his continued existence than by his departure in death. But first he carefully considers the advantages of each possibility. As Lightfoot and others have observed, “the grammar of the passage reflects the conflict of feeling in the apostle’s mind. He is tossed to and fro between the desire to labour for Christ in life, and the desire to be united with Christ by death.”⁵⁹ While the former possibility is judged to be “more necessary” (ἀναγκαιότερον), the latter is, literally, “much more better” (πολλῷ μᾶλλον κρείσσον).

⁵⁸ Jacques Bels, “La mort volontaire dans l’oeuvre de saint Augustin,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 187 (1975) 147-80. The relevant texts are *Contra Gaudentium Donistarum Episcopum* and *De civitate dei* 1.17-27. Though purely polemical in the *Contra Gaudentium*, Augustine’s opposition becomes more theoretical in the *De civ. dei* when the Donatists appeal to the “Old Testament” example of Razis in order to justify their position.

⁵⁹ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1891) 92.

At the outset it is important to note that Paul's reflections on death do not arise from the fact that he faces imminent execution. Admittedly, he is in prison, presumably in Ephesus, but by the time he sits down to write his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul has every reason to expect that he will receive a favorable verdict (1:25-26). Indeed, he looks forward to visiting the Philippians in the very near future (2:24). Furthermore, full weight must be given to the phrase, "yet which I shall choose I cannot tell" (καὶ τί αἰρήσομαι οὐ γνωρίζω, 1:22). I take this to mean what it says, that the question of life or death is a matter of Paul's *own* volition, not something to be imposed on him from the outside. And if it is a matter of Paul's own choosing, then it appears that he is reflecting on the possibility of suicide.

In Phil. 1:21 Paul issues a fundamental statement about the meaning and significance he attaches to life and death: ἐμοὶ γὰρ τὸ ζῆν Χριστός καὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος. The meaning of the expression τὸ ζῆν Χριστός is, at first sight, problematic, since it does not seem to be consistent with the rest of the passage. If death is preferable to life because it means union with Christ (as Paul states in 1:23), then in what sense is living equivalent to Christ? Most commentators are inclined to interpret this expression in light of Paul's pronouncement in Gal. 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."⁶⁰ In other words, the life Paul lives is already a kind of post-mortem existence. Paul's remarks in 2 Cor. 4:8-11 are similar: "We are afflicted in every way ... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." As important as these parallels are they still do not completely remove the difficulty of understanding the expression "to live is Christ" in its immediate context. For it is hard to see how Paul can say that his life is Christ and his death gain when elsewhere he insists that all believers belong to Christ in both life *and* death (cf. Rom. 8:38-39).

A possible solution to this problem may be that Paul is playing on the similarity in sound between the title Χριστός and the word

⁶⁰ Cf. J.-F. Collange, *L'épître de saint Paul aux Philippiens* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, Xa; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1973) 60, and the literature there cited.

χρηστός (“useful”).⁶¹ In fact Alberto Giglioli, following the Arabic version of Walton’s Polyglott of 1657, has gone so far as to emend the text at this point from Χριστός to χρηστόν, attributing the change of η to ι to itacism.⁶² For a number of reasons Giglioli’s emendation cannot be sustained;⁶³ but that has little bearing on the possibility that Paul is engaging in *paronomasia* on Χριστός. Thus, Paul would not only be saying that “For me to live is Christ,” but also implying that “For me to live is *useful* and to die is gain.” The latter is entirely consonant with the remainder of the passage. Even though Paul personally prefers death, it is nevertheless “useful” for him to continue his earthly tasks because it is necessary for the continued progress of the Philippians (1:24-26).

Whatever the meaning of τὸ ζῆν Χριστός there is no doubt about the interpretation of its counterpart, τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος. Why is death a gain? The answer is found in the phrase τὸ ἀναλῦσαι καὶ σὺν Χριστῷ εἶναι (1:23). For Paul death is a gain because it means union with Christ. Yet, as D. W. Palmer has shown, a complete answer to the question, why death is a gain, is not only found in what Paul says, but also in what is left unstated but may be assumed in the context.⁶⁴ For numerous writers in addition to Paul affirm the idea that death is a gain, and there is a conventional explanation which they offer. Death is a gain because it means release from life’s troubles and afflictions. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord

⁶¹ *Paronomasia*, or the technique of playing upon words of similar sound but different meaning, was a common rhetorical figure in ancient literature, see H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1920) § 3040. Paul frequently makes use of this device (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Cor. 1:13; 3:2; 6:10; 10:12; Phil. 3:3; 2 Thess. 3:11; Philem. 11. Cf. Justin, *Apol.* 1.4.1; and Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 1:1: “I am a Christian. I bear this name beloved by God in the hope of being useful (εὐχρηστος) to God.”

⁶² A. Giglioli, “Mihi enim vivere Christus est. Congettura al testo di Phil. 1,21,” *Rivista Biblica* 16 (1968) 305-15. Giglioli was not the first to suggest this emendation, cf. C. Müller, *Commentatio de locis quibusdam Epistolae Pauli ad Philippenses* (Hamburg: Meissner, 1843) 17. Note that Suetonius apparently confused the name Christus with Chrestus when he wrote: “Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit” (*Divus Claudius* 25.4); cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.

⁶³ Giglioli’s emendation actually requires two changes. In order to be grammatically correct χρηστός must be neuter (χρηστόν). This would require not only the change of η to ι, but also ν to final ζ. Furthermore, the title Χριστός would probably have appeared in the manuscript in the form of the *nomina sacra* χ̅ς. This is, in fact, how it appears in P⁴⁶ and Sinaiticus.

⁶⁴ D. W. Palmer, “‘To Die is Gain’ (Philippians i 21),” *NovT* 17 (1975) 203-18.

henceforth. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors'' (Rev. 14:13). In the first part of this paper we noted that many writers insisted that death should be entered into joyfully because it is a haven and refuge from the cares and torments of life. Indeed, Paul Antin has drawn attention to a passage in Sophocles' *Antigone* (462-64) which closely parallels the thought and form of Phil. 1:21. Antigone declares,

I knew that I would die ... even if you had not made a public proclamation. And if I am going to die before my time, I count it gain [κέρδος ... ἐγὼ λέγω]. For death is a gain to one whose life, like mine, is full of misery.⁶⁵

In a more theoretical context, Socrates considers that "the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtually nothingness..., or it is a change and migration of the soul from this place to another. And if it is unconsciousness, like a sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain'' (θαυμάσιον κέρδος).⁶⁶ These examples, which could easily be multiplied, express the sentiment that death is a gain because it brings rest from one's earthly labors.⁶⁷

If the answer to the question, why death is a gain, is something of a *topos* then it may reasonably be assumed in the Philippian context, so long as it coheres with other statements in the letter.⁶⁸ Are there indications in Phil. that Paul regards his life as burdensome? Though he can affirm that "to live is Christ," he also freely acknowledges the troubles and afflictions that vex his earthly life. He repeatedly refers to his imprisonment (Phil. 1:7, 13, 14, 17); and he speaks of his own θλίψις (1:17; 4:14) and his participation in Christ's παθήματα (3:10). For him life is on ἄγῳν (1:30) involving

⁶⁵ P. Antin, "Mori lucrum et *Antigone* 462, 464," *RSR* 62 (1974) 259-60. It should be pointed out that Antin contends (incorrectly, in my view) that the analogy between Antigone and Paul is purely verbal. Both claim that death is a gain, but (so Antin argues) their reasons differ. For Antigone death is a deliverance from present troubles; for Paul it is access to the full life in Christ (p. 259). Antin was not the first to draw attention to this parallel. It was already noted by J. J. Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum Graecum* (Amsterdam: Dommerian, 1752) 2.264. Wettstein cites a host of other references.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Apology* 40CD. Cf. 40E: "If such is the nature of death, I count it gain (κέρδος ἔγωγε λέγω)."

⁶⁷ See the abundant list of parallels in Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum Graecum* 2.264. These have been conveniently assembled (with Greek text and English translation) by D. W. Palmer, "To Die is Gain" 208-16. Cf. H. Diels, *Der antike Pessimismus* (Berlin: Mittler, 1921).

⁶⁸ So Palmer, " 'To Die is Gain' " 217.

grief (2:27), humiliation, deprivation, and hunger (4:11-12). in metaphorical language Paul speaks of being poured out as a libation (2:17) and being conformed to the death of Christ (3:10). References like these can be found throughout his letters. In 2 Cor. 1:8-9 Paul recounts his bitter experience in Asia: "For we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. We felt that we had received the sentence of death." And in the *peristasis*-catalogues of 2 Cor. 6:4-5 and 11:24-29 he gives detailed, though stylized, examples of his sufferings as an apostle, including imprisonments, beatings, and shipwrecks.⁶⁹ Thus, Paul offers abundant indication of the afflictions which plague his life. If death is a gain for him, it is not only because it entails union with Christ, but also because it brings deliverance from life's miseries. And that, as Palmer notes, is a "better" (κρείσσον) state of affairs for Paul as for many of his contemporaries.⁷⁰

It is for these reasons that Paul "lusts after death" (ἐπιθυμία εἰς τὸ ἀναλῦσαι).⁷¹ And although he finally rejects the "gain" of death, it is clearly death that he prefers. Of course, we should not underestimate the fact that Paul finds himself torn between two possibilities (the expressions τί αἰρήσομαι οὐ γνωρίζω and συνέχομαι ἐκ τῶν δύο indicate as much); but in the final analysis the comparative κρείσσον, doubly strengthened by πολλῶ μᾶλλον (a combination unique in the New Testament), outweighs the simple comparative ἀναγκαιότερον. For Paul then death is "much more better." This interpretation is confirmed by a similar statement in 2 Cor. 5:1-8.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling.... For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ...So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.... We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.⁷²

⁶⁹ On these catalogues, see A. Fridrichsen, "Zum Stil des paulinischen Peristasenkatalogs," *Symbolae Osloenses* 7 (1928) 25-29; *idem*, "Peristasenkatalog und res gestae," *ibid.* 8 (1929) 78-82; and J. T. Fitzgerald, Jr., *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (SBL Dissertation Series, 99; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

⁷⁰ Palmer, "'To Die is Gain'" 218.

⁷¹ Cf. Seneca's *libido moriendi* (n. 33 above).

⁷² The crucial verse is 5:8, καὶ εὐδοχοῦμεν μᾶλλον ἐκδημησαι ἐκ τοῦ σώματος καὶ ἐνδημησαι πρὸς τὸν κύριον. Cf. Phil. 1:23. For obvious seasons, I disagree with the

This in turn raises another question. If Paul personally prefers death, why does he finally choose life instead? Here attention must be given to the comparative ἀναγκαιότερον in 1:24. In the first part of this paper we noted that Socrates had left a single loophole for the justification of suicide: “an individual must not kill himself until god sends some necessity (ἀνάγκη) upon him” (*Phaedo* 62C). If we apply this principle to Paul’s situation it becomes apparent that the necessity or constraint is on the side of his remaining: “but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (1:24). Thus, while the option of suicide is considered, and indeed personally desirable, it is ultimately rejected because it contravenes the present will of god that Paul continue to carry out his mission. In this regard compare Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 9:16: “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity (ἀνάγκη) is laid upon me. Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.” It is not the case therefore that Paul rejects suicide *per se*, only that it is not (yet) the proper context for such an act.

If our thesis is correct, that in Phil. 1:21-26 Paul is alluding to the possibility of suicide, then a comparison with other views on the subject is warranted. Returning to the theories outlined in the first part of this paper, it is clear that there are no points of correspondence between Paul’s position and the views of Plato (at least in the *Laws*) and Aristotle who subordinated suicide to civic duty. Nor are there any real similarities between Paul and the Cynics who advocated suicide for seemingly trivial reasons. However, a comparison with Plato’s account of the death of Socrates, especially as it came to be interpreted in middle and late Stoicism, offers a more promising alternative. In the *Phaedo* Socrates left a single loophole for the justification of suicide, namely, a divine signal. The obverse of this is his statement that humans are put in a sort of prison from which they must not set themselves free or run away, since “the gods are our guardians and we humans are the possessions of the gods” (62B). The point here is that an individual does not have the right to take his own life until a divine order is issued. As we have seen, this understanding was instrumental in shaping Cicero’s position on suicide and was used to justify the suicides of

conclusions of J. Murphy-O’Conner, “‘Being at Home in the Body We are in Exile from the Lord’ (2 Cor. 5:66),” *RB* 93 (1986) 214-21. The phrase εὐδοχοῦμεν μᾶλλον (2 Cor. 5:8) does not express a preference but a *decisive* choice.

Zeno and Cleanthes. Even Josephus, Paul's younger contemporary and kinsman, seems to have been aware of the Socratic position on suicide. It also appears to have informed Epictetus' thinking on the subject. Epictetus felt obliged to moderate against an excessive fascination with voluntary death, or suicide, on the part of younger men, who appealed to him in the following way:

Are we not in a manner akin to god, and have we not come from him? Allow us to go back whence we came; allow us to be freed from these fetters that are fastened to us and weigh us down. Here are thieves and robbers, and courts of law, and those who are called tyrants; they think they have some power over us because of this paltry body and its possessions. Allow us to show them that they have no power over us.⁷³

Here we should note that the death-wish of these young Greeks is based on a doubled desire: (re)union with the deity and escape from earthly troubles, precisely the same reasons why Paul prefers death. In an attempt to restrain these men Epictetus exhorts them in the following manner:

And thereupon it were my part to respond: Men, wait upon god. When he shall give the signal to depart and set you free from this service, then you shall depart to him; but for the present endure to abide in the place where he has stationed you.⁷⁴

A similar position on suicide was endorsed by the Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus in a statement that can be read as a virtual paraphrase of Phil. 1:21-26.

One who by living is of use to many has not the right to choose to die, unless by dying he may be of use to more.⁷⁵

This, I contend, is the context in which Paul's reflections on death in Phil. 1:21-26 are best understood. On the one hand, he prefers death to life because it offers union with Christ and deliverance from earthly troubles. But Paul also recognizes that because a divine *ἀνάγκη* has been laid upon him he cannot depart until a divine signal is given. Paul therefore chooses to remain, and in so doing aligns himself with a tradition on suicide which can be traced back to Socrates.

⁷³ Epictetus 1.9.13-15.

⁷⁴ Epictetus 1.9.16.

⁷⁵ Οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπὶ πολλῶν συμφέροντι ζῶντα καθηρόντως ἀποθανεῖν, μὴ ἐπὶ πλείονων ἀποθνήσκοντα συμφέροντι (fr. 29 in C. Lutz, "Musonius Rufus: 'The Roman Socrates'," YCS 10 [1947] 132).

There is yet one more link in the chain that deserves consideration, namely, Paul's notions of self-sacrifice and dying and rising with Christ. There are numerous passages in his letters which lend themselves to a martyrological interpretation. Like Ignatius after him, Paul seems almost pathologically fascinated with his sufferings and possible death, and he devotes considerable space to their theological implications. In these passages Paul expresses the thought that his apostolic mission will ultimately cost him his life, and that his death, like the death of Jesus, will have salvific consequences. In metaphorical terms Paul speaks of becoming "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) and of "being poured out as a libation on the sacrificial offering of your faith" (Phil. 2:17). He maintains that he is even willing to become an *anathema* if it will save his fellow Jews (Rom. 9:3). In other passages Paul speaks of having a share in the sufferings of Christ and being conformed to his death in order to attain to the resurrection (Phil. 3:10-11). Perhaps the most striking reference of all, however, is one in which Paul (or a Paulinist) refers to his sufferings as somehow completing what was *lacking* in the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24). In some sense therefore Paul views himself as a "second Christ" whose suffering and death will bring to completion what the "first Christ" left incomplete. These passages, which speak of Paul's sufferings and impending martyrdom, provide a more immediate context for interpreting his reflections on death in Phil. 1:21-26. If, as noted earlier, voluntary martyrdom and suicide cannot always be clearly distinguished, then it would indeed be correct to assume that Paul had in mind the possibility of suicide, although he of course would likely have referred to it as martyrdom.⁷⁶

Finally, in what way are Paul's reflections on death affected by his concept of dying and rising with Christ? If he already regards his earthly life as a kind of postmortem existence (Gal. 2:20; cf. 2 Cor. 4:8-11; Rom. 6:1-11), the act of martyrdom, whether self-inflicted or not, would merely be the release of the spirit of Christ in him.

Conclusion

There is naturally some reticence in setting forth a new interpretation, especially a potentially controversial one. It was to my

⁷⁶ In point of fact, we do not know how Paul died. The possibility of suicide, whether voluntary or forced, should not be ruled out.

great delight therefore that I encountered John Donne's treatise on suicide, entitled *Biathanatos*.⁷⁷ Composed in 1608, but not published until 1647 (some sixteen years after the author's death), Donne's essay was one of the first attempts "to reverse the reversal that Augustine had initiated" on the subject of suicide.⁷⁸ From Augustine down to the Reformation the condemnation of suicide as an act of murder (considered unredeemable along with the sins of adultery and apostasy) reigned supreme in Latin theology. Aquinas regarded it as such and supported it by raising self-preservation to the status of a universal natural law. As William Clebsch eloquently describes it, "The most powerful argument against Augustine and Aquinas on suicide to flow from the pen of a Christian moral theologian is the argument spelled out in [Donne's] book."⁷⁹ Of special interest to me are Donne's remarks on Phil. 1:21-26, which I regard in some sense as a confirmation of the thesis I have tried to defend in this paper.

To this readiness of dying for his brethren Saint Paul had so accustomed himself and made it his nature that, except for his general resolution of always doing what would promote their happiness, he could hardly have obtained for himself permission to live. At first he says he did not know which to wish for, life or death. Therefore, unless some circumstance inclines or averts us, life and death are generally equal to our nature. Then, after much perplexity, he made up his mind, and he desired to be released and to be with Christ. *Therefore, a holy man may wish it*. Still, he corrected that again, because he says, "For me to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:24). Therefore, charity must be the rule of our wishes and actions in this matter.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Recently transcribed and edited by W. A. Clebsch, *John Donne: Suicide* (Studies in the Humanities Series, 1; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983). As Clebsch points out, Donne preferred the term "self-homicide" to "self-murder." (The word "suicide" did not enter the English language until long after the book was written [p. ix].) He did so in order to heighten the paradoxical nature of the very idea about which he was writing.

⁷⁸ Clebsch, *John Donne: Suicide* x.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 84, italics mine. The author wishes to express grateful acknowledgment and appreciation to Hans Dieter Betz, Robert M. Grant, Jon D. Levenson, and John M. Rist for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.