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АНТИЧКЕ СТУДИЈЕ СРБИЈЕ

АНТИКА
И САВРЕМЕНИ СВЕТ:
РЕЛИГИЈА И КУЛТУРА

Зборник радова



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EPICTETUS' SMOKY CHAMBER: A STUDY ON RATIONAL SUICIDE AS A MORAL CHOICE

Abstract: Self destruction, inapprehensible an option as it might be, has been a challenging issue for philosophers and scholars since the dawn of time, forcing meditation into a vigorous and everlasting debate. The core question is: could suicide ever be deemed rational a choice? And if so, could it count as a moral alternative, if the circumstances call for it? The Stoics from Zeno up to Epictetus and Seneca regarded suicide as the ultimate resort, as the utmost opportunity for a rational being to maintain his virtue, when all other bridges are burnt. For an act to be moral, it has to be deliberate, as well as the manifestation of an established evaluative hierarchy, however spontaneous and instantaneous might the latter be. In other words, a moral act is one that agents rationally opt for over other possible alternatives, on the subjective basis of their alleged best interests. Modern philosophers as Tom Beauchamp, Margaret Battin and Jacques Choron stress the criterion of rationality as a key issue regarding the ethics of suicide. Utilizing Rorty's second definition of rationality, the article examines whether self destruction can be the outcome of proper evaluative assessment and deliberation, given that, as T. N. Pelegrinis suggests, such an evaluation seems to rest on a symmetry case, which might hardly be based on sound foundation.

Key words: Stoics, Epictetus, Seneca, Richard Rorty, Tom Beauchamp, Margaret Battin, R. F. Holland, T. N. Pelegrinis, rational suicide, best interests, moral choice, deliberation, symmetry.

Let us seek death, and he not found, supply
With our own hands his office on ourselves:
Why stand we longer striving under fears,
That show no end, and have the power,
Of many ways to die the shortest choosing,
Destruction with destruction to destroy.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

“Agamus Dei gratias,
quod nemo innvitus in vita teneri potest”

Seneca, *Epistle XII*

Might there be such a thing as rational suicide? If, as Kierkegaard puts it, the instant of decision is a moment of madness¹, then the one which concerns, affirms and, finally, brings about suicide, should be deemed *utter* madness. Even Schopenhauer, not at all against suicide in general, could not find any coherent meaning in such a desperate step. According to him, suicide is nothing but “an experiment – a question which man puts to Nature, trying to force her to an answer. The question is this: What change will death produce in a man’s existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make; for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer”². If it were ever possible to Epictetus, Schopenhauer would be among the very first to be picked for his smoky chamber.

I.

It is true that suicide throughout the classic era was much more morally acceptable than it is nowadays³, though a far cry from being unambiguously admissible. As a matter of fact, even though great public figures – influential thinkers included – were famous suicides, only the Cynics and the Stoics overtly sanctioned suicide as a moral choice. To the Pythagoreans, although their master allegedly was a suicide himself, the voluntary

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 28–29.

² Arthur Schopenhauer, “On Suicide”, *Parerga and paralipomena*, E. F. J. Payne (Trans.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, Vol. II, p. 311.

³ Ludwig Edelstein, “The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation and Interpretation”, in Temkin O, Temkin C L (Eds.), *Ancient Medicine, Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967, p. 62.

termination of life was morally unacceptable, since it does not allow the suicide to fully repent for his sins⁴, something that could disturb – or, even, break – the circle of reincarnation⁵. Plato, as manifest from Socrates' blunt answer to Cebes, was extremely skeptical towards suicide, since in his eyes such an act could only violate the divine plan – obviously an assumption rooted in Pythagorean notions⁶. Socrates seems to directly address the not yet proposed Epictetus' argument: "There is a doctrine uttered in secret that man is a prisoner who has no right to open the door of his prison and run away; this is a great mystery which I do not quite understand. Yet I, too, believe that the gods are our guardians, and that we are a possession of theirs."⁷ We belong to the gods, our masters, and must not rob them. In his later works Plato, however, becomes somewhat equivocal about suicide; from his point of view suicide could be vindicated only in extreme circumstances, but not if done because of "sloth and unmanly cowardice"⁸, while elsewhere he seems to favor suicide under specific conditions⁹. According to Aristotle "to die to escape from poverty or (the sorrows of) love or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness to fly from what is troublesome, and such a man endures death not because it is noble but to fly from evil"¹⁰ and "he who through anger voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to the right rule of life, and this the law does not permit; therefore he is acting unjustly"¹¹. Epicure didn't seem to favor suicide, as he insists that the wise should not withdraw himself from life, even when he has lost his sight¹², while the Epicurean Lucretius scorns him who departs from life out of fear for death¹³. That

⁴ Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* (*The Deipnosophists*), 2.216, S. Douglas Olson (Trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006.

⁵ Kalman J. Kaplan, Matthew B. Schwartz, *A Psychology of Hope: A Biblical Response to Tragedy and Suicide*, Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008, p. 18.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedo* 61e; 62b–c, Benjamin Jowett (Trans.), Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62a–b.

⁸ Plato, *Laws* 9.873c, Benjamin Jowett (Trans.), New York: Prometheus Books, 2000.

⁹ Plato, *Republic* 3.406a–d, G. M. A. Grube (Trans.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1992.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1116a.1, David Ross (Trans.), London: Oxford University Press, 1925.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 1138a.

¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 10.119, R. D. Hicks (Trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann, 1931.

¹³ "Whilst they in filth and darkness roll around; /some perish away for statues and a name, /and oft to that degree, from fright of death, /Will hate of living and beholding light/Take hold on humankind that they inflict/their own destruction with a gloomy heart". Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 3:79–83, William Ellery Leonard (Trans.), New York: Dover Publications, 2004.

leaves us only with the Cynics and the Stoics, to wit with not really much; the former were thought of as a bit weird at the time, while the latter were never considered being on the crest of the wave regarding philosophical meditation¹⁴.

Epictetus, though, would not even slightly bother about all these; after all he was a Stoic. To him suicide need not be dealt with either as a complicated or as a sinuous moral issue; it is strictly a matter of common sense. From his point of view life can be depicted as a chamber, which every now and again gets a bit smoky. Its inhabitant, each one of us, may put up with the smoke, or he may not. As long as he does, he may stay in; if the air gets choky, however, it is up to him whether he opens the door and gets out, or he stays in and suffocates to death¹⁵. That is all about suicide, no delicate line of reasoning brought forth, no moral issues called upon, simply a sheer rational choice. Epictetus, it is true, is amongst the last in line – together with Seneca and Marcus Aurelius – of a great Stoic tradition, which means that to him delicate philosophical issues were already unraveled. To the Stoics, in general, of actual moral importance – or, of any importance at all – was only vice (*kakia*) and virtue (*arête*). Everything else was regarded as indifferent (*adiaphora*), life and death included. Life *per se* is of no particular or outstanding moral merit, since it can guarantee the attainment of virtue no more than that of vice. A person who is led to vice by the circumstances of his life would be better off dead, and the one who by death acquires virtue is not lamentable, but enviable and praiseworthy. Eventually, death – likewise life – is nothing but a means to an end, and the only reasonable end for the moral agent is the attainment of virtue. Virtue can be achieved by external as well as by internal means, but only the latter are in the moral agent's control, since external events are determined solely by fate. Therefore, man ought to care only for what is in his control (ἐφ' ἡμῖν), and disregard what lies beyond (οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν). What is in the moral agent's control is only opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever are our own actions¹⁶, while beyond our control is body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions. In other words, the circumstances in the moral agent's life are up to fate to fetch, but the way he perceives, seeks, reacts

¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, *History of the Western Philosophy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974, p. 252.

¹⁵ "Has it smoked in the chamber? If the smoke is moderate, I will stay; if it is excessive, I go out; for you must always remember this and hold it fast, that the door is open", Epictetus, *The Discourses* I, 25:17–18, George Long (Trans.), Forgotten Books, 2010.

¹⁶ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1:1–3, George Long (Trans.), New York: Prometheus Books, 1991.

and feels about them is entirely up to him. Abiding by Epictetus' metaphor, whether the chamber becomes choky or not, it is obviously beyond our control. What we need to consider in an untoward case like that is how to react, to wit whether we stay in, or we just open the door and walk out. To Epictetus suicide is a matter of opinion, pursuit and desire, so it is entirely up to the moral agent to opt for it. Seneca, less than half a century before Epictetus, had stressed exactly the same point: "It is wrong to live under constraint; but no man is constrained to live under constraint... On all sides lie many short and simple paths to freedom, and let us thank God that no man can be kept in life against his will"¹⁷.

All the same, in every decision we take on the horns of a dilemma, leastways in every rational one, there lurks a latent evaluation. We overhaul both our options, and upon our estimation we decide which one is preferable to us according to our best interests, at least the way we perceive them at the very instance of the decision. For a choice to be rational – and, obviously, to Epictetus suicide stands for a rational one – it has to be fully intentional, deliberate, and the agent needs to be vividly aware of its consequences. Every rational choice is *par excellence* free, deliberate and responsible, and in that respect it is a moral one. Suicide, namely, if it is to be reckoned with as a moral option, it has to be rational, to wit be the outcome of reasonable estimation, one which allegedly achieves what best serves a person's values and interests in the most effective way at a given time¹⁸. Given that to the Stoics in general every person's best interests are limited to the attainment of *arête*, and self imposed death may secure virtue under given circumstances, suicide may serve a moral agent's best interests, thus it may be a free, deliberate, responsible choice, to wit rational; consequently it meets the sufficient conditions – though, not infallibly the necessary ones – to be assessed as a moral option.

II.

As it is obvious, the key issue concerning the ethics of suicide is *rationality*¹⁹. For if the criterion of rationality is not fully met, self imposed death can only be reckoned with as momentarily impulsive reaction or,

¹⁷ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Epistle XII:10, *Moral Epistles*, Richard M. Gummere (Trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1917.

¹⁸ David Hume, "Of Suicide", in Peter Singer (Ed.), *Applied Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 19–28.

¹⁹ C. G. Prado, S. J. Taylor, *Assisted Suicide, Theory and Practice in Elective Death*, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, p. 32.

even, as the actual demonstration of severe mental distortion. So let us probe a little bit further into the alleged rationality of self imposed death under specific circumstances, and let the circumstances be the worst imaginable: incurable cancer, horrendous intolerable pain – the kind palliative care cannot deal with and no other relief is possible –, gradual loss of self control and autonomy, long gone privacy and lucid awareness of the hideous situation on behalf of the sufferer. The chokiest possible air in the smokiest possible chamber, and the door always unlocked, waiting for the miserable inhabitant to finally make up his mind. We are to estimate his final choice as to what it brings about, and as to whether it meets the prerequisites of a rational deed.

Suicide would not be a morally debatable act if it did not bring about death, which is often supposed to be an evil in general. Now, opting for an evil is not necessarily an irrational thing to do, because one can always choose it over something even worse. Thus, in order that suicide be regarded as irrational a choice at any rate, death should count as the *summum malum*. Now, every evil can either be *malum prohibitum* or *malum in se*. The *summum malum*, evidently, should definitely be *malum in se* and not just *malum prohibitum*²⁰, for the later is only a fleeting arrangement of the former, one that is subject to circumstantial changes and entirely determined by them. Actually, the opponents of suicide think of death as such²¹. If so, choosing death over life can not be in accordance with reason, since even the most miserable life is better than death. Is then death such a cardinal evil? To Thomas Nagel, if death is an evil, it can not be such because of its positive features, but only because what it deprives us of²². That is simply because we are totally unaware of what death is about, while we very well know what we lose by dying. The lamentable loss is obviously not mere organic survival, for if we had to choose between immediate death and immediate comma followed by certain death twenty years after, almost each one of us would be totally indifferent as to which misfortune he undergoes; the actual loss is *the conditions in life* which death deprives us of – to wit, doing certain things, having experiences etc. Thus, death can

²⁰ Both terms are used in their actual meaning, and not as legal terms.

²¹ “Hence it is not lawful for man to take his own life that he may pass to a happier life, nor that he may escape any unhappiness whatsoever of the present life, because the ultimate and most fearsome evil of this life is death”, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, SS, Q. 64, art. 5, Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.6.6 – 8: “Now the most terrible thing of all is death; for it is the end, and when a man is dead, nothing, we think, either good or evil can befall him any more”.

²² Thomas Nagel, “Death”, in Peter Singer (Ed.), *Applied Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 9–18.

be dreadful only *as a loss*, but never *as a state*, to wit we grieve upon *ceasing to exist* instead of *commencing being non-existing*. If it was the other way round, we would lament *being unborn* the way we lament *dying*, according to the Lucretian symmetry argument²³; however, we do not. Actually, we do not really mind being non-existing, but we mind ceasing living. What further proves that death is not actually regrettable as a state *per se* is that it is nonsensical to pity one for having more or less of it, whereas for every other regrettable state of being we can do so. He who enjoys a good state for much time is luckier than him who does it less, while one who suffers an unfortunate state longer is more miserable than the one who suffers less; however, while life is a good of which Alfred Tennyson had more than George Gordon Byron – for he lived longer –, death is not an evil which Alexander the Great has suffered more than Einstein – for the former is being longer dead than the latter. Once one dies he is as pitiful as any other, irrespective of whether he is long dead or not; we pity him not because he is now dead, but because he once ceased living. In conclusion, death can not be deemed *malum in se*; rather it is an evil only due to the very fact that it is the deprivation of life.

Though death cannot be *summum malum* (for it is not a *malum in se*) as a state, it could still be the *summum malum* as a negation, since it deprives us of the *summum bonum*, life. Life, however, is not an unconditional good. Rather it is specific conditions in life which are actually considered good in general – for obviously not every condition in life is good. Hence death may be an evil only as far as it deprives us of a life even slightly *worth living*, to wit of a life endowed with *even one* condition, which the person considers desirable or, at least, satisfactory. Therefore, if life has already been deprived of everything in it which can be considered good and is no longer worth living – at least the way the owner perceives it –, death can no longer be lamented *as a loss*, and in that respect as an evil, since it deprives the person of nothing good. Furthermore, man often chooses death over life, either to achieve a specific goal by dying, or to avoid undergoing specific untoward situation, which would be unavoidable if he continued living; such are the cases of the hero or the martyr. Obviously to a hero or to a martyr life is not the *summum bonum*, as well as to everyone else who looks up to heroes and martyrs with admiration. Concluding, under particular circumstances death *as such* or *as a deprivation* of life

²³ “The same estate as if never born before, when death immortal hath taken the mortal life”, Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 3.974–5, William Ellery Leonard (Trans.), New York: Dover Publications, 2004; cf. Stephen Hetherington, “Lucretian death: asymmetries and agency”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42(3), 2005, p. 211.

is neither *summum malum* nor *malum in se*, and choosing it over life may be in firm accord with reason, or even more the only rational alternative; when so, deliberately opting for death stands for a rational – hence a potentially morally assessable – choice, since it either brings about the mere cessation of a totally miserable state of being, to wit the deprivation of only unfortunate conditions, or utterly removes the possibility of engaging in an unwished situation.

III.

So far we argued on the one hand that death is not an evil as such, but only as a negation and a deprivation of a good, to wit life; on the other, that even as a deprivation, under particular circumstances it can not be deemed an evil at all. Thus, the choice of self destruction *as such* is not necessarily an irrational one. But in order to be proven rational a choice, suicide has to abide by specific criteria.

There are many approaches as to which the criteria for telling whether suicide is rational or not are. According to Jacques Choron, suicide may be rational – and thus, morally assessable – if the suicide's motives seem justifiable or, at least, understandable by his contemporaries in the same cultural or social group²⁴. The appeal to *understandability* may seem to loosen the standards a bit, but what actually Choron wishes to rule out is pathological motivation. Choron challenges the theoretically favored perspective of the detached observer²⁵, which mainly rests on abstract reasoning and philosophical absolutes, for these to him represent a theoretical basis which might be inadequate to the particular circumstances. Judging the motives of suicide requires that we take into consideration *peccatoris circumstantiae atque peccati*²⁶; in other words, it calls for empathy. When justification is unattainable, empathy could provide the grounds for understanding the motives of the suicide, and thus for judging the rationality of his act. Although Demosthenes' peers might have been reluctant to fully justify his motives, they could very well understand them, which, according to Choron, is sufficient a condition to regard Demosthenes' suicide a

²⁴ Jacques Choron, *Suicide*, New York: Scribners, 1972, pp. 96–7.

²⁵ C. G. Prado, S. J. Taylor, *Assisted Suicide, Theory and Practice in Elective Death*, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, pp. 34–35.

²⁶ “The circumstances of the sinner as well as those of the sin”, as Aquinas exhorts confessors to judge sin. See Stephen Toulmin, “How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics”, in Tom L. Beauchamp and LeRoy Walters (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1989, p. 48.

rational one. The same can not be said about Jacques Rigaut's case, the French poet who in 1929 at the age of thirty shot himself with a gun – as he had previously announced – using a ruler to be sure the bullet passes through his heart, though he had no obvious reasons at all, save a peculiar obsession with suicide. When it is impossible to *even empathetically understand* the motives of the suicide – such as in Rigaut's case –, the rationality of his act is shady and questionable. Obviously, under the scope of Choron, Epictetus' inhabitant does nothing irrational, if he chooses to walk out the room, because we can at least empathetically understand his motives. However, the understandability of motivation is not sufficient enough a condition for a choice to be deemed rational, or, at least, not pathologically triggered. The notion that appealing to established standards, according to which suicidal reasoning must have similar force for cultural and social peers as for the suicidist²⁷, allows for almost everything, because empathy leaves almost next to nothing unexcused. As Terence puts it, *homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*²⁸. Almost everyone can understand the motivation of Medea and sympathize with the abandoned woman in love who decides to kill her children in order to punish her unfaithful husband. However, such a motivation can hardly trigger a person who suffers not a severe mental derangement, since many women in love are being everyday abandoned by unfaithful husbands, however the gross majority is not even remotely tempted to react like Medea. Though not even the slightest effort is needed to understand Medea's motivation, we are extremely disinclined to consider her – as well as her deed – rational.

In the search of a better safety lock, Margaret Battin articulates her own criteria for rational suicide on the axes of non impairment on the one hand, and of satisfaction of interests on the other. She defines non impairment as the ability to reason, having a realistic world view and adequacy of information, while the satisfaction of interests stands for avoidance of harm and accordance with fundamental interests²⁹. As for the first axis one could notice that it doesn't actually provide the criteria for rational suicide; it is rather an analytic approach of the rational choice itself. As for the second axis, the appeal to the avoidance of harm and the accordance with fundamental interests seems to rule out suicide, since it always results in death, which is generally considered to be the worse self-inflicted harm, thus it can never be in one's interests. Battin, though, stands her

²⁷ C. G. Prado, S. J. Taylor, *Assisted Suicide, Theory and Practice in Elective Death*, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, pp. 34.

²⁸ Publius Terentius Afer, *The Self-tormentor (Heautontimoroumenos)*, in *The Comedies*, Betty Radice (Trans., Ed.), London: Penguin Classics, 2004.

²⁹ Margaret Battin, *Ethical Issues in Suicide*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982, p. 291.

ground by emphasizing that, in order to assess whether resorting to suicide in order to avoid something unbearable – let's say the suffocating air in Epictetus chamber – is actually a harm, we have to take into consideration “the amount of other experience permitted...and whether this other experience is of intrinsic value”, to wit whether the person's life is made worthwhile due to “important experience during the pain-free intervals”³⁰. If there is no merit left in life, no other experience of intrinsic value, suicide could be regarded as in accordance with the person's interests. Let us keep in mind that personal interests are closely associated with individual values. We value something more or less; hence we have a smaller or greater interest in it accordingly. As a matter of fact, interests are *determined* by values. Values, however, even though they may be shared by peers, are entirely subjective. Under that scope, leaving the smoky chamber could well be in accordance with one's values, hence be in his interests to do so. If so, suicide can be deemed rational, since if one acts in accordance with his values he can only but best serve his interests, thus he can do no harm to himself. What is problematic with Battin's account is that under that scope hardly any suicide can qualify as irrational, Rigaut's included. For it could be argued that Rigaut valued posthumous glory or the appeasement of his inquiring mind more than the continuation of his life, hence he had a greater interest in committing suicide than in staying alive. The appeal to “other experience of intrinsic value” is of no great help, since a soul fixed on a specific purpose may be unreceptive of other experiences, not to mention that what Battin refers to as of *intrinsic value*, is still the outcome of subjective evaluation. If even life can be devoid of the value we use to ascribe to it, I cannot see why any other state of being should at any means be deemed *intrinsically* valuable.

Richard Rorty provides an account not of rational suicide in specific, but of rationality in general; an account which will be very useful to our study. According to Rorty rationality can be defined as three distinct but overlapping abilities: (i) the ability to cope with the environment, (ii) the ability to establish an evaluative hierarchy and (iii) the ability not to be overly disconcerted by difference from oneself, not to respond aggressively to such differences³¹. What is of importance to our issue is the ability to establish an evaluative hierarchy, which, according to Prado and Taylor, results in the ability to establish priorities; thus the individual may (a) set

³⁰ C. G. Prado, S. J. Taylor, *Assisted Suicide, Theory and Practice in Elective Death*, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, pp. 35–36.

³¹ Richard Rorty, “A Pragmatist View on Rationality and Cultural Difference”, *Philosophy East and West* 42 (4), 1992, pp. 581–596.

goals other than mere survival, as well as (b) set conditions on what is acceptable survival³². In the first case individuals may sacrifice their lives for loved ones; in the second case, they may be unwilling to endure life as, e.g., paraplegics³³. The dweller of Epictetus smoky chamber may well value posthumous reputation or quality of life more than continuing to live. Accordingly, it is more in his interests to commit suicide rather than to hook on to life. As far as Rorty's criterion is concerned, that kind of suicide is rational, since it is the outcome of reasonable estimation of existing alternatives, while it might be in firm accordance with the person's evaluative hierarchy and priorities. However, the appeal to Rorty's account of rationality in order to rationalize suicide, suffers the same obtuseness as Battin's account of rational suicide: almost every act of self destruction can be regarded as rational. But this is not the only inconsistency.

It is clear that making up our mind in face of a dilemma means going through specific subliminal – though inescapable and essential – mental processes. According to Rorty's account a rational choice is the one that presupposes – as vivid as possible – awareness of one's current situation and its implications, as well as thorough evaluation of the optional one. The moral agent evaluates each option according to his individual value system and his subsequent interests; he rates them, and chooses the one that best tallies with his world view. The process of hierarchical evaluation consists in telling good from better, or worse from worst, according to established subjective criteria, dispositions and tendencies. Now, assuming that leaving the smoky chamber is better than staying in, implies no evaluation at all, hence it doesn't meet Rorty's second criterion. That is because, as T. N. Pelegrinis underpins, we can not rationally prefer an option entirely unknown to us to another that we are already well aware about, for there can be no criterion applicable to our evaluation³⁴. Pelegrinis probes into the case of an American journalist – cited by R. F. Holland³⁵ –, who decided to commit suicide after he was diagnosed with cancer. As Pelegrinis remarks, if the journalist had miraculously been offered the option to live again his life up to the point he was diagnosed with cancer, he would have chosen so; that one would have been a rational choice. The journalist had already lived without cancer; he would have been able to

³² C. G. Prado, S. J. Taylor, *Assisted Suicide, Theory and Practice in Elective Death*, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, pp. 36–37.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 45.

³⁴ Theodosios N. Pelegrinis, *Human Existence*, Athens: Kardamitsa, 1985 (in Greek), p. 139.

³⁵ R. F. Holland, "Suicide", *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, pp. 155–157.

compare his current situation to the previous one, and it is almost self-evident that a life clear of cancer is preferable to the one burdened with such a grievous illness. However, since getting rid of his cancer was not actually an option to him, the journalist decided to cease living. Now, according to Pelegrinis, preferring death over life is not as valid a choice as preferring health to illness, since *vi naturae* it can not abide by any hierarchical evaluation. While one can be well aware of what a life with or without cancer is – and, thus, rationally put the latter higher to the former in his individual evaluative hierarchy – for he has lived either way, nevertheless it is impossible to him to put a higher merit to dying over living with cancer, since – though he is aware of what living with cancer is about – he is totally ignorant of what being dead is. According to Pelegrinis, such a comparison – and the subsequent evaluation – is impossible³⁶. If so, the appeal to Rorty's second criterion of rationality regarding suicide can not be met, hence suicide can never be rational a choice. What seems to be wrong with Epictetus' analogy is a fact that the Stoic thinker turns a blind eye on, but can hardly be withheld: the miserable inhabitant of his chamber knows not what the conditions outside are, thus he can not rationally choose to exit the room. This is the so called *incommensurability* or *lack of contrast* argument concerning the rationality of suicide, which can well shake the foundation of Epictetus' analogy. There can always be more smoke outside, or even no air at all to breath, or utter disgrace, or eternal grief and remorse, as well as the exact opposites. Leaving the chamber, under that scope, can not stand for a rational choice, but only for an emotional reaction, the actual manifestation of *impulse in excess* (*horme pleonazousa*)³⁷, of which the Stoics were so cautious to abstain, since its results can only be disobedient to reason³⁸. In that case, Epictetus himself would not be that sure as to whether leaving the chamber would be a genuine option for a moral agent, since only “when we find reason and affection united in an action, we can confidently affirm that it is right and good”³⁹.

³⁶ Theodosios N. Pelegrinis, *Human Existence*, Athens: Kardamitsa, 1985 (in Greek), p. 139.

³⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.110, R. D. Hicks (Trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann, 1931.

³⁸ Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 67.

³⁹ Epictetus, *The Discourses and the Manual*, P. E. Matheson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916, Vol. II, p. 145.

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„Το γεμάτο καπνό δωμάτιο του Επίκτητου:
ένα δοκίμιο για την έλλογη αυτοκτονία
ως ηθική επιλογή“

Μπορεί η αυτοκτονία να θεωρηθεί έλλογη; Και εάν ναι, δύναται αυτή να λάβει ηθικό πρόσημο; Οι Στωικοί, από τον Ζήγωνα έως τον Σενέκα, αντιλαμβάνονταν την αυτοκτονία ως το έσχατο καταφύγιο, ως την τελευταία ευκαιρία του ηθικού προσώπου να διατηρήσει την αρετή του, τουτέστιν ως κατ' εξοχήν έλλογη πράξη και, συνακόλουθα, ηθική επιλογή υψηλής αξίας. Εάν, ωστόσο, η αυτοκτονία είναι πράγματι ηθική επιλογή, πρέπει να είναι ελεύθερη, σκόπιμη προτίμηση, και να εκφράζει ένα συγκεκριμένο αξιακό σύστημα. Με άλλα λόγια, πρέπει αυτή ελλόγως να προκρίνεται αντί άλλων προσφερομένων εναλλακτικών, επί τη βάση των βελτίστων συμφερόντων του ηθικού προσώπου. Σύγχρονοι φιλόσοφοι, όπως οι Beauchamp, Battin και Choron, υπογραμμίζουν την αξία του κριτηρίου της λογικότητας κατά την ηθική αξιολόγηση της αυτοκτονίας. Το μετά χείρας άρθρο προσφεύγει στο δεύτερο κριτήριο της λογικότητας του Rorty, και συναφώς εξετάζει τον βαθμό κατά τον οποίον η επιλογή της αυτοκτονίας είναι αποτέλεσμα ιεράρχησης και αξιολόγησης πραγματικών και ισοδυνάμων επιλογών ή εάν, όπως ο Θ. Πελεργίνης υποστηρίζει, κάτι τέτοιο είναι αδύνατον, δυνάμει της άφευκτης σχετικής ασύμμετρης σύγκρισης.



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