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## Suicide in the *Phaedo*

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**Abstract:** In the *Phaedo* the character Socrates argues that suicide is morally wrong. This is in fact one of only two places in the entire Platonic corpus where suicide is discussed. It is a brief passage, and a notoriously perplexing one. In this article, I distinguish between two arguments that Socrates gives in support of his claim. I argue that one of them (what I call the Gods Argument) is not to be taken literally, while the other (what I call the Prison Argument) represents the deeper reason for the prohibition of suicide. I further relate the question of suicide to the overarching concerns of the *Phaedo* as a whole: the nature of our incarnate “imprisonment”, the nature and purpose of philosophy, the philosophical “purification” of the soul, the human pursuit of knowledge, and the nature of the divine.

**Keywords:** Plato, *Phaedo*, death, suicide

At *Phaedo* 61c–62c, Socrates tells his interlocutors that, even though philosophers should be ready and willing to die, nonetheless they should not kill themselves. This is in fact one of only two passages in the entire Platonic corpus where suicide is discussed (the other being *Laws* 873c–d). It is a perplexing text, both grammatically and substantively. Yet while the *Phaedo* passage has received its fair share of scholarly attention, the *reasons* underlying Socrates’ view – *why* suicide is morally wrong – remain unclear and largely unexamined.<sup>1</sup> It is my aim in this article to identify and analyze those reasons. Contrary to what some have suggested, I believe that the discussion of suicide is not a “digression” from the

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1 Most of the scholarly discussion has focused on 62a2–7, which (as I shall argue below) is an intriguing preface to Socrates’ claims regarding the wrongness of suicide, but does not do any work in grounding or elucidating those claims. Only a few scholars – most notably, Gallop (1975) and Bostock (1986) – have attempted to investigate the reasons behind Socrates’ claims (in 62b1–9), but they have focused on noting the problems and inconsistencies in Socrates’ views, and have not endeavored to offer anything like a holistic or charitable interpretation of them. The one exception to this is Warren (2001), whose view comes closest to my own.

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main topics of the *Phaedo*, nor is it meant to be considered as a stand-alone moral issue.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the question of suicide is integrated with the recurring themes of the *Phaedo* – the fate of the soul after death, and the value of the philosophical life – and hence is to be interpreted in light of the dialogue as a whole.

Socrates offers two justifications for the prohibition on suicide (62B1–9): first, that “we are in a kind of prison, and must not free ourselves or run away” (the *Prison Argument*, PA); and second, that “the gods are our guardians and we are one of their possessions” (the *Gods Argument*, GA). Most commentators on the *Phaedo* have regarded GA as the “real” reason for Socrates’ prohibition of suicide, or have treated it as an “elaboration” of the cryptic PA. But I believe that such a view is mistaken. For one thing, PA and GA are logically and conceptually independent of one another. Moreover, there are good reasons to think that Plato’s Socrates would have rejected GA, given that it assumes an unacceptably crude view of the nature of the divine. I suggest, instead, that Socrates offers GA as a view tailored to the constraints of the present dialogical inquiry, and he would not have expected it to withstand critical scrutiny, at least not if it is understood on a literal level.

This leaves us with PA, the most intriguing and heretofore unexamined part of the suicide passage. The key question is: *why* are we in a prison, and *why* must we not run away? I suggest that the remainder of the *Phaedo* provides us with an answer. It turns out that we are *responsible* for our own incarnate imprisonment, as a result of prior misdeeds. And the only way to be freed from this imprisonment is by a lifetime of philosophical purification and preparation, that is, by cultivating our desire to know the Forms and by seeking to have the soul inquire “by itself”. Yet suicide prematurely terminates this process of self-cultivation, thereby preventing the requisite purification from taking place. In this sense, the act of suicide shows a kind of presumptuousness – an implied claim that one’s purification is “done”, and that one is justified in leaving life. In addition, the act of suicide might very well betray the sort of bodily concern that one is supposed to be transcending.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Archer-Hind (1973), p. 9 claims that Socrates’ arguments against suicide are “quite outside the main argument of the dialogue.” The only previous commentators who have appreciated the connection between the suicide passage and the rest of the dialogue are Eckstein (1981), Dorter (1982), and Warren (2001).

## The context and framing of the suicide passage

I begin by considering the dialogical position of the suicide passage as well as the discursive frame with which Plato sets it up. As the *Phaedo* opens, Socrates is sitting in his jail cell on his execution day. The authorities have just released him from his bonds; he relishes the opportunity to spend his final hours in philosophical conversation, and sends his wife and child away. Socrates explains to Cebes why he has spent his last days taking the traditional Aesopic μύθοι and putting them into verse – namely, as a response to a curious dream in which he was bidden to “practice and cultivate the arts” (μουσικὴν ποίει καὶ ἐργάζου, 60E6–7). This then sets up the transition to the discussion of suicide (61B–62C):

*Socrates:* Tell this to Evenus, Cebes, wish him well and bid him farewell, and tell him, if he is wise, to follow me as soon as possible. I am leaving today, it seems, as the Athenians so order it.

*Simmias:* What kind of advice is this you are giving to Evenus, Socrates? I have met him many times, and from my observation he is not at all likely to follow it willingly.

*Socrates:* How so, is Evenus not a philosopher?

*Simmias:* I think so.

*Socrates:* Then Evenus will be willing, like very man who partakes worthily of philosophy. Yet perhaps he will not take his own life, for that, they say, is not right. [*As he said this, Socrates put his feet on the ground and remained in this position during the rest of the conversation.*]

*Cebes:* How do you mean Socrates, that it is not right to do oneself violence, and yet that the philosopher will be willing to follow one who is dying?

*Socrates:* Come now, Cebes, have you and Simmias, who keep company with Philolaus, not heard about such things?

*Cebes:* Nothing definite, Socrates.

*Socrates:* Indeed, I too speak about this from hearsay, but I do not mind telling you what I have heard, for it is perhaps most appropriate for one who is about to depart yonder to tell and examine tales about what we believe that journey to be like. What else could one do in the time we have until sunset?

*Cebes:* But whatever is the reason, Socrates, for people to say that it is not right to kill oneself? As to your question just now, I have heard Philolaus say this when staying in Thebes and I have also heard it from others, but I have never heard anyone give a clear account of the matter.

*Socrates:* Well, we must do our best, and you may yet hear one. And it may well astonish you if this subject, alone of all things, is simple, and it is never, as with everything else, better at certain times and for certain people to die than to live. And if this is so, you may well find it astonishing that those for whom it is better to die are wrong to help themselves, and that they must wait for someone else to benefit them.

*Cebes [lapsing into his own dialect, laughing quietly]:* Zeus knows it is.

*Socrates:* Indeed, it does seem unreasonable when put like that, but perhaps there is reason to it. There is the explanation that is put in the language of the mysteries, that we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away. That seems to me an impressive doctrine and one not easy to understand fully. However, Cebes, this seems to me

well expressed, that the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions. Or do you not think so?

*Cebes:* I do.

*Socrates:* And would you not be angry if one of your possessions killed itself when you had not given any sign that you wished it to die, and if you had any punishment you could inflict, you would inflict it?

*Cebes:* Certainly.

*Socrates:* Perhaps then, put in this way, it is not unreasonable that one should not kill oneself before a god had indicated some necessity to do so, like the necessity now put upon us.<sup>3</sup>

It is striking that Plato situates his discussion of suicide right at the *beginning* of the *Phaedo*, even before entering into the “formal” arguments for immortality. Not only that, but Plato heightens the tension of the moment with a key dramatic touch, by having Socrates *put his feet on the ground*.<sup>4</sup> All of this naturally suggests that the question of suicide is a matter of great importance, both for the *Phaedo* as a whole and for Plato personally. We are being invited, then, to take the issue of suicide seriously, and as an issue that is connected (in yet unforeseen ways) to the discussion follows.

Plato’s framing of the suicide passage is notable in two further respects. The first is the way in which the main claims of the passage are repeatedly attributed to someone *other* than Socrates, as if Socrates is going out of his way to disclaim responsibility for what is said. The (purported) *fact* of suicide being wrong is attributed to others: “they say” (φασι, 61C10, E5) that suicide is not right; it is Philolaus (not Socrates) who has spoken about such matters (61D7, E7); Socrates is speaking about such things only on the basis of “hearsay” (ἀκοῆς, 61D9) or what he has “heard” (ἀκηκώς, D10), and likewise for Cebes (ἦκουσα, 61E7, ἀκήκοα, E9). Similarly, Socrates’ prison argument for *why* suicide is wrong is put in the “language of the mysteries” (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος, 62B3) and not his own language.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Grube and Cooper (2002). Unless otherwise noted, all translations will be taken from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> In one sense, Rowe (1993, p. 123) is right to say that Socrates’ act of putting his feet on the ground signals a shift to “more serious” matters. The question of suicide and the soul is surely more important than Aesop’s fables. But we must be careful here: it would be incorrect, as an interpretive approach, to assume that everything which precedes the feet-shifting is somehow irrelevant or unimportant (e. g., the outer frame of *Phaedo* and Echechrates, or the mention of pleasure and pain).

<sup>5</sup> As Cooper (1989, pp. 14–15) notes, the prohibition of suicide is best kept distinct from the justification for the prohibition: only the former is explicitly attributed to Philolaus. Further discussion is in Strachan (1970), who argues for an Orphic source for the latter.

The second noteworthy aspect of Plato's framing of this passage is the way in which the veridicality of Socrates' claims is subtly brought into question. Indeed Socrates is careful to avoid any categorical or definitive statement of certainty on the matter: *perhaps* suicide is wrong (ἴσως, 61C9, 62B2, 62C6); such a claim *perhaps* has "some reason" to it (τινὰ λόγον, 62B2) and is "not unreasonable" (οὐκ ἄλογον, 62C6);<sup>6</sup> and in response to Cebes' remark about never having heard a "clear" (σαφές, 61E8) account of suicide, Socrates says that they should "exert themselves" (προθυμεῖσθαι) and *perhaps* (τάχα, 62A1) Cebes may yet hear one. Strictly speaking, Socrates does not even declare suicide to be morally bad or evil; he says instead that it is οὐ θεμιτόν (61C10), "not right" in the sense of being contrary to accepted law or custom.<sup>7</sup> To top it all off, Socrates aligns the discussion of suicide – and indeed the entirety of the *Phaedo* – with myths, saying that it is fitting for him now (as one about to leave life) to "examine and tell tales about" (διασκοπεῖν τε καὶ μυθολογεῖν, 61E1–2) the nature of our post-mortem journey.

Thus Socrates frames his remarks on suicide with disclaimers as regards their origin and their reliability. But why? Why attribute the prohibition on suicide to others, and why avoid a straightforward endorsement of it?<sup>8</sup> One reason for Socrates' caginess here concerns the nature of the subject-matter itself. As I will suggest below, the question of suicide is interwoven with the broader psychological and eschatological concerns of the *Phaedo* – the nature of the soul and its purification, the fate of the soul after death, and the nature of the divine. Yet such matters cannot be known or defined with complete certainty; not even Socrates can claim, for instance, a privileged understanding of our post-mortem journeys.<sup>9</sup> In fact Socrates goes so far as to say that not even the highest objects

<sup>6</sup> To say that something is "not unreasonable" is not the same thing as saying that it is "reasonable", the former suggests a lesser degree of reason than the latter (Eckstein 1981, p. 45).

<sup>7</sup> The θέμις or 'unwritten law' in question could be one laid down by the gods, though it need not be; and even if it were, an appeal to θέμις is still much weaker than an appeal to some independent standard of (say) justice. (After all, we would still be left with the problem of the *Euthyphro*: what *makes* the θέμις right? Divine will, or some independent standard or rightness?) Cf. Rowe (1993), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> It may true that (as Rowe 1993, p. 124 notes) Socrates' refusal to "own" these claims is disingenuous, and that he is indeed presenting a novel view of suicide. But even so, he still presents those claims *as if* belonging to others, and it is worth asking why. (Archer-Hind's answer to this question, Archer-Hind 1973, p. 9 – that it indicates the disconnect between the suicide passage and the rest of the *Phaedo* – is flatly contradicted by the textual evidence, as I will argue later.)

<sup>9</sup> Hence the *Phaedo* is laden with repeated statements of epistemic modesty and caution. To take one example: at 63B9–c2 Socrates says that although he "hopes" (ἐλπίζω) to join the company of good men after death, he would not "insist" (δυσχυρισάμην) upon it; and again, that he has "good hope" (εὖελπις, 63C5) that good men achieve a better fate after death than bad men. (*Con-*

of philosophical contemplation – the Forms – can be fully known while we are incarnate.<sup>10</sup> Reason is thus limited in certain ways, including in regard to the question of suicide (where complete certainty and precision are not attainable). Yet by qualifying his claims (“perhaps”, etc.) and by attributing them to others (a sign that he may not endorse them fully), Socrates is able to bring this fact to our attention.

In addition to pointing to the nature of the subject-matter, Socrates’ disclaimers may also show us something about the characters of the *Phaedo*. Socrates is well aware that Cebes and Simmias “keep company” (συγγεγονότες, 61D7) with Philolaus. What better way, then, to pique his interlocutors’ interests and rope them into dialogue than by making reference to philosophical views in which they are already invested? This technique – framing a claim in ways that appeal to an interlocutor’s current beliefs and values – is of course common across the Platonic dialogues. In the context of the *Phaedo*, this may simply be a way of speaking to Simmias and Cebes in terms that they already understand.<sup>11</sup> But, more deeply, it may also be a call to Simmias and Cebes to revise (and perhaps reject) some of those terms. As we will see, Socrates does not uncritically adopt Pythagorean concepts, but appropriates them for his own purposes.

In sum, Plato’s framing of the suicide passage serves as a methodological cue to the reader. The prominent placement of this passage in the *Phaedo* signals that suicide is an issue of importance and is connected to what follows in the rest of the dialogue; but the qualifications and disclaimers compel us to regard the passage as but a provisional and preliminary statement on Socrates’ part, one that is meant to be further examined and questioned (and perhaps, ultimately, rejected). In this sense, Cebes’ eagerness to hear a “clear” account of the matter – though reflective of a worthy desire to know – needs to be tempered, lest he (or the reader) assume that Socrates’ own account constitutes such clarity, and lest we lose sight of the fact that *complete* clarity is beyond our grasp (at least while we are incarnate). So we are indeed being challenged to “exert ourselves” (προθυμεῖσθαι), both because of the difficulty of the inquiry and because of the difficulty to persevere in the face of a known limit.

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*tra* Beets 2003, p. 101, then, I see no evidence that Socrates’ words in this passage imply anything like ‘certainty’.)

<sup>10</sup> E. g., he says that “the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom *whenever it is associated* with the soul” (66A), and again, that “if we are ever to have *pure knowledge*, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself” (66D–E). It seems likely that we shall, *only then, when we are dead*, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers...*not while we live*” (66D–E).

<sup>11</sup> As suggested by Gotshalk (2001, pp. 19 ff.).

## Socrates' two arguments

In the spirit of Socratic exertion, let us now consider the suicide passage in the *Phaedo* in greater detail, first by breaking it down into its main parts. The passage begins with Socrates making a bold claim: philosophers should be willing to die, or in this case, Evenus should be willing to follow Socrates to death as soon as possible (61B7–8, C8–9, D4–5). Socrates' explanation for and justification of this claim will drive much of the *Phaedo*. However, Socrates immediately adds that, even though a philosopher should be *willing* to die, he should not take his *own* life, for suicide is “not right” (οὐ θεμιτόν, 61C9–10, D4). Cebes is puzzled by the apparent contradiction between these two statements: how can it be that suicide is wrong if one is supposed to be embracing death?<sup>12</sup> (Cebes might have added: why not just take matters into one's own hands, rather than awaiting a more “natural” death?) Cebes thus asks Socrates to explain *why* suicide is wrong, as he has never heard a clear account of the matter (61E5–9). Socrates is happy to oblige – sharing with Cebes and Simmias what he has heard about suicide – though (as noted above) he is careful not to promise complete clarity on the matter.

But Socrates' explanation of the wrongness of suicide is indirect. For he begins not by discussing the actual reasons for its wrongness, but by offering a kind of prefatory remark that (seemingly) places the issue of suicide in a broader context:

It may well astonish you if this subject, alone of all things, is simple, and it is never, as with everything else, better at certain times and for certain people to die than to live; and if this is so, you may well find it astonishing that those for whom it is better to die are wrong to help themselves, and that they must wait for someone else to benefit them (62A2–7).

This is a notoriously difficult and ambiguous sentence, and a great deal of ink has been spilled by commentators trying to make sense of it.<sup>13</sup> The ambiguities stem, principally, from the unclear meaning of “astonishing” or “surprising”

<sup>12</sup> This is not a merely theoretical question: a certain Cleombrotus is reported to have killed himself after reading Plato's *Phaedo* (*Greek Anthology* VII.471). Whether or not this story is true, it at least indicates that one might be tempted to commit suicide if one takes seriously enough the idea that death is something good (and preferable to life). Cf. Warren (2001), pp. 92–94.

<sup>13</sup> It has rightly been called “one of the most obscure statements in all the dialogues” (Dorter 1982, p. 11). The most thorough discussions of the passage are to be found in Dorter (1982), pp. 11–19, and Gallop (1975), pp. 79–83. Other commentators who discuss the passage include Archer-Hind (1973), pp. 10–11, Bluck (1955), pp. 151–153, Burger (1984), pp. 30–31, Burnet (1911), pp. 20–21, Currie (1958), Geddes (1885), pp. 213–217, Hackforth (1955), p. 191, Rowe (1993), pp. 126–127, Tarán (1966), Verdenius (1958), p. 198 and Warren (2001), pp. 91–92, 95–96.

(θαυμαστόν, A2, A5), the unclear referent of “this” (τοῦτο, A2), and the unclear scope of the claim in A3–5 (particularly as regards what is supposedly “simple” [ἀπλοῦν] and what supposedly should “never” [οὐδέποτε] be the case).<sup>14</sup> Depending on how one interprets and combines these various elements, one winds up with a different sense of what, precisely, is supposed to be so “surprising” to Cebes. I myself make no claim to offer any ‘solution’ of the issues here, and I remain largely agnostic as to which interpretation is the ‘right’ one. But fortunately – given my purposes in this article – those issues can be safely bracketed. For all commentators agree that Socrates here is (among other things) stating once more a prohibition on suicide, and nearly all agree that Socrates is stating that – at least for some people, possibly for all people – it is better to be dead than alive.<sup>15</sup> However, Socrates gives no indication in 62A2–7 as to *why* death might be preferable to life, or *why* suicide is being prohibited in spite of that preferability. Thus if we want to understand Socrates’ *reasons* for asserting the immorality of suicide, we must move on from 62A2–7 and see what the rest of the dialogue has to say.<sup>16</sup>

It is in 62B2–C8 that Socrates offers (albeit briefly) actual *arguments* for the immorality of suicide. He mentions two arguments in particular. The first – which he says is put “in the language of the mysteries” (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις) – is that we are in a kind of “prison” (ἐν τινι φρουρᾷ) and “must not free ourselves or run away” (62B2–6). This argument, adds Socrates, is “impressive” (μέγας) and “not easy to understand” (οὐ ῥάδιος διδεῖν). I shall call this the *Prison Argument* (or PA for short). The second argument is that the gods are our “guardians” (τοὺς ἐπιμελουμένους) and that we are one of their “possessions” (κτημάτων); as such, the gods would be angry – and inflict punishments – if one of their possessions killed itself without their giving any indication that they wanted it to die (62B6–C4). I shall call this the *Gods Argument* (or GA for short). This second view, says Socrates, is “well expressed” (εὖ λέγεσθαι). Socrates concludes then that it is “not

**14** Dorter (1982) gives a very helpful overview of the issues involved. Does θαυμαστόν indicate approval or disapproval? Does τοῦτο refer to the claim regarding the wrongness of suicide or the claim regarding the relative merits of life and death? Does A3–5 mean that it is always better to be dead than alive, never better to be dead than alive, or sometimes better to be dead than alive?

**15** The one interpretation that I think can be safely rejected is that of Loriaux (cited in Gallop 1975, p. 81), according to which it is *never* better to be dead than alive (i. e., that life is always better than death). Loriaux is the only commentator I know of who has espoused this particular view. Such a view is clearly contradicted by the rest of the *Phaedo*, which sets out in detail why philosophers should be ready and willing to die, and why a discarnate existence is preferable to an incarnate one.

**16** Cf. Warren (2001), p. 96.



unreasonable” (οὐκ ἄλογον) that we should not kill ourselves, unless a god has indicated some necessity (ἀνάγκη) to do so (as is the case with Socrates’ present circumstance).

My concern here is to get a better understanding of meaning of these two arguments, particularly in relation to the rest of the *Phaedo*. Regarding PA, for instance, just what is the “prison” in which we find ourselves, and *why* are we prohibited from attempting to escape it? Regarding GA, in what sense are we really “possessions” of the gods, and why would it be so upsetting to the gods if we did kill ourselves? Aside from questions that can be raised individually about PA and GA, we may also ask about the relation between them: Does Socrates intend them to be entirely distinct and separate points? Or might they be interconnected in some way – for instance, might one of them provide an elaboration or explanation of the other? Is one of the arguments meant to be foundational, such that the other is subordinate?

## The Gods Argument

I begin with GA, as that is where most previous commentators have focused their attention. Indeed, most commentators (either explicitly or implicitly) have treated GA as Socrates’ “real” or “primary” reason for prohibiting suicide, and have either ignored PA or downplayed the significance of PA.<sup>17</sup> This interpretive approach is natural enough, given that GA is far easier to grasp and far less mysterious than PA. Alternatively, some commentators have acknowledged that PA plays some role in Socrates’ thinking, but have regarded it as incomplete or vague on its own; they then claim that GA provides us with a deeper or fuller account of the meaning of PA.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of which camp they fall into – those who dismiss PA or those who subordinate PA to GA – these commentators all offer a more-or-less literal interpretation of GA, according to which there are actual gods who are

<sup>17</sup> Those who take this approach include Ahrens Dorf (1995), pp. 26–29, Beets (2003), pp. 102–103, Bluck (1955), p. 40, Gotshalk (2001), pp. 23–24, Rowe (1993), pp. 128–129, White (1989), pp. 35–37 and Cooper (1989), pp. 14–16. Some ignore PA altogether (e. g., Ahrens Dorf and Bluck); others discuss PA, but claim that Socrates dismisses or rejects the view (e. g., Gotshalk, Rowe, and Cooper). Also cf. Olympiodorus (in Westerink 1976, p. 38), who regards PA as the “mythical” argument and GA as the “philosophical and dialectical” argument.

<sup>18</sup> Those who take this approach include Burger (1984), pp. 32–33, Dorter (1982), pp. 19–22, Stern (1993), p. 23, Warren (2001), pp. 97–98, 100, 104, as well as the Neoplatonic commentator Damascius (in Westerink 1977, p. 36). Against this approach, the commentators who most clearly distinguish between GA and PA are Gallop (1975) and Bostock (1986).

our ‘masters’ or ‘owners’ in some sense. As such, Socrates’ argument amounts to the claim that suicide is *unjust* and/or *impious* (since our lives are not our own), not to mention *imprudent* (since we will face punishment from the gods).<sup>19</sup>

Let us now assess the strength of these two interpretive approaches. Is it plausible to read GA as providing an explanation for PA, such that the latter is dependent on the former for its meaning and philosophical adequacy? There are several reasons to think otherwise. For one thing, Socrates’ language suggests that he views GA and PA as distinct or separate arguments: he refers to PA as both “impressive” and “not easy to understand”, whereas he refers to GA as “well expressed”; and he sets up the entire sentence as contrasting clauses.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, we may note that GA and PA are logically and conceptually distinct from one another: it is possible for PA to be true and GA false, and vice versa.<sup>21</sup> Notice, finally, that if GA is indeed intended to explain PA, it fails to do so, for it does not tell us *why* the gods imprisoned us (or even *whether* they were the ones responsible for doing so). I conclude from these considerations that we should not read GA into PA, but instead should treat them as distinct lines of thought.

What then of the other prevailing claim among commentators, that GA constitutes Socrates’ ‘primary’ or ‘real’ justification for the prohibition on suicide? (After all, even if we are to treat GA and PA as distinct, it does not follow that we must treat them as equally important.) Here again I find this interpretive approach to be seriously flawed. Admittedly – as Socrates says – PA is unclear and “hard to understand”, at least if we treat it as a stand-alone statement. But that fact does not by itself give us a good reason to *dismiss* PA altogether; it instead challenges us to look for an interpretation of PA, in light of the rest of the *Phaedo* (an approach that I shall pursue in the next section). More to the point, there are good reasons to think that Plato would not have found GA acceptable in the first place, and hence that it does not deserve a privileged place in our understanding of the prohibition of suicide. Those reasons are as follows:

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**19** White (1989) casts the prohibition in terms of impiety, Cooper (1989) in terms of injustice, Ahrens-dorf (1995) in terms of imprudence, and Stern (1993) in terms of the gods’ care for us. Of course even this literal interpretation of GA leaves a number of unanswered questions, like *who* these gods are, *why* they don’t want us to kill ourselves, and what *basis* Socrates has for believing in them. The only commentator to take a non-literal approach to GA is Dorter (1982); I will consider the question of non-literal interpretation later in this article.

**20** PA is set up with *ὁ μὲν...* (‘on the one hand’), which leaves GA as the implied *ὁ δέ...* (‘on the other hand’).

**21** Perhaps we are in a prison, but the gods had nothing to do with it (or that they are indifferent to it, or that they are not our ‘masters’ anyway). Alternatively, perhaps we are ‘possessions’ of the gods, but in such a way that earthly life is a gift and not a prison.

1. As it stands, GA is incomplete, for it does not tell us *why* the gods would not want us to kill ourselves. Is it because they simply want to enjoy the “use” of their “possessions” in perpetuity? In that case, the gods are acting somewhat selfishly in their disregard for human desires; and if they were serious in wanting perpetual enjoyment, then they should have either found a way to make humans immune from suicidal attempts, or else they should have found a way to eliminate suicidal impulses. Alternatively, is it that the gods want what is best for humanity as a whole, as opposed to any one individual human? But that still leaves it unclear *why* a prohibition on suicide is best for humanity as a whole, particularly given that there are some cases where it is arguably better *both* for the individual *and* for society as a whole for a given person to be dead.<sup>22</sup> All of this is operating under the assumptions that the gods in fact *have* a reason for wanting to prohibit suicide, and that humans can potentially *know* what that reason is – though neither of these need be the case. If it turns out that the gods either don’t have a reason or we can’t know what it is, then that raises a whole set of other problems that would no doubt have been unpalatable to Plato.<sup>23</sup>
2. Even supposing that the gods’ reason for prohibiting suicide could be fully known and spelled out, the fact remains that GA embeds an unacceptably crude, anthropomorphized view of the divine that Plato would likely have rejected. Notice in particular the word Socrates uses to describe these gods’ reaction – χαλεπαίνους (62C3) – if any human dared to kill himself. ‘Anger’ is the mildest of the possible meanings of χαλεπαίνω; the word can also indicate being ‘violent’ or ‘savage’. GA is thus attributing to the gods a rather unstable emotional state, and indeed is suggesting that their desire for punishment is a direct result of that state (as opposed to, say, a result of a considered judgment about what is best). Yet this sort of anthropomorphized picture of the gods – as beings who experience the same kinds of powerful emotions as humans – is one that Plato decidedly rejects in the *Republic*, where it is emphasized that the gods must be entirely good, immutable, and temperate.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Plato elsewhere rejects the notion that the gods are

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<sup>22</sup> Bostock (1986), pp. 18–19.

<sup>23</sup> Bostock (1986), pp. 18–19. If the gods don’t have a reason, then that calls into question their divinity, and their worthiness of being worshipped; it also (as Bostock notes) makes the gods irrelevant to human affairs. If they do have a reason but it cannot be known by us, then it amounts to a kind of “blind faith” that we are supposed to rely upon.

<sup>24</sup> *Republic* 379A–392A. An upsurge of anger (as suggested by GA) would seem to contradict Socrates’ insistence in the *Republic* that the gods are stable and not susceptible to change, and also that they do not experience such things as grief or violent laughter or lust. A desire to punish

beings who are in constant need of placation and ‘service’, and that they have human form at all.<sup>25</sup>

3. Equally problematic is the notion that humans are mere “possessions” (κτημάτων) of the gods. As with the anthropomorphized view of the gods, this view of the relation between gods and humans derives from traditional mythology. And here again, the word that Socrates uses is suggestive: in its most benign sense, a κτήμα is a piece of property or possession of someone else (the verb κτάνωμαι means to procure, get, gain or acquire); but the word is also used in connection with slave-ownership. Socrates thus seemingly suggests that humans are no more than ‘things’ which are wholly owned and controlled by the gods, and that our relationship with the gods is modeled on either commercial transactions or slavery (or both). But Plato surely cannot accept this conception of the human relation to the divine – and in this case we need look no further than the *Phaedo* itself to see why. Throughout the *Phaedo* it is suggested that humans have (at least in part) a certain *affinity* to the gods, and that we can potentially enjoy a certain *fellowship* with them. For example, in the dream that Socrates reports (60D–61A), he is clearly not relating to the divine as either a piece of property or a slave (since the voice that he hears is instructing and advising him, rather than commanding him).<sup>26</sup> Even more clearly, Socrates later emphasizes how – if we live rightly (that is, philosophically) while on earth – we can depart after death to *spend time with the gods* and exist *in the company of the gods* (81A9, 82B10–C1, 83E2–3); the gods are there to serve as our *guides* (108C4) and they communicate with at least some souls via *speech* and *visions* (111B7–8). None of this would make sense or even be possible if humans were mere ‘slaves’ or ‘possessions’ of the

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humans (also suggested by GA) is something that Plato does countenance in the *Republic* (see 380B), though we would need an account of how punishing a person for committing suicide would *benefit* that person. It is notable (as Ahrens Dorf 1995, p. 29 points out) that Socrates conspicuously does *not* affirm that the gods of GA are benevolent or just.

<sup>25</sup> The *Euthyphro* implicitly criticizes the idea – put forward in Euthyphro’s various definitions – that humans are engaged in a kind of exchange or commercial transaction with the gods (see Werner 2012 for more on this point). The *Phaedrus* explicitly rejects anthropomorphism (246C–D).

<sup>26</sup> Rowe (1993), p. 129.

gods, as GA seemingly suggests.<sup>27</sup> Given these and other problems,<sup>28</sup> then, it seems likely that Plato would have rejected this conception of the human-divine relationship.

4. Finally, if GA is indeed Socrates' main or primary reason for prohibiting suicide, then he is doing no more than appealing to our self-interest – all but eliminating the role of philosophical reasoning in the process. In effect, then, we are being told, “Obey the gods' will or you will be punished!” And while this might be prudent advice, it is hardly the sort of argument that we would expect from Plato, who was deeply concerned with showing how a virtuous life was good in itself – in the soul – apart from any rewards or punishments that might accrue to it.

I conclude, then, that GA cannot be Socrates' ‘real’ or ‘primary’ reason for prohibiting suicide, and that he does not offer it as a way of grounding or explaining PA. If understood on a literal level, GA embeds claims that Plato almost certainly would have rejected. Might there be a non-literal sense to GA that could pass Platonic muster? Some commentators have thought so, but I have a hard time making much sense of their interpretations, and I find little textual support for them. It has been suggested, for instance, that we are “possessions” of god insofar as we can “only truly exist within the absolute unity that is god.”<sup>29</sup> But I find no indication in the *Phaedo* that the goal of life is “union with god”, or that Plato even believes in a single (monotheist) god to begin with. It has also

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**27** Novak (1975, pp. 16–17) suggests that we have a twofold relationship to the gods: prior to death, we are their servants and “chattel”, whereas after death – if we have prepared ourselves adequately – we are their “associates”. But this view is problematic: even if we restrict human servitude/slavery to an incarnate context, we will still have difficulty making sense of Plato's repeated references to “godlikeness” and “affinity” (not to mention specific episodes such as Socrates' dream, which occurs in an incarnate context).

**28** It is unclear, for instance, *why* we would be possessions of the gods. It cannot be because we owe our existence to them – the soul is uncreated, after all (White 1989, p. 37). Is it because (as White claims) the gods are morally better than us? But the gods' anger already calls that notion into question, and (as noted above) Socrates conspicuously fails to mention anything about divine benevolence in GA. (Strictly speaking, possessing X need not entail that one take care of X – or, if one does, it might be for merely self-interested reasons. Cf. Beets 2003, p. 102.) Furthermore, GA seems to assume that humans can accurately understand and interpret all of the gods' commands, for Socrates acknowledges that we are *permitted* to kill ourselves when a god has “indicated some necessity to do so” (Eckstein 1981, pp. 45–46). But how are we supposed to know when such “necessity” is present?

**29** Beets (2003), pp. 102–103. According to Beets, “reunion with god” is the ultimate aim of human life.

been suggested that by “gods” here Plato means something like Forms or reason or “the impersonal source of truth.”<sup>30</sup> But while this interpretation has a certain appeal, I am not sure what it would mean for humans to be “possessions” or “slaves” of the Forms or of reason, let alone what the “anger” of these things is supposed to represent. Overall, what these approaches to GA demonstrate is the problematic nature of allegorical interpretation – a style of interpretation that Plato is quite critical of elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

But if Socrates does not intend for GA to be taken with complete seriousness, then why does he put it forward? I suggest that he does so in order to provide the sorts of considerations that would appeal – on an intuitive level – to Simmias and Cebes, and to others (including other readers) like them. There is indeed clear evidence in the *Phaedo* that, despite their philosophical abilities and inquisitiveness, Simmias and Cebes are not yet at the level of a Socrates – a more mature philosopher who is robustly and self-consciously engaged in the process of “purification”. For instance, they are clearly attracted to materialism, as evidenced by Simmias’ view of the soul as a kind of harmony (85E–86D), and Cebes’ analogy of the soul as a kind of smoke (70A–B). This is what prompts Socrates’ complaint that they are gripped by a “childish fear” (77D) of the soul’s dispersal after death. Elsewhere, Simmias laughs when he first hears the claim that philosophy is a preparation for death (64A–B), showing that he is still steeped (at least in part) in the mindset of the *hoi polloi*.<sup>32</sup> Given these limitations, Simmias and Cebes may not yet be ready to fully grasp or appreciate a more complex argument (of the sort of which I believe PA provides). So it makes sense for Socrates to offer them GA, an argument that will make the basic point clear – impressing upon them the need *not* to commit suicide – but it is not intended as a satisfactory philosophical account.

## The Prison Argument

Let us then turn to PA, which is tersely conveyed in a single sentence, that “we are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away.” Socrates does

<sup>30</sup> Dorter (1982), pp. 20–22.

<sup>31</sup> *Phaedrus* 229c–230a.

<sup>32</sup> As Ahrens Dorf (1995, p. 37) notes, Simmias’ laughter indicates that he still finds the philosophical life – as Socrates describes it – as something strange and ridiculous, and that he has a certain sympathy with the many’s contempt for philosophy. On this point also cf. Stern (1993, p. 33).

not elaborate further, and thus he leaves us in the dark as to *why*, exactly, suicide is being prohibited on PA. What are the *grounds* of the prohibition? If the body is indeed a prison, then *why shouldn't* we attempt to escape it on our own? Questions also arise regarding key concepts in PA: In what sense are we in a “prison” (φρουρά, 62B4)?<sup>33</sup> What is the (alleged) crime for which we are being imprisoned, and who imposed the sentence?<sup>34</sup> Why does Socrates say that PA is both “impressive” (μέγας) and “not easy to understand” (οὐ ῥάδιος διδεῖν)? Finally, why does Socrates cast PA “in the language of the mysteries” (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος)?<sup>35</sup>

These questions have received scant attention in the scholarly literature on the *Phaedo*. Indeed, as I noted earlier, most commentators have either ignored PA or dismissed its importance.<sup>36</sup> Among those few commentators who do discuss PA at any length, almost all throw their hands up in perplexity or fail to offer an actual *interpretation* of its possible meaning.<sup>37</sup> But where to turn for a basis for interpretation? One might think that the *Crito* could be of some help here, since it is the only other dialogue that both has a prison as its setting and discusses

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**33** As a number of commentators have noted, the word φρουρά has two possible meanings, ‘prison’ and ‘guard-duty’ (i. e., a ‘guard-post’ or ‘outpost’ or ‘watch’). But for a number of reasons – like the fact that the *Phaedo* is set in a prison, and the recurring talk of ‘releasing’ oneself (λύειν, 62B5), being ‘released’ (59E6, 60A1), and being imprisoned in the body (67D, 82E) – the most likely meaning here is ‘prison’. For further discussion, see Burger (1984), p. 32, Burnet (1911), pp. 22–23, Cooper (1989), p. 15, Gallop (1975), pp. 83–85, 226, Geddes (1885), pp. 18–19, Rowe (1993), p. 128, Strachan (1970) and Friedländer (1969), p. 472 n. 6.

**34** Cooper (1989, p. 15) claims that suicide is forbidden “because it entails evading the full execution of a just sentence and so is itself something unjust.” But in fact there is no indication in PA as to whether the sentence is just, or even whether we are “guilty” of anything. Rowe (1993), p. 129 considers the possibility that it was the gods who imposed the sentence, and hence – since the gods are good – the punishment must be deserved. (Cf. Warren 2001, pp. 100, 104.) But, again, there is no indication in the text at this point as to whether the gods are involved.

**35** Most commentators think that the “mysteries” in question are those of the Orphics, as opposed to the Eleusinian mysteries or Pythagorean beliefs (see Archer-Hind 1973, p. 11, Burnet 1911, p. 61, Geddes 1885, p. 18 and Strachan 1970). But Rowe (1993, p. 128) is also right to note that trying to identify any alleged (historical) source for PA is misplaced, since “part of the point of saying that they are ‘secret’ or ‘forbidden’ may be just to block the question,” and that it is common for Plato to “invent sources for ideas which he needs for his own purposes.”

**36** E. g., Bostock (1986, p. 18) considers PA to be a “non-starter”; Gotshalk (2001, p. 24) and Williams (1995, p. 158) think that Socrates “dismisses” PA; and Archer-Hind (1973), p. 12 claims that Socrates does not think that PA is “worth much.”

**37** See, e. g., Burger (1984), pp. 32–33 and Gallop (1975), pp. 83–84. Apart from the ancient Neoplatonist Olympiodorus (in Westerink 1976, p. 42) – who offers an allegorical (and patently unsatisfactory) reading of PA, in terms of our relation to Dionysus – I am aware of only one scholar (Novak 1975) who has attempted to offer anything like an in-depth interpretation.

prison sentencing at any length. Unfortunately, the sorts of considerations that Socrates adduces in the *Crito* (in relation to the laws of Athens) are simply not relevant or applicable to the *Phaedo* (in relation to our imprisonment in a body). Consider some of the arguments that Socrates (in the name of the Laws) presents in the *Crito* as to why he should not escape prison: (a) that the laws and the city made him possible, by providing him certain benefits, so that now he is in a position of debt (50D–51B); (b) that, by remaining in Athens his whole life, Socrates implicitly entered into an agreement with the city, which he cannot now break (49E, 51E–52E); and (c) that he must either persuade the city to change its laws, or else obey them, or else depart the city altogether (51B–D, 52A). How can any of these possibly help us to understand PA, where the “sentence” in question is that of being incarnate? As regards (a), while it may be true that incarnation made possible one’s *earthly* self, one’s *true* or *essential* self (the soul) hardly depends on incarnation; furthermore, it is questionable whether life itself confers benefits analogous to those provided by the city, and whether those benefits (if they exist) are sufficient to generate a prohibition on suicide.<sup>38</sup> As regards (b), there is no sense in which a person makes an ‘agreement’ to enter into life, rendering that concept irrelevant to PA. Finally, as regards (c), there is no one to whom ‘persuasion’ might be directed if one wanted, nor is there anywhere that one might ‘emigrate’ to except through suicide itself.<sup>39</sup> More broadly, there is no mention of the law in PA – nor anywhere else in the *Phaedo* – so it can hardly be claimed that the intent of PA is to condemn suicide *because* it is illegal.<sup>40</sup>

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**38** Gallop (1975), pp. 83–84. Part of the point of the *Crito* argument is based on the notion of reciprocity: that Socrates *owes* something to the city for having provided him with so many good things. But can the same thing be said about incarnate existence? (*What* would the benefits be, and *to whom* do we owe a debt?) Even if incarnate life does offer benefits, that fact is not sufficient to generate a prohibition on suicide, for there might very well be times when life’s negatives outweigh its benefits (rendering suicide an attractive and reasonable option).

**39** Gallop (1975), pp. 83–84.

**40** The only occurrence of νόμος in the *Phaedo* is at 58B5, where *Phaedo* mentions the Athenian law that prohibits executions while the Delian mission is away. To my knowledge, there was no actual law in Athens that prohibited suicide; moreover, as Garrison (1995, pp. 13–23) has shown, there is no evidence that the corpses of those who committed suicides were subject to any punitive measures. (Aristotle regards suicide as illegal at *NE* V.11, but he bases that view upon an interpretive principle – *viz.*, what the law does not explicitly enjoin is implicitly prohibited – and not any actual statute.) But even if a law against suicide did exist, construing PA in terms of illegality would be a mistake: for as Gallop (1975, p. 84) notes, “to condemn suicide merely on account of its illegality would simply be to disregard religious and moral questions it raises” (questions that Socrates clearly wants to address).



Fortunately, we need not rely on the *Crito* – or on any other dialogue – in order to arrive at an understanding of PA. I believe that everything we need to properly interpret PA is contained in the *Phaedo* itself. In fact, Socrates himself is *inviting* us to engage in this kind of interpretation, and not to give up too easily. When he refers to PA as a “secret” λόγος (wrought in the language of the mysteries) that is “not easy to understand”, he is not – as some have suggested<sup>41</sup> – dismissing it or relegating it to the realm of the esoteric; rather, he is indicating that he takes it seriously and wants us to do so as well. As with the *Phaedo* as a whole, part of what makes PA a “secret” λόγος is that its meaning is not transparent, and that it is incumbent upon the reader (or listener) to do the work of recovery. Moreover, Socrates gives us an indication here of how to proceed, through his very reference to the “mysteries”. For notice that Socrates refers to the mysteries elsewhere in the *Phaedo*, most notably when he is in the midst of discussing the philosophical life and philosophical “purification” (69C–D). This tells us that PA is connected to the rest of the *Phaedo*; rather than treating suicide as a stand-alone moral issue, we must consider it in light of such issues as the nature of the soul, the nature of the philosophical life, and the Forms. In this sense, it only *appears* as if Socrates drops or dismisses PA, when in reality he uses it as an introductory statement of various issues to be worked out later.<sup>42</sup>

Let us turn then to the rest of the *Phaedo*, and consider how it might shed some light on the meaning of PA. I will focus here in particular on two passages – 63E–69E and 80C–84B – which seem to be most relevant to the issue of suicide, and to the status (and value) of life and death more generally. Immediately after stating GA and PA, Socrates offers a bold claim that underlies the remainder of the *Phaedo*: that “the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death” (64A). This claim is rather counter-intuitive, even for Simmias and Cebes, which may be why Socrates emphasizes the need to practice philosophy *in the proper manner* or *rightly* (ὀρθῶς).<sup>43</sup> In terms of its substance, Socrates’ claim has two dimensions to it, as he is calling us to prepare ourselves both for *dying* (ἀποθνήσκειν) and for *death* itself (τεθνάναι).<sup>44</sup> While Socrates here refers to the “practice” (ἐπιτηδεύουσιν) involved in the phil-

<sup>41</sup> E. g., Archer-Hind (1973), p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> One commentator who appreciates this point is Warren (2001), pp. 94–95, 102–104.

<sup>43</sup> This implies that some – like Simmias and Cebes – practice philosophy in an improper or incorrect manner. The phrase is repeated at 67B, 67E, 69D, 81A, and 82C.

<sup>44</sup> The former term denotes a process that takes place *during* life, while the latter denotes the end-state or what comes *after* death (i. e., the state of *being* dead). We are supposed to be ready for both. Cf. White (1989), p. 44. (I disagree here with Archer-Hind 1973, pp. 15–16, who reads τεθνάναι as referring to the perfected philosophical state that one can attain while incarnate. It

osophical life, later he will also refer to the “preparation” (παρεσκευάσθαι, 67C2), “training” (μελετώσι, 67E5, 81A1), and “purification” (κάθαρσις, 67A5, 67C5, 69C1, C6, 80E2, 82D6, 83D9) which we are supposed to be undergoing.

Two questions arise at this point: *Why* do we need this preparation or purification – what is its ultimate *point* or *goal*? And *what*, concretely, is the process of purification supposed to involve? As regards the first question, Socrates’ answer becomes clear in the passage 65A–67A. In brief, Socrates’ answer is an epistemic one: the ultimate objects of knowledge – the Forms – cannot be grasped by any of the bodily senses (65D–E); so long as our soul is fused with a physical body, pure knowledge will be unattainable (65A–D, 65E–66A); consequently, the ultimate object of our desire – which is pure knowledge – will be attainable only when the soul is fully separated from the body, that is, when we are dead (66D–E). The “purification” and “preparation” which Socrates extols, then, will enable us to get as close as possible to knowledge of the Forms while we are incarnate – a closeness which will, in turn, make us ready for a purer knowledge after death.<sup>45</sup> (It is after death that the philosophers enter the “true Hades” [Ἄιδου ὡς ἀληθῶς, 80D], that is, the realm of the Forms.) The point of purification, then, is to put us in the best position to attain what we most desire, namely wisdom, and to enable us to lead the best kind of life for a human.<sup>46</sup> And this, ultimately, is why the philosopher should be ready and willing to die (since it is only in death that our desire can be truly fulfilled).

As regards the second question, the *Phaedo* identifies a number of specific practices and elements as being constitutive of philosophical purification:

1. The philosopher will take an appropriate attitude toward the *body*. Cognitively, this entails a recognition of the problematic nature of the body (from a philosophical point of view) – the fact that it distracts us from pursuing truth (66B–D) and hinders our access to truth (65A–C). Socrates goes so far as to say that the philosopher will *disdain* or *despise* (ἀτιμάζει, 65D1) the body. Practically, this entails that the philosopher will be unconcerned (to the extent possible) with the physical pleasures of food, drink, sex, clothing, and the like

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makes little sense that we would be ‘preparing’ or ‘training’ ourselves unless there is some end-state *for which* we are preparing or training.)

<sup>45</sup> As with the earlier conjunct (dying *and* death), so too here the message is aimed at both our incarnate (pre-mortem) and discarnate (post-mortem) situation; that is, Socratic purification constitutes both a way of living (here and now) and a future-oriented stage.

<sup>46</sup> In this sense, as Davis (1980, pp. 76–77) well notes, immortality in the *Phaedo* is not (or is not primarily) so much a means of overcoming death as it is a means of overcoming ignorance. (Cf. Ahrens Dorf 1995, p. 41.)

- (64D–65A, 81B–C, 84A–B).<sup>47</sup> For pleasures and pains serve only as “another nail to rivet the soul to the body,” making us think (falsely) that “truth is what the body says it is” (83D).
2. The philosopher will attempt (as much as possible) to *separate* (χωρίζειν) his soul from the body and use “pure thought alone” as a means of engaging in philosophical inquiry (65E–66A, 67C). The goal here is to have the soul “gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body and to dwell by itself as far as it can” (67C–D, 83C–B).
  3. The method of philosophical inquiry involves a *withdrawal from the senses* to the extent possible, given that the senses are unreliable as sources of truth (83A, 65B–E). Instead, the philosopher will rely on *recollection* (ἀνάμνησις) as his incarnate method of grasping the Forms – where that recollection is triggered by ordinary objects that resemble the Forms (74A–D).<sup>48</sup> More broadly – as exemplified by the *Phaedo* itself – the practice of philosophy relies crucially on interpersonal *dialogue*.
  4. The philosopher will cultivate and pursue moral *virtue*, exemplifying such qualities as moderation, courage, justice, and wisdom (68C–69B).
  5. Unlike the misologist – who regards all arguments as unreliable – the philosopher maintains a persistent belief in the existence of a true and sound λόγος (89D–90E). That λόγος may not always be identifiable or manifest; but when it is not, the philosopher will blame *himself* for failing to grasp it, rather than skeptically calling into question the very possibility of discourse. Such *perseverance* in pursuit of truth requires both courage and eagerness (90E).
  6. Finally, the philosopher will maintain an attitude of *modesty*, and will not make false claims to the possession of complete truth. Dialectically, this manifests itself in a concern with truth rather than eristic – a desire to *know* rather than a desire to *win* an argument (91A). In terms of the drama of the *Phaedo*, this attitude is clear in Socrates’ welcoming of criticisms and objections (85B, E, 86D–E). Moreover, Socrates explicitly acknowledges that his arguments in the *Phaedo* are not the final word, and are in need of re-examination (and perhaps rejection) (107B). Such modesty makes sense, given what Socrates

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<sup>47</sup> As Gotshalk (2001, pp. 29–31) puts the point, what Socrates is advocating here is a new mode of *caring* – i. e., re-directing one’s concerns away from the ordinary objects and toward more worthy objects. Such re-direction need not require complete asceticism, however; indeed Socrates’ own conduct in life – having a family, partaking of wine, etc. – suggests that it does not.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Withdrawal’ thus does not mean (and cannot mean) elimination: we *need* the senses as a starting-point (and ongoing prod) for inquiry. But we must come to a new valuation of the senses, rely on them as minimally as possible, and ‘withdraw’ from any prior assumptions about their veridicality.

has said about the Forms: for if full knowledge of the Forms can be attained only *after* death, then no *living* human can possibly claim to possess such knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

These are the main constituents (at least in rough outline) of philosophical purification and preparation – and, I take it, they are what Socrates has in mind when he refers to the “path” (ἀτραπός, 66B4) which the philosopher is supposed to follow.<sup>50</sup> And with this in mind, we can now return to PA and arrive at a better understanding of it. It should be clear by now why Socrates says that we are in a “prison”: namely, insofar as the *soul* is imprisoned in a *body*.<sup>51</sup> Incarnate humans are separated from what they most desire (wisdom), and it is only after death that our prison term can potentially come to an end. (Of course, for non-philosophers not even death represents a time of liberation, as they will continue to be subject to reincarnation.) But the question still remains as to *why*, if death is such a positive end-state, we should not take it upon ourselves to commit suicide and thereby arrive at our goal that much more quickly. Why not escape the prison through our own initiative?

To answer this question, it will be useful to distinguish the different kinds of suicide, or the different possible motives that might lead a person to commit suicide. From Plato’s point of view, most suicides are committed for distinctly *non-philosophical* reasons or motivations, and betray precisely the sort of concern for the body that one is supposed to transcend. A review of the many suicides mentioned in Greek mythological, literary, and historical texts reveals why this is the case.<sup>52</sup> Elise Garrison – who has done extensive work on suicide in classical myth and literature – categorizes these suicides into several main groups, based on their primary motivation: suicide done from (a) *grief*, for instance at the

<sup>49</sup> On this point cf. esp. 85C–D, where Simmias uses the raft analogy to illustrate the need for provisional theses in the face of epistemic limits.

<sup>50</sup> Archer-Hind (1973), pp. 19–20 claims that death itself is the ἀτραπός, but that cannot be right: for death is the *end-goal* of our travels, and not the journey itself. Part of Plato’s point is to contrast the common path (followed by the many) with the philosophical path (Geddes 1885, p. 32); the term ἀτραπός may also suggest something like a ‘short-cut’ that circumvents the highway in favor of a more direct route, but which involves more difficult terrain (Burnet 1911, pp. 35–36). Cf. also the reference to the philosopher’s travels at 82D.

<sup>51</sup> This point is explicitly made at 92A1. Socrates elsewhere invokes prison imagery to make this point: e.g., the goal of the philosophical life is to “free” oneself from the “bonds of the body” (ἐκλυομένη ὡσπερ ἐκ δεσμών ἐκ τοῦ σώματος, 67D1–2; also cf. λύσις at D4, D9); and the impure desires of non-philosophers “imprison” or “bind” them (ἐνδεθῶσιν) to a body (81E2).

<sup>52</sup> The most exhaustive catalogue of ancient textual mentions of suicide – with some 960 (!) entries – is to be found in van Hoof (1990).

death of a loved one (usually a spouse or child) or at being abandoned/spurned by a lover; (b) *shame* or *dishonor*, for instance at being the victim of a rape or failing in some crucial way in a military context; (c) *madness*; (d) *self-sacrifice*, say for the good of a community or a military victory; (e) *fear*; (f) *frustration*; (g) *anger*; and (h) a *loss of political power*.<sup>53</sup> With the exception of suicides that result from madness – where the act is outside of the control of the individual – none of these motives would pass Platonic muster in the *Phaedo*; indeed, they all signal an impure attachment to the bodily and to the physical (in contrast to the demands of philosophical purification, as outlined earlier). For instance, grief at the death of a loved one would be misplaced for Socrates, given that death is potentially a *good* thing for the individual. Likewise, although Socrates in the dialogues recognizes an appropriate place for emotions like anger, shame, and frustration, committing suicide *because of* such an emotion would most likely indicate a misplaced sense of what should (and should not) be at the center of one's life.<sup>54</sup> To commit suicide from these sorts of motives, then, would *not* enable a person to escape the “prison” of incarnate life at all; to the extent that one has failed to adequately practice philosophical purification – as evidenced by these strong passions – one will only be subject to further reincarnation (83C–E).

So much then for the ‘ordinary’ or ‘non-philosophical’ kinds of suicide. But could there be such a thing as a ‘philosophical suicide’, and if so, why should PA condemn it? Suppose that someone (perhaps a reader of the *Phaedo*) has followed Socrates’ advice and worked strenuously over the course of a number of years to achieve a separation from bodily concerns and a rigorous engagement with philosophical dialectic/inquiry. Surely there will come a point where one feels sufficiently “prepared” and “purified” for the final “mystery”, such that no additional years of training could be beneficial. If so, why not exit life through

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<sup>53</sup> See Garrison (2000) and Garrison (1995). I am simplifying her schema here, as she categorizes the motivations based on gender.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, Pantites (a Spartan) is reported to have hung himself after not receiving an appropriate honor for his role in a battle (Herodotus VII.232); and Timanthes (a great athlete) is said to have burned himself to death after being unable to draw a great bow (Pausanias VI.8.4). In both cases, there seems to be a misplaced or excessive sense of honor (corresponding to what the *Republic* would identify as an honor-loving soul). (On the Greek sense of honor in relation to suicide cf. Walcot 1986, in addition to Garrison 2000 and Garrison 1995.) We may also note here Socrates’ critique of *violent* or *excessive* (σφόδρα) pleasures, pains, and passions at 83B–C, and I suspect that most of the emotions described by Garrison would fall into that category.

one's own initiative, so as to arrive at that disembodied state in which one can finally grasp the Forms?<sup>55</sup>

But Socrates (in PA) would condemn even a philosophically-motivated suicide. To understand why, we must attend more carefully to the nature of our imprisonment. The 'prison' in question is that of incarnate and earthly existence. And we must keep in mind the reason *why* we are imprisoned in the first place: namely, because we have been *re-born*, as a result of some *prior* misdeeds and/or intellectual failings.<sup>56</sup> We are imprisoned, in other words, *because we have imprisoned ourselves*. Now everyone would agree that, all other things being equal, it would be better to be free than imprisoned. The question then becomes one of strategy: what is the best way of ending one's sentence? Socrates' answer is that which I outlined above, namely, the practice of philosophical preparation and purification. Only those who adequately prepare themselves in this way are able to escape from the repeated cycle of reincarnation, and enter the company of the divine (81A, 82B–C, 114C). Only those who philosophize 'rightly', that is, will avoid returning to prison.

We are now (finally) in a position to understand why PA urges us *not* to attempt to run away or escape on our own (via suicide), even if we are motivated by philosophical considerations. To wit: suicide is ultimately inconsistent with philosophical purification. For one thing, suicide represents a *premature termination* of the process of purification, such that we risk departing life *without* having adequately prepared ourselves. Recall that the philosophical life (as Socrates envisions it) requires both *perseverance* in the face of the difficulties of inquiry, as well as a recognition of the *provisionality* of all arguments and claims. Given that earthly existence involves a mediated access to Forms – via recollection – no philosopher can ever claim to have the 'final' word or 'complete' knowledge; rather, the lover of wisdom is aware that his beliefs are always revisable, and that a fuller level of understanding is always possible. He is, like the hunter, always on the "track" of his prey (66A) – in this case, wisdom – though unlike the hunter, he recognizes that the search (while incarnate) has no end. Philosophical purifica-

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55 Again, this is not a mere academic question, as at least one individual in antiquity is reported to have committed suicide after reading the *Phaedo* (see n. 12 above). Other potential examples of "philosophical suicide" include those of Empedocles and Pythagoras: the former supposedly leapt into a volcano in order to prove his divinity (DL VIII.69 ff.), while the latter supposedly starved himself to death because he did not wish to live any longer (DL VIII.40).

56 The whole point of the so-called Cyclical Argument (70C–72E) is that living things come into being *from* the dead – i. e., our discarnate souls existed *prior* to our births. The nature of discarnate existence – between one's incarnations – is expounded upon in the concluding myth of the *Phaedo*. Reincarnation is further discussed in 81E ff.

tion or preparation is thus an *ongoing* process, and must continue for as long as we are able (hence the need for perseverance).<sup>57</sup> This is exemplified in Socrates himself, who philosophizes (and recognizes his limits) right until the very end. Suicide deprives us of additional opportunities to engage in this process – opportunities which, even if they do not yield a ‘final’ answer, might nonetheless help to make us *better*.<sup>58</sup> The one who commits suicide cannot truly be sure that he has done *all* that he could in life to separate the soul and withdraw from the senses; – consequently, he cannot know whether his death will lead to freedom or yet another prison term.

Indeed, the philosopher who commits suicide is assuming – mistakenly – that earthly purification does in fact admit an upper limit or end-point, and that he has reached it. Such a person is assuming, in other words, that there is no more work to be done, and that he is fully ‘ready’ for the next stage. This attitude betrays a real *presumptuousness* that Socrates would find highly problematic.<sup>59</sup> To think that one could ever be ‘done’ with the work of philosophy is to misunderstand what philosophy is in the first place, and what the nature of incarnate humans is; it is to think in terms of the acquisition of wisdom rather than the love (and perpetual pursuit) of it. On what grounds could anyone confidently rule out the possibility of future inquiry promoting further epistemic and moral growth? Yet philosophical suicide entails just such misplaced confidence. Moreover, even if (*per impossibile*) purification *did* admit of an end-state, how could anyone be in a position to *know* that he had reached it? There is a real problem of self-knowledge here that the would-be suicide is all too glibly eliding.<sup>60</sup> Here again, what is called for is epistemic modesty, of the sort that Socrates displays in the *Phaedo*.<sup>61</sup> Finally, how could a person ever be fully sure of what his *motives* are in committing suicide? It is flattering to think that one is acting from a desire for knowledge or a desire to join the gods – but isn’t it equally possible that one is acting (at

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57 Friedländer (1969, p. 41) puts the point well: “Human existence finds its completion in death, as inescapable as it is mysterious. And for this same reason, human existence lacks completion if an arbitrary end is put to life. Thus, from death we are directed back to life that faces toward death.” (Also cf. Burger 1984, p. 38, who wonders whether there might be a sense in which philosophers *regret* their death, insofar as it is the moment that puts an end to their lifelong pursuits.)

58 I am inspired here by Xenophanes: “By no means did the gods reveal all things to mortals from the beginning, but in time, by searching, they discover better” (DK21B18, translation, slightly modified, by McKirahan 2010).

59 On this point (and in what follows) I am indebted to Novak (1975), pp. 17–18.

60 No soul can fully know itself – a point that Plato explores in other dialogues (most notably the *Alcibiades I*).

61 See n. 9 above.

least in part) from boredom, impatience, or some other kind of mental or physical pain? If so, then one is not so ‘separated’ from the body as one thought, and has not traveled quite far enough on the road of virtue.

In short, suicide is hardly a cure for our imprisonment, but a recipe for its continuation. Ultimately, the best thing for humans is not to attempt escape on our own, but to do our time with ‘good behavior,’ by way of an ongoing engagement with the life of philosophy.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, “philosophical suicide” is revealed to be an oxymoron and a contradiction. We can now better appreciate why Socrates says that PA is wrought “in the language of the mysteries” (62B), and why he refers to the mysteries later in the *Phaedo*.<sup>63</sup> Historically, those who participated in the mystery cults saw themselves as set apart from the *hoi polloi*; they engaged in a distinctive set of rituals and initiations so as to arrive at a privileged end-state (involving special knowledge, ecstasy, and/or a promise of a better afterlife). For Plato, likewise, the philosophical life involves a distinctive path of preparation and purification, which if followed conscientiously allows the individual to arrive at a privileged – though not perfect or complete – perspective and level of understanding, as well as eventual release from the prison. In the end, only the philosophers (as opposed to the Bacchantes or Orphics or participants at Eleusis) are the practitioners of the *true* mysteries, for only they are oriented toward the Forms (as opposed to Dionysus or Demeter or Orpheus).<sup>64</sup> By couching PA in terms of the mysteries, then, Plato is signaling that a proper understanding of suicide (and its wrongness) requires us to take a broader look at the life that it forecloses – a life that, at its best, indeed involves a certain kind of initiation.

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Olympiodorus (in Westerink 1976, p. 34), who observes that suicide is not a release but a flight.

<sup>63</sup> Most notably, at 69C–D. With these two passages (62B and 69C–D), Plato is thus using the mysteries as an “encompassing frame” for the entire discussion of purification (Gotshalk 2001, pp. 25–27).

<sup>64</sup> A point that Socrates makes explicit at 69C–D, when he identifies the true Bacchantes with “those who have practiced philosophy in the right way.” I take it, then, that Plato is not being ironic in his references to the mysteries, nor is he making a mundane historical point about the origin of the prohibition on suicide. Instead, Plato is appropriating the mantle of authority that often surrounded the mystic cults and claiming it for philosophy instead. The philosopher thus becomes a special (and truer) kind of ‘seer’ or ‘mystic’ (White 1989, pp. 42–43).



## The Prison Argument in relation to other arguments against suicide

If my interpretation of PA is correct, then what we have in the *Phaedo* is an argument against suicide that is quite distinct from other arguments that occur later in the history of philosophy. For instance, Plato does not appeal – as later theists do – to the idea that suicide is contrary to nature or natural law, or that life is a gift from God (to whom we owe gratitude), or that we are God’s property, or that suicide is contrary to God’s command.<sup>65</sup> Nor does Plato appeal – as later non-theistic arguments do – to the idea that life is intrinsically precious or valuable, or that suicide prevents us from fulfilling certain social roles or responsibilities, or that we owe a debt to society at large.<sup>66</sup> Still less is there any hint in the *Phaedo* of anything resembling the later arguments from Kant and Camus.<sup>67</sup> It is remarkable that the distinctness of PA has not been noted previously (regardless of what one thinks of its soundness as an actual argument).

One aspect of the uniqueness of PA deserves underscoring: the fact that the argument is not grounded in any considerations concerning justice or obligations to others. Unlike Aristotle – who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (V.11) regards suicide as an injustice committed against the city – Socrates in the *Phaedo* makes no mention of any harm being done by suicide against one’s friends, family, or city.<sup>68</sup> The focus, rather, is on the harm that suicide does to *oneself*, in the form of a prematurely terminated engagement in the life of philosophy, and the consequent diminishing of one’s happiness both during life and after death.<sup>69</sup> Ironically

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**65** For discussion of these and other arguments, see Cholbi (2011, pp. 40–53). Aquinas (*Summa* 2a-2ae, Q64, Art. 5) appeals to the natural law and gift arguments, while Augustine (*City of God* I.20) argues that suicide contradicts God’s commandment “Thou shall not kill.” In the *Phaedo*, we find the property argument represented in GA.

**66** Again, these arguments are discussed in detail in Cholbi (2011), pp. 53–64.

**67** For Kant (*Lectures on Ethics*), suicide violates a duty that one has to oneself, and entails treating oneself as a mere thing (and not a rational agent). For Camus (*Myth of Sisyphus*), suicide represents a weak acquiescence to an absurd universe – a rushing towards our inevitable fate (death) rather than a revolting against it.

**68** Cf. Novak (1975), pp. 19, 24–26, 35, suggesting that the absence of concern with society in the *Phaedo* is due to the fact that Socrates is situated in an imperfect *polis*; by contrast, in the *Laws* – where there is more concern shown for the impact of suicide on society – we have a sketch of the sort of *polis* that ought to exist (but does not yet exist).

**69** We see this emphasis on self-interest (or self-development) throughout the *Phaedo*, with a particularly revealing passage at 82B–C. Socrates says that “No one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs from life, no one but the lover of learning. It is *for this reason* (τούτων ἕνεκα)...that those who practice philos-

enough – given that the entire reason for Socrates’ execution in the *Phaedo* is the judgment of a court – the *Phaedo* is largely an apolitical text, or at least holds its main discussion on an apolitical plane. Indeed, the fact that there are only a few brief references (mostly made in passing) to civic matters in the *Phaedo* suggests that Socrates is depreciating the entire realm of the political in the dialogue.<sup>70</sup> He does say that the philosopher will possess all of the cardinal virtues, but whereas he gives an account of why the philosopher will be both temperate and courageous (68C–69A), he offers no comparable account of why the philosopher will be just.<sup>71</sup> Certainly there is no suggestion that one who would commit suicide is doing anything *unjust*.<sup>72</sup>

The apolitical tenor of PA is mirrored in Socrates’ conduct throughout the *Phaedo*, even as his companions make several explicit attempts to root him more

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ophy in the right way keep away from all bodily pleasures, master them, and do not surrender themselves to them” (italics mine). Passages such as these do give an initial impression that virtue and the philosophical life are but means to an end (*viz.*, a better afterlife for oneself). Of course that is not Plato’s view of the matter, but one would need dialogues other than the *Phaedo* to see why. (I agree with Bostock 1986, pp. 34–35 that, considered just by itself, the *Phaedo* does seem to treat self-interest as the basis of morality.)

70 Stern (1993), p. 36. Apart from the dramatic frame (where mention is made of The Eleven [59E] and the hemlock-bearer [63D–E, 116Bff.]), I find only three brief references to civic matters: at 66C Socrates says that all war is the result of a desire for wealth and the needs of the body, at 90C he mentions the sophists in connection with the vice of misology, and at 113E–114B he relegates those who have committed the worst crimes (like murder) to an eternity in Tartarus in the afterlife. This suggests that the demands of the *polis* simply are not Plato’s concern in the *Phaedo*.

71 He mentions justice in two passages (69B3, C2, 82A3, B2) and claims that the philosopher will in fact be just, but he does not explain why this is so. Needless to say, it remains a vexing problem in the *Phaedo* (which I will not attempt to address here) whether the other-worldly-minded philosopher would have any incentive to care about others’ concerns or societal obligations.

72 Still less is there anything to support the idea (put forward by Dorter 1982, pp. 25–26) that suicide violates our obligation to the cosmos as a whole. Dorter takes his cue from the reference to the “good and binding” force or cause that holds all things together (99C), in the manner of some cosmic *Nous*; Dorter then claims that, since such providence exists, suicide would be a violation of what is best for the whole cosmos, as human life itself is necessary for the good of the whole. (Olympiodorus in Westerink 1976, p. 40 also interprets PA in terms of divine providence.) But while these sorts of claims might fit the *Timaeus* (and later thinkers such as Augustine), I find no evidence for them in the *Phaedo*: though Socrates does indeed allude to the possibility of a divine *Nous*, he makes no use of it in the context of PA. Moreover, if divine providence *were* the basis of the prohibition against suicide, that would raise some serious problems: how indeed *could* any human action (including suicide) possibly contravene the divine scheme of what is best? (Necessarily, as Gallop 1975, pp. 84–85 notes, the time of a person’s death would always be the ‘right’ time.) If suicide really were contrary to the good of the whole cosmos, then it would not even have been an option in the first place.

firmly in his relationships with others. At 63B–C, for instance – after Cebes has expressed his puzzlement at Socrates’ claim that philosophers should be ready and willing to die – Simmias observes that Socrates seems to be utterly unconcerned with his impending death, and in particular is bearing the thought of leaving his friends *so lightly* (οὐτω ῥαδίως). Implicit here is a challenge to Socrates to explain *why* (or at least *how*) he has this seemingly cavalier attitude toward his friends. But Socrates never in fact responds to this challenge: the “defense” that he subsequently offers (the account of philosophical purification and the afterlife) helps to explain his attitude of calm in the face of death, but it does not explain why there should not be even a tinge of regret at the prospect of leaving his loved ones.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates expresses only indifference and unconcern when Crito asks what kind of burial he would like (115C–E). He may be offering sound philosophical advice – that one’s true self is in the soul, and not the corpse – but he is also disregarding the social significance of funerals and burials.

Yet even if PA itself focuses primarily on the individual, there is nothing in the argument that necessarily precludes taking others’ interests into account, or developing further (and complementary) grounds for the immorality of suicide. In fact we can readily see why – given the terms of discussion that Socrates has laid out – refraining from suicide *would* be good for others and for one’s city: the longer one remains in life, the longer one has a chance to engage in philosophy *in a community with others*. Socrates may not talk *about* that community in the *Phaedo*, but the drama of the dialogue certainly puts it on display for us, as we witness a tight-knit group of men conversing on a very solemn day.<sup>74</sup> Philosophy of course would not (and could not) exist without just such a community, if for no other reason than that dialogue is vital to the philosophical method.

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<sup>73</sup> Socrates does say that, after death, he hopes to join the company of the gods, as well as men who are *better than men are here* (i. e., better than the men on earth, 63B). But if this is Socrates’ response to Simmias’ challenge, then it is an utterly condescending one, and seems to sidestep the main issue – one’s obligations to others – rather than deal with it head-on (cf. Rowe 1993, p. 132). As Ahrens Dorf (1995) notes, Socrates “wishes to die because he wishes to belong to [a community] which is better than his earthly community” (p. 35), which again raises the question of “whether it is just for the philosopher to disregard his duties to others in order to attain the greatest goods for himself” (p. 39). Must the philosopher ultimately ‘separate’ himself from fellow humans beings in much the same way that he separates himself from his body? *The Phaedo* does not really address this question, but one would certainly be forgiven for thinking that the dialogue suggests an affirmative answer.

<sup>74</sup> And not just conversing: Socrates strokes Phaedo’s hair (89B), and Socrates’ companions all burst into tears at the end (117C–D).

The continued living (and not suicide) of its members is thus essential. And even if the philosophical community is marginalized or mocked within the broader *polis*, that *polis* is still better off because of its presence. I regard PA, then, as one way of considering the issue of suicide in Platonic terms, but one is open (at least in principle) to accommodate the more civic-minded dialogues such as the *Republic*.

## Conclusion and unanswered questions

My aim in this article has been to show that the *Phaedo* offers us a powerful and interesting (and historically unique) argument against suicide. That argument is not to be found in GA, but rather in PA, whose meaning can best be grasped in light of the *Phaedo*'s broader discussion of the soul, philosophy, and purification. Of course the *Phaedo* also leaves us with a number of unanswered questions, and it neglects some issues that have become important in contemporary discussions of suicide. For instance, in the contemporary literature the ethics of suicide *prevention* is coming under greater scrutiny: what obligations (if any) does a person have to prevent *others* from committing suicide? What sorts of methods are ethically permissible in preventing others from committing suicide?<sup>75</sup> The *Phaedo* does not address this issue at all, which is perhaps unsurprising given the dialogue's overall lack of interest in one's obligations to others. (It may be that Crito – in the dialogue that bears his name – feels an obligation to help his friend Socrates escape from prison, but that is different from a felt obligation to prevent suicide in general; and in any case Crito's reasons are promptly rejected by Socrates.)

It is also unclear what the *scope* of the *Phaedo*'s prohibition on suicide is meant to be: does Socrates express disapproval of *all* suicides, or only some? Scholarly opinion on this question is divided.<sup>76</sup> At a minimum, we can say that Socrates recognizes at least *one* kind of suicide as ethically permissible, namely (as he says) *when a god indicates some necessity to do so* (πρὶν ἀνάγκην τινὰ θεὸς ἐπιπέμψῃ, 62C7), as in the present case (the state-mandated drinking of the hem-

<sup>75</sup> See Cholbi (2011), pp. 115–138.

<sup>76</sup> Bluck (1955, p. 152) considers the prohibition on suicide to be absolute, whereas Gallop (1975, p. 85), Tate (1956, p. 222), and Rist (1969, p. 235) believe that it admits of exceptions. Olympiodorus (in Westerink 1976, p. 48) suggests that the ἴσως (“perhaps”) in 61C9 indicates that Plato is opening the door for possible exceptions.

lock).<sup>77</sup> Of course this does raise some serious questions, such as how we can *know* when such “necessity” exists or when the god has given the relevant permission.<sup>78</sup> But Socrates clearly sees his own present actions as falling outside of the scope of PA.

Could there be other situations where suicide is acceptable, beyond divine necessity or a legal mandate? The case which comes most readily to mind – at least in contemporary discussions of suicide – is that which involves some kind of chronic or fatal medical condition, especially when it involves incurable pain or suffering. It seems that physician-assisted suicide (as it is now called) did sometimes occur in the ancient world, although we know little about it as the Greeks do not discuss the issue.<sup>79</sup> In other dialogues Plato does at least seem to open the door to the permissibility of suicide in such cases.<sup>80</sup> Just on the basis of the *Phaedo*, however, it is less clear whether medically-related suicide would be permissible. At least when it comes to a court-ordered self-killing (such as in Socrates’ situation), a case could be made that failing to abide by the law would itself be contradictory to a life of virtue (and hence contradictory to a life of purification); but it is much harder to apply the considerations of PA to a medically-related suicide. Granted that physical pains and diseases are one of the myriad ways in which our bodies distract us from pursuing the truth and prevent us from attaining an accurate assessment of reality (66B–C, 83B–D), yet it is precisely for this reason that the *Phaedo* would perhaps *resist* the idea of killing oneself in situations of severe illness. Pain and pleasure are always to be found conjoined, says Socrates (60B–C); and the experience of a severe pain will tend to make us believe

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<sup>77</sup> There has been much debate in the literature as to whether Socrates’ actions – the drinking of the hemlock – do in fact constitute a “suicide”. (For discussion, see Duff 1982, Frey 1978, Lesser 1980, Smith 1980, and Walton 1980.). This is ultimately a definitional or conceptual question, and one which I will not address here. For my purposes, what is relevant is that *Socrates himself* – that is, Plato’s character in the *Phaedo* – considers his actions to amount to “killing oneself” (i. e., committing suicide [there being no word for suicide in Greek]). (Cf. Bostock 1986, p. 17 and Gallop 1975, p. 85.) Whether he was right to regard his actions thusly is another question.

<sup>78</sup> Eckstein (1981), pp. 45–46.

<sup>79</sup> Discussion can be found in Cooper (1989), p. 11–14 and Gourevitch (1969). Some medical texts prohibit physician-assisted suicide – though as Gourevitch notes, that is likely an indication that the practice was somewhat common (else there would not have been a need for a prohibition).

<sup>80</sup> In the *Laws*, “excruciating and unavoidable misfortune” – which I take to refer to (or at least include) physical pain – is given as one of three reasons for an acceptable suicide (873c). In a notorious passage in the *Republic*, Socrates says that those who are chronically ill and cannot be cured should not be treated with medicine and should be allowed to die on their own (407c–408b, 41a). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates says that life with a diseased body does not profit or benefit us (505a).

– falsely – that the cause of the pain is something clear (83c). Severe illness would thus seem to be a quintessential time when we cannot fully trust our judgments, raising the strong possibility that we make a hasty or ill-formed judgment. This leaves us in a position of being uncertain as to whether our imagined action (committing suicide) will in fact lead to our desired outcome (the *avoidance* of future pain) – much in the same way that a person contemplating “philosophical suicide” cannot be certain as to whether he is in fact prepared for the post-mortem liberation that he seeks. So suicide in a case of severe illness is somewhat problematized in the framework of the *Phaedo*, even if other dialogues are more open to it.

But whether the *Phaedo* admits additional exceptions – beyond the necessity now confronting Socrates – the overall message of PA is clear: suicide is contrary to the philosophical life to which we are called, and ultimately it prevents the soul from attaining its deepest desires. This is a powerful message, even if one ultimately disagrees with it. Now as I noted at the outset of this article, we should not regard PA as representing Plato’s ‘final’ or ‘complete’ word on the matter, since no human – Plato and Socrates included – can have the totalizing perspective of the gods. There is room for further discussion and debate regarding suicide, and Socrates reminds us shortly before taking the hemlock that all of the fundamental assumptions and claims of the *Phaedo* require re-examination (107b). At the very least, though, PA puts us on notice against a facile reading of the *Phaedo* (à la Cleombrotus), it encourages us to dig deeper and challenges us to live the philosophical life before hastily throwing it away.

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