

Augustine on Taking One's Own Life: Suicide and Martyrdom

The Platonic Background to the Discussion

Plato:

- The philosophical life requires courage and a willingness to practice dying to oneself so as to arrive at better things (see *Phaedo* 64A). Nonetheless, although one should be ready and willing to die for the good, one is not permitted to take one's own life unless compelled to do so by unavoidable external causes:
 - “But perhaps it will seem strange to you that this alone of all laws is without exception, and it never happens to mankind, as in other matters, that only at some times and for some persons it is better to die than to live; and it will perhaps seem strange to you that these human beings for whom it is better to die cannot without impiety do good to themselves, but must wait for some other benefactor” (*Phaedo* 62a).
 - We have been placed in an earthly body by divine providence in accordance with a higher purpose and therefore must not strive to exit this body/life prematurely (i.e. prior to the death/dissolution of the body).
 - If God sends some necessity upon one that clearly and unavoidably constrains them to end their life, this alone can justify the ending of one's own life
- In *Laws* 873C, Plato further condemns those who take their own life apart from any unavoidable external constraint:
 - “Now he that slays the person who is, as men say, nearest and dearest of all, --what penalty shall he suffer? I mean the man that slays himself—violently robbing himself of his Fate-given share of life, when this is not legally ordered by the state, and when he is not compelled to it by the occurrence of some intolerable and inevitable misfortune, nor by falling into some disgrace that is beyond remedy or endurance—but merely inflicting upon himself this iniquitous penalty owing to sloth and unmanly cowardice...”
 - This leads to exclusion from burial in proximity to others (cf. Elias [in Sorabji, p. 359] on the Roman practice of mutilating the feet of those who had committed suicide before burying them and the idea there of the cursing of the ground).
 - In spite of all this, note that loss of honor (public disgrace) and inevitable misfortune, as well as the command of the state, can in some manner potentially justify, require or excuse suicide.
 - The nature, limits and rationality of suicide were also discussed in the classical period in works of tragedy; see e.g. Euripides *Hercules furens* 1347 +1246.
 - Note also that in *Laws* 854C Plato suggests that a person who cannot cure himself of vice may find it to be more noble to take his own life than to continue to live.
- The discussions of the **later Neoplatonists** (including Augustine) regarding suicide take a similar view (see the texts collected in Richard Sorabji (ed.), *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200-600 A.D.: A Sourcebook. Volume 1: Psychology*, London: Duckworth, 2004, pp. 350-360, which also contains a short bibliography).

- See e.g., Olympiodorus *Lecture 1 on Phaedo* §§7-9 on pp. 357-358. This expounds the Platonic viewpoint and also lists five reasons when the Stoic philosophers argued that suicide was justified, since the persistence of physical life is itself neither good nor bad (*adiaphoron*) and other considerations (i.e. what virtue requires) could therefore make it fitting and appropriate to end one's own life. (Plotinus, in a lost treatise that discussed suicide, had previously mentioned five similar Stoic justifications for suicide.)
 - Following Plotinus, it was argued that one's present time in an earthly body gave one opportunities for purification, i.e. breaking the hold that disordered bodily emotions and desires (anger, lust, etc.) have on us.
 - In this case, the pressures we feel upon us are not wholly to be rejected as alien, improper and unnecessary, because, when approached rightly, they can be a catalyst for change.
 - Furthermore, when one acts violently to separate the body from the soul, this requires a violence of primal physical emotion (fear, anxiety, hatred) which stains, defiles and disorders the soul (by a hasty search for a lesser pleasure, overturning one's previous progress toward better things and leaving the soul fettered to a worse state).

Stoic Philosophy of the Roman Imperial Period:

Reason gives us certain duties which are our proper functions (i.e. care for our bodies and obligations toward others, obligations rooted in the rational order of the universe which increase in intensity when they involve our family and our fellow-countrymen)

- Cf. Epictetus 3.2.4: "For I ought not to be unfeeling like a statue, but should preserve my relations both natural and acquired as a pious person, a son, a brother, a father, a citizen"
- This includes an inborn sense of the need for self-care and rational self-preservation
 - Cf. Epictetus 4.11.11: You should brush your teeth "in order that you may be a human being, and not a beast or a pig"; you should likewise think that your body has been entrusted to you like a horse; wash it, rub it down, make it so that nobody will turn his back on you or move aside" (4.11.17).
 - Thus one should feed the body when it is hungry and care for it when it is sick.
 - Nonetheless, the rational person will sometimes need to act with regard for one's proper character (*prosopon*) in a way that results in one's death (accepting fatal illness, speaking out for the good in spite of threats made against one's life by persons with the power to carry out this threat), though the wise man is able to "await death well and nobly" (3.10.13) because he understands his place within the broader scheme of things (2.5.25-26) which is guided by providence and correspondingly fulfills his duties (2.10.5-6).
 - Cf. Enchiridion 17: "Remember that you are an actor in a play, the nature of which is what the Playwright wants; if He wishes it to be short, it is short; if long, it is long; if He wishes you to play the part of a beggar, act even this role adroitly; and so if your role be that of a cripple, an

official, or a private man. For this is your task, to play the character (*prosopon*) given to you well; but the selection of the role is Another's.

- Human excellence therefore lies not in maximizing opportunities for bodily comfort or the extension of physical life, but rather in making it "your glory, or an opportunity for you to show by deed what sort of person a man is who follows the will of nature" (3.20.13)

For a Stoic, suicide is not only appropriate but necessary when required to

- 1) fulfill an obligation to the state (being willing to die because one is concerned to benefit one's country, friends, kin, community, etc.);
- 2) avoid vice when one is
 - a. not free to act as one will
 - i. When positive action is (or soon will) no longer be in our power, then it is reasonable to commit suicide.
 1. Cf. Clement of Alexandria (SVF 3.765): Suicide is appropriate when one has lost all hope of action (*elpis tes praxeos*).
 - b. strong pressure is being or will be brought to bear to compel one to act contrary to virtue;
 - i. Cf. Epictetus 4.1.165: "Such a man is not to be saved by any shameful means; he is saved by dying, and not by running away."
 - 3) avoid a foreseeable loss of rational control over one's life (e.g. through senility or insanity). Cf. Seneca *Ep.* 58.35: "I won't abandon old age if it preserves me whole for myself, or at least whole in the better part; but if it starts to shatter my mind and tear down its parts, if it does not leave me life, but mere breath, I will sally forth from the decrepit and tottering building."
 - a. Cf. Epictetus 3.13.14: "When God does not provide the necessities, he signals the retreat"; 1.19.16: "Men, wait upon God. Whenever he gives the sign, then you are free to return to him. But for now be content to remain in the place where he stationed you."
 - b. Cf. Cicero *De finibus* 3.60: "When one's circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is befitting to remain alive; when one possesses or sees in prospect a majority of contrary things, it is befitting to depart from life
 - i. Selection of preferred indifferents, since virtue is the only good and the wise person already has that
 - c. Thus, "they [sc. the Stoics] say that the wise man will commit a well-reasoned suicide both on behalf of his country and on behalf of his friends, and *if he falls victim to unduly severe pain or mutilation or incurable illness* (Diogenes Laertius VII.30)
 - d. While the Stoic cannot control physical and mental deterioration associated with the decline of the body, he or she can control how he or she thinks about it, which allows for appropriate action to be taken.
 - e. Note that for Epictetus, one's rational choice (*proairesis*) is, in some sense one's very self, so if one's capacity for and access to rational choice is increasingly lost, so is the self, since what makes one a self is the reasoned pursuit of the good/virtue (excellence).

- i. Note that in this model the body is treated as
 1. external to the self (since it is not within one's power to keep it from decline, loss and externally imposed misfortunes) and
 2. a possible source of impediments to the realization of the self and its goals.

Augustine's Account of Suicide

Augustine, like Paul, made a sharp break with the Greco-Roman tradition (particularly Stoic moral philosophy of the Roman imperial period) which recognized certain situations in which the decision to commit suicide would be appropriate, good and necessary; see Arthur J. Droge, "*Mori lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide*," *Novum Testamentum* 30:3 (1988), pp. 263-286, which offers an interesting discussion of Phil. 1:21-26 within the context of ancient discussions of suicide.

Augustine's Principal Arguments against Suicide

(1) We have a duty of self-care arising from natural inclination (i.e. a rightly ordered form of basic self-love).

(2) We have a debt of love that we owe to others. (We are not our own, but belong to God and have certain duties toward others, which are in a sense extensions of the love/care one owes to oneself, as well as being informed by God's own greater love for the neighbor.)

(a) In this light must we understand the command, "Thou shalt not kill" (the sixth commandment): "For it is unlawful to take the law into our own hands, and slay even a guilty person, whose death no public sentence has warranted, then certainly he who kills himself is a homicide, and so much guiltier of his own death, as he was more innocent of that offence for which he doomed himself to die" (*City of God*).

(b) To take one's own life into one's hands and act precipitously by committing suicide is to look away from God (a final and definitive refusal of trust in God and a denial of trust in his providence, by the very nature of the act itself excluding any subsequent repentance/penance).

(i) The decision to commit suicide thus

- is based upon an unwillingness to endure suffering (as Job and others faithful to God did) (*City of God* 1.24) and
- involves a kind of despair that (as in the case of Judas) cannot trust God (*City of God* 1.17);

(ii) Because "without faith it is impossible to please" God, suicide

- leads one away from the good one seeks: "No man should put an end to this life to obtain that better life we look for after death, for those who die by their own hand have no better life after death" (*City of God*) and
- excludes the possibility of repentance through the death of the sinner (*City of God* 1.25).

(c) In contemplating the case of Christian women, now commended by the Church as martyrs, who had committed suicide to avoid being raped (e.g. St. Pelagia, commended by Ambrose; cf.

also the commendations of this type of act by Jerome and Chrysostom), Augustine affirms that one “who knows it is unlawful to kill himself, may nevertheless do so if he is ordered by him whose commands we may not neglect. Only let him be very sure that the divine command has been signified “ (*City of God*).

The Donatist threat of suicide as martyrdom

- Gaudentius’ two letters to Dulcitius and Augustine’s reply
 - precipitous and avoidable death is condemnable suicide through obstinacy (rooted in pride and lack of charity), rather than commendable martyrdom
 - the death of the intransigent by the action of the state may be necessary to restore justice and ultimately create the possibility of religious freedom for others

Martyrdom distinguished from suicide by Augustine

- (1) Martyrdom is imposed upon one because of one’s refusal, while under arrest, to deny the faith.
- (2) Suicide is freely chosen because of a passionate, somewhat theatrical attraction to voluntary death (for example, one is not to offer oneself up to the authorities).
 - (a) This distinction between
 - martyrdom (supernatural courage in confessing the faith, where this would unavoidably lead to death) and
 - suicide (the impulsive ending of one’s life to escape from a supposedly unbearable or meaningless suffering)is found already in early Christian accounts of martyrdom and Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 4.17.1, but is used by Augustine against the Donatists, claiming that their martyrs were really nothing more than suicides (*Jo. ev. tr.* 11.15).
 - (b) One further contribution of Augustine is his equation of suicide with self-murder and therefore falls under the prohibition against murder in Ex. 20:13.
 - This identification of suicide with self-murder was approved by later Latin theologians (including Aquinas) and the Reformers and only began to be questioned in the seventeenth century with the appearance of John Donne’s treatise on suicide *Biathanatos* (composed in 1608 but only published in 1647, sixteen years after the author’s death).

Does Augustine’s account address only one type of suicide (a certain type of planned rational motivation; see e.g. Swinney, *Through the Dark Woods*, pp. 68-69) rather than the disintegration of rationality/personality commonly involved in the suicide of the severely depressed (see e.g. Greene-McCreight, *Darkness is My Only Companion*, pp. 45-46), in which moral responsibility may also be diminished or lost?