Better Off Dead: Suicide in Plato's Philosophy

Anna Christensen

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

Christensen, Anna, "Better Off Dead: Suicide in Plato's Philosophy" (2017). Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 1095.
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1095

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Sciences at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
Better Off Dead: Suicide in Plato’s Philosophy

by

Anna Christensen

A dissertation presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2017
St. Louis, Missouri
# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations ........................................................................................................ iv
List of Tables ...................................................................................................................... v
List of Abbreviations ......................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................. viii
Abstract ............................................................................................................................ ix
Preface .................................................................................................................................. x
Note to Readers ................................................................................................................... xvii

Chapter 1: As the God Leads: The Ethics of Platonic Suicide ........................................... 2
  1.1 The Question .................................................................................................................. 2
  1.2 The *Phaedo’s* Religious Prohibition ............................................................................ 4
  1.3 The *Laws’* Legal Prohibition ..................................................................................... 8
  1.4 The Consistent Grounds for Prohibiting Suicide ......................................................... 11
     1.4.1 Objection 1 ............................................................................................................. 17
     1.4.2 Objection 2 ............................................................................................................. 20
  1.5 The Consistent Exceptions ......................................................................................... 22
  1.6 Socrates’ Suicide ......................................................................................................... 25
  1.7 Response to Objections ............................................................................................. 28

Chapter 2: The Wisest Death: Wisdom and Suicide in Platonic Ethics .......................... 34
  2.1 The Question ................................................................................................................ 34
  2.2 *Eudaimonia* ............................................................................................................... 35
  2.3 Is Plato’s Account Too Permissive? .......................................................................... 38
     2.3.1 Objection 1 .......................................................................................................... 44
     2.3.2 Objection 2 .......................................................................................................... 46
     2.3.3 Objection 3 .......................................................................................................... 46
  2.4 Is Plato’s Account Too Exclusive? ............................................................................. 47
     2.4.1 A First Stab ........................................................................................................... 49
     2.4.2 Another Response ................................................................................................. 52
  2.5 How Socrates’ Suicide Was Wise .............................................................................. 56
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1</td>
<td>The <em>Phaedo</em>’s Response</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2</td>
<td>The <em>Crito</em>’s Response</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Final Thoughts</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Suicidal Philosopher: Plato’s Socrates</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>The Question of Responsibility</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1</td>
<td>The Argument for the City’s Responsibility</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>Previous Arguments for Socrates’ Responsibility</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3</td>
<td>The Platonic Argument for Socrates’ Responsibility</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.4</td>
<td>The Argument for Joint Responsibility</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.5</td>
<td>Objection: The Jailer</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>The Question of Intention</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: The Death of Socrates ................................................................. x
List of Tables

Table 1: Agential Responsibility ........................................................................................................ 74
**List of Abbreviations**

I have tried to follow established conventions for abbreviating works of ancient authors. I list them below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Platonic Texts:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ap.</td>
<td>Apology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ax.</td>
<td>Axiochus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charm.</td>
<td>Charmides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crat.</td>
<td>Cratylus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crit.</td>
<td>Crito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthyd.</td>
<td>Euthydemus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthyp.</td>
<td>Euthyphro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grg.</td>
<td>Gorgias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lch.</td>
<td>Laches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lg.</td>
<td>Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men.</td>
<td>Meno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phd.</td>
<td>Phaedo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phdr.</td>
<td>Phaedrus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prt.</td>
<td>Protagoras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol.</td>
<td>Statesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sym.</td>
<td>Symposium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theat.</td>
<td>Theatetus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim.</td>
<td>Timaeus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Ancient Texts:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ar. Pol.</td>
<td>Aristotle, Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cic. Lg.</td>
<td>Cicero, Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civ. Dei</td>
<td>Augustine, City of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contr. Ctesip.</td>
<td>Aeschines, Contra Ctesippus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contr. Era.</td>
<td>Lysias, Contra Eratosthenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.L.</td>
<td>Diogenes Laërtius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRN</td>
<td>Lucretius, On the Nature of Things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.E.</td>
<td>Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.N.</td>
<td>Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Il. Homer, *Iliad*
KD Epicurus, *Principle Doctrines*
M. Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*
Mem. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*
SVF Stoic Fragments
Tro. Euripides, *Trojan Women*
Acknowledgements

I could never have completed this dissertation without many people’s help. First, I thank my advisor, Eric Brown, for continuing to drive me forward. I also thank him, along with Emily Austin, Anne Margaret Baxley, Robert Lamberton, and Kit Wellman for their willingness to serve on my committee and for their support as I have written and revised this dissertation.

I am also grateful to Anya Plutynski as Director of Graduate Studies, and to Ron Mallon as Chair of the Washington University Philosophy Department, as well as to Washington University in St. Louis for providing the resources and funding necessary to complete my degree.

I also owe a debt to my undergraduate advisor, Randy Jensen, without whose Ancient Greek Philosophy class I never would have been lured away from the music department’s dark cave and into the light of philosophy. If Plato’s Socrates is right, and philosophy is the true art form, then I have him to thank for helping me see that.

I must also mention several friends and colleagues. In particular, I thank Nich Baima, Jason Gardner, Christiane Merritt, Caroline Stone, Nathanael Tagg, Ian Tully, and Don Wacome. They have been invaluable in helping me through this process, from reading drafts and providing criticism to even (at one time) stealing my car keys when I was a flight risk.

Finally, I thank my parents for supporting me ever since I came home that one day in undergrad saying that I had declared a philosophy major. You no doubt questioned what I was doing with my life (perhaps you still do!). But you stuck with me. I will always be grateful for your love and support.

Anna Christensen

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2017
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Better Off Dead: Suicide in Plato’s Philosophy

by

Anna Christensen

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

Washington University in St. Louis, 2017

Professor Eric Brown, Chair

In Better Off Dead: Suicide in Plato’s Philosophy, I argue that Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide, and show how this thesis coheres a rich set of Platonic views about the permissibility of suicide, about living a good life, and about responsible and intentional action. An ancient philosophical tradition portrays Socrates’ death as a virtuous suicide, but contemporary scholars tend to focus on the fact that Socrates’ death occurred as a result of execution. They think that Plato does not portray Socrates as committing suicide, largely because some textual evidence suggests that Plato considers suicide to be ethically wrong (Phd. 61c; Laws IX.873c). I argue that this interpretation is too narrow. Instead, carefully examining Plato’s discussions of suicide reveals that Plato has a consistent account of suicide according to which suicide is sometimes both ethically permissible and in the agent’s best interest. Socrates, I argue, embodies such circumstances in Plato’s dialogues. In addition, I argue that Plato’s account of responsibility and intentional action allows that suicide and execution are mutually compatible explanations of Socrates’ death. According to Plato’s account, Socrates was at least as responsible for his death as the city was, and Socrates committed suicide.
Preface

In Jacques-Louis David’s painting, *La Mort de Socrate (The Death of Socrates)*, Socrates is portrayed as a resolute old man dressed in white, one hand gesturing up to heaven as his other extends over the cup of poison he is about to drink. Other men surround him, their palpable distress at Socrates’ approaching death appearing in stark contrast to Socrates’ own demeanor. Socrates is calm, seemingly unmoved by his friends’ anguish, as he uses his death scene to impart final words to those he leaves behind.

Illustration 1: *The Death of Socrates*

The image illustrates the significance that both philosophy and history have accorded to this event. Socrates gained as much immortal acclaim by the way he died, as he did by how he lived. He died by drinking poison hemlock, after an Athenian law court convicted him of corrupting the youth and teaching about strange new gods. Many scholars today view this death as martyrdom\(^1\), execution\(^2\), or murder\(^3\) – the unlucky price Socrates had to pay for his uncompromising devotion to his philosophical beliefs.

---

1. David (1787).
Yet a rich ancient tradition tells a different story. Socrates committed suicide, it says, rather than continue to live on in circumstances where life would not be worth living. Moreover, the ancient tradition reveres Socrates for this choice. In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon presents Socrates as choosing to die and consequently winning eternal glory. He commends Socrates’ fortitude, declaring that Socrates’ death displayed his strength of soul: “for having once decided that death was better for him than longer life, he did not weaken in the presence of death, just as he had never set his face against any other thing, either, that was for his good, but was cheerful not only in the expectation of death but also in carrying it out” (Xen. *Ap*. 33). Elsewhere, Xenophon professes that “there is no record of death more nobly borne” than Socrates’ (*Mem*. IV.vii.8). The attitude is one shared by another biographer, Diogenes Laërtius, who writes that a god himself called Socrates “wise” when he took the hemlock from the Athenians.

The Stoics maintained this attitude regarding Socrates’ death. When Stoicism’s founder, Zeno of Citium, committed suicide, his followers referenced Socrates’ words in Plato’s *Phaedo* to vindicate his action. The Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca, explicitly tried to model his own suicide after Socrates’. The epigrams of Callimachus note that another philosopher, Cleombrotus, read the *Phaedo* and decided to follow Socrates’ example by throwing himself into the sea. Such

---

6 “Drink then, being in Zeus’ home, Socrates; for truly did a god call you wise, being wisdom himself; for when you simply took the hemlock from the Athenians, they themselves drank it as it passed your lips” (πίνε ὑμῖν ἐν Διὸς ὄν, ὦ Σωκράτες: ἣ σε γάρ θ᾽ ὡς καὶ σοφὸν ἐπί θεός, κάι θεός ἢ σοφή, πρὸς γὰρ ἀθηναίων κόψων ἄπλως σὺ ἐξέβου: αὐτῷ δ᾽ ἐξέπιον τοῦτο πεῖ στόματι, D.L. II.46).
7 See Cooper (1999), Griffin (1986), and Rist (1969).
8 Zeno tripped over a stone and broke a toe. He took this as a “sign from god” that it was necessary for him to die, so he committed suicide (D.L. VII.28). The reference is to Plato’s *Phaedo* (62c). See also Warren (2001).
9 Seneca took poison such as the Greeks gave those condemned to die (i.e., hemlock). That action alone failed, so he also cut his wrists and suffocated himself in a bath. See Tacitus (*Annals* XV.64).
10 “There is a certain epigram of Callimachus about Cleombrotus of Ambracia, who [Callimachus] says, although nothing awful had happened to him, threw himself from a wall in the sea, after having read Plato’s book” (Callimachi quidem epigramma in Ambraciotam Theombrotum est, quem ait, cum ei nihil accidisset adversi, e muro se in mare abiecisse, lecto Platonis libro; Cicero [*Tusc. Disp.* I.84]). Augustine writes of the same case, making special note that the “book” in question was indeed the *Phaedo* (*Civ. Dei* I.22).
stories indicate that Socrates’ final act was not only viewed as a suicide, but also as a suicide worthy of esteem, praise, and even occasional imitation by any who would consider themselves philosophers.

It is not difficult to see why the ancients would conceive of Socrates’ death as a suicide. On the final page of Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates takes the cup of poison himself (117c), having already refused the opportunity to escape prison (98e-99a; cf. *Crit.* 54d-e) and announced that he wants to die (*Phd.* 63b-c; cf. *Ap.* 40c ff.). He then drinks the poison, requiring neither restraints (*Phd.* 116c), nor to be told to drink a second time (116e-117a). Earlier in the same dialogue, Plato even had Socrates characterize his imminent death as a suicide. Socrates says that suicide is impermissible (οὐ...θεμιτόν, 61c10) except when “a god sends some necessity, such as the one that has now come before us” (62c6-9).11 The fact that he refers to his own case as one for which a god has provided some necessity indicates that he views it as a suicide requiring such permission.

Most modern readers ignore12 or dismiss13 the characterization of Socrates as committing suicide. A few scholars have considered the question,14 but unfortunately these scholars have concentrated on what it means to qualify a death as “suicide.” Yet more is at stake here than a merely semantic definition. Indeed, if we grant that Plato really characterizes Socrates as a suicide at the *Phaedo*’s conclusion, three further puzzles follow from that characterization. Each puzzle appears in attenuated form within the same passage, and each has ramifications for our understanding of Platonic philosophy more generally.

---

11 πρὶν ἀνάγκην τινὰ θέως ἐπιπέμψῃ, ὡσπερ καὶ τὴν γὰρ ἡμῖν παροῦσαν.
13 Rowe (1993: 7, 125) accepts a limited sense in which Socrates committed suicide – because he takes the poison from the warder and drinks it (130) – but otherwise dismisses the appellation by referring to Socrates as “executed.”
First, the last page of the *Phaedo* also characterizes Socrates as especially just (δικαιότατος, 118a). Thus, if Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide, Plato must also think that Socrates’ suicide is permissible, consistent with Socrates’ being just. As we have seen, Plato has Socrates himself suggest that his suicide is permissible (62c). But how can this assessment be correct?

Second, the last page of the *Phaedo* also characterizes Socrates as especially wise (φρονιμώτατος, 118a). So Plato must have thought that Socrates’ committing suicide was consistent with Socrates’ being wise. For this to be the case, Socrates must have had a good reason to commit suicide. But what good reason could Socrates possibly have had? Notice that this question is particularly pointed if we think that Plato is a eudaimonist, on the grounds that Plato’s Socrates elsewhere suggests that good reasons for action must culminate in the goal of *eudaimonia* (happiness, success, or well-being).\(^1\) How can it serve Socrates’ *eudaimonia* to kill himself, and what might this answer suggest more generally about the wisdom and rationality of other suicides?

Third, the *Phaedo* also characterizes Socrates’ death as a punishment mandated by Athens (98d-e; 116c). But how is Socrates’ death as punishment compatible with Socrates’ death being a suicide? After all, if Athens executes Socrates, then it may seem that Athens – and Athens alone – is responsible for killing Socrates. Consequently, it seems difficult to think that Socrates could be responsible for his death or have intended to die in any meaningful way. Notice that this question is not merely a semantic concern. Rather it concerns what it means to act as a responsible and intentional agent.

My dissertation addresses these three puzzles, one per chapter. I defend the thesis that Plato thought Socrates committed suicide by showing how this notion coheres with a consistent

---

\(^1\) See *Euthd.* 278e, 280b; *Grg.* 468b-d; *Laws* 864a; *Meno* 77c-78b; *Prt.* 352b-358e; *Rep.* IV.443e.
set of Platonic views about suicide’s permissibility, about the grounds for wise action, and about responsible and intentional action. A more detailed synopsis of the chapters follows.

In Chapter 1, “As the God Leads: The Ethics of Platonic Suicide,” I consider the internal consistency of Plato’s account of suicide and how Socrates can be viewed as a permissible suicide. Disparities between the *Phaedo* and the *Laws* have led some scholars\(^\text{16}\) to question whether his texts can provide us with a coherent view of suicide. While Plato expresses his arguments in predominantly religious terms in the *Phaedo*, he expresses his reasons on legal or practical grounds in the *Laws*, without citing theological commitments. Moreover, he appears to endorse a much broader set of conditions permitting suicide in the *Laws*.

I argue for a coherent account of suicide between the two dialogues. I show that the same theological and philosophical grounds prohibiting suicide can be found in both texts, and that the *Phaedo*’s exception is broad enough to include the *Laws*’ longer list of exceptions. In addition, I argue that Plato can consistently hold Socrates as a permissible suicide by both the *Phaedo*’s and the *Laws*’ reasons.

In Chapter 2, “The Wisest Death: Wisdom and Suicide in Platonic Ethics,” I argue that Plato’s account of suicide is consistent with eudaimonism,\(^\text{17}\) and that Socrates’ suicide is consistent with his being wise. We have two worries about suicide in his ethics: 1) that his account is too permissive, and 2) that his account is too exclusive.

\(^{16}\) See especially Cooper (1999), Geddes (1885), and Rowe (1993).

Assuming that *eudaimonia* is virtuous activity, the first point is troublesome because choosing to commit suicide cuts life short. A person cannot perform any activity if she is dead! But Plato allows suicide in cases of extreme pain, misery, and shame. I show that these cases signify when opportunities for achieving *eudaimonia* by performing virtuous activity are severely impeded or impossible. At that time, a person is better off dead. I argue that Socrates’ suicide is itself an example of such a case. So we need not worry that Plato’s account is too permissive.

However, we might worry that Plato’s account could be too exclusive, because he does not unconditionally allow suicide to all people who might seem to be benefitted by death (*Phd* 61d). I argue that Plato’s answer is found in his insistence that only when a soul has been properly prepared to die is it beneficial to separate the soul completely from the body. Suicide under ordinary conditions will only hinder her *eudaimonia*, both because it will cause death to occur before the agent is ready to be benefitted (*Phd* 67a; *Phdr* 242d-243a) and because it will be impermissible and vicious (cf. *Phd* 62c). If we grant that acting virtuously is required to obtain *eudaimonia*, committing suicide impermissibly could never help the agent achieve *eudaimonia*.

In Chapter 3, “The Suicidal Philosopher: Plato’s Socrates,” I consider what role Plato thinks Socrates played in his own death. Citing the *Phaedo*’s prohibition against suicide and Socrates’ devotion to justice, many scholars claim Socrates could neither have been responsible for nor have intended his own death, and therefore his death could not be a suicide. This is no mere semantic quibble about the word “suicide.” Rather, the question turns on Plato’s account of

---

18 The assumption is supported by several Platonic texts, including *Charm.* 171e-172a, *Crit.* 48b, *Grg.* 507b-c, and *Rep.* I.352e-354a.
19 The argument picks up on some of Kant’s arguments against suicide, in particular this claim: “[Suicide] transcends all limits on the use of free choice, for the latter is only possible insofar as the subject exists” (*Lectures* 27:370).
20 See, especially, Brickhouse & Smith (1989), Burger (1984), Geddes (1885), and Woozley (1979).
responsible and intentional action. On this account, I argue, Socrates is responsible for killing himself.

I first provide an account of Plato’s view of responsibility as it appears in the Phaedo and is more thoroughly presented in the Gorgias. Then I apply those views to the question of who is responsible for Socrates’ death, by Plato’s lights. I use evidence from the Phaedo (98e-99a) to show that Plato thinks the city and Socrates share joint responsibility for Socrates’ death, because both agents share the goal that Socrates die.21

This discussion opens the second question of whether Plato thinks Socrates intended his death. Drawing on the Gorgias (468b), I argue that Plato recognizes instances when an agent has joint intentions, and that Socrates has joint intentions. He kills himself because justice requires it. But he also kills himself because he simultaneously wants to die. Thus he intends to die, and he commits suicide.

---

Note to Readers

My goal in this dissertation is to understand Plato’s thoughts on suicide throughout his career while presenting an A) maximally charitable and B) consistent view that C) illuminates and coheres with other of Plato’s views on the value of life. Naturally, this goal requires making assumptions about his texts.

Scholars often divide the Platonic dialogues into groups on the basis of a presumed order of their composition (viz. into “early,” “middle,” and “late” periods), and then use this proposed order to track developments in Plato’s views. The attempt to so organize Plato’s compositions is complicated by the fact that some scholars mark “transitional” works between the proposed periods.22 Moreover, scholars are not in perfect agreement about which dialogues belong to which groups.23

Since very little of what I argue rests on any particular order of Plato’s dialogues, I do not pay special attention to it except in one case. Insofar as Plato only explicitly addresses suicide in two texts, the Laws and the Phaedo, I consider how those two texts cohere. Most scholars believe that the Laws was Plato’s final composition,24 and some scholars have indicated that that later text appears to disagree with the Phaedo’s earlier account of suicide.25 I argue in Chapter 1 of this dissertation that the Laws and the Phaedo provide a consistent set of Plato’s views, regardless of whether or not they were written at different points in Plato’s career.

23 See Cooper (1997: xii) for a discussion, although Cooper himself does not hold to this division. The belief that there even is a division between these groups has been undermined by recent scholarship. See Thesleff (1982 and 1989), Howland (1991), and Nails (1995).
24 The text is rougher than Plato’s other dialogues, suggesting that Plato left it unfinished when he died. Diogenes LÆretius suggests that Plato left the Laws unpublished when he died, since he claims that the text was left inscribed on “wax tablets.” Inscribing on wax tablets was normal for drafting texts in the ancient world (III.37). However, this might not indicate that the Laws was Plato’s last composition as much as it indicates that Plato simply did not think it was yet publishable.
25 See especially Cooper (521) and Geddes (224, n. 2).
Another concern stems from the fact that Plato never wrote in his own voice. Rather, he wrote through the medium of dialogues, a philosophical drama in which several characters have points to contribute. As a result, it is difficult to say what Plato’s views are. Scholars often locate Plato’s voice in that of an authoritative speaker (e.g., “Socrates” in many dialogues, the “Stranger” in the Laws\(^{26}\)). The view goes back to antiquity,\(^{27}\) but recent scholarship has become suspicious of the view.\(^{28}\)

I assume that it is necessary to keep the dialogues’ artistic medium in mind. However, the fact remains that it is Plato as author, rather than the characters he creates in his dialogues, who is reaching out to us as readers. So when we consider a character in a Platonic dialogue, we do not only consider what that character is saying, but also what Plato as author is trying to have us think through what he has his characters do. In this dissertation, I try to construct plausible Platonic views and see how those views fit together. Because these views are expressed through characters in a drama, we cannot know for certain that they are Plato’s views. However, I assume that their inclusion informs us that they are views Plato took seriously, and it is at least possible that Plato endorsed them.

All translations of ancient texts from the Greek and Latin are my own unless otherwise indicated. For Platonic texts, I used the new OCT (Duke et al., eds.). For the Phaedo, I consulted both Strachan’s text in the new OCT and Burnet’s text in the old OCT.

\(^{26}\) The Athenian Stranger is never named in the Laws. Pangle (1988: 511–512n.2) notes speculation about who he is. Cicero (Lg. I.5.15) thinks the Stranger represents Plato, while Aristotle (Pol. II.1265a) thinks it is Socrates.

\(^{27}\) Aristotle suggests Plato’s views were positions taken by Socrates or the leading speakers in the dialogues. These passages are discussed in Cherniss (1944). Diogenes Laërtius wrote that Plato’s views are expounded by four persons—Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian Stranger, and the Eleatic Stranger. He writes: “Even when Socrates and Timaeus are the speakers, it is Plato’s doctrines that are laid down” (III.52).

\(^{28}\) For an overview of developments in Platonic scholarship about this matter, see Press, ed. (2000).
Readers familiar with Ancient Greek may wonder at my using the term “suicide” so freely. For one thing, the language does not have a single exclusive word meaning “suicide,” but instead makes do with a series of euphemisms and expressions denoting the action. For another, the concept of “suicide” itself may be open to any number of possible interpretations. I avoid the latter issue entirely, since I bypass semantic entanglements regarding whether this or that action counts as “suicide.” Let the following suffice for a definition: “suicide” is “intentional self-killing.” This definition should remain uncontested. It recognizes the principal point that suicide must be an intentional action. It also excludes cases of accidental self-killing, such as when a person fatally electrocutes herself by touching a live wire that she erroneously assumes is dead. However, some questions will remain regarding whether this or that self-killing is truly “intentional.” I address such a case in Chapter 3.

The former concern is not nearly so problematic. Even English did not include a word for suicide until fairly recently in its history, and instead used a number of phrases and euphemisms to denote an action of intentional self-killing. Ancient Greek likewise refers to the action with an extensive list of phrases and euphemisms.

Plato’s own language choices for the action are largely unambiguous, and include the following: “to kill oneself” (“ἐαυτόν . . . κτείνῃ” in Laws IX.873c3-4, and “αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνωναι” in Phd. 62c7, cf. c2-3, 61e6), and a couple that refer more obliquely to “leaving, setting oneself free from” or “running from” life (“ἀπαλάττου τοῦ βίου” in Laws IX.854c5-6, and “ἐαυτὸν ἐκ ταύτης λύειν οὐδ’ ἀποδιδάσκειν” in Phd. 62b5). Plato also refers to doing violence against

---

29 The word “suicide” in English apparently dates from the 1650s, while the explicit definition of “one who kills oneself deliberately” dates from 1728. On this, see Battin (1993), Cholbi, and Cooper.

30 The most familiar of these is the word ἐξαγωγή used by the Stoics, which literally means “exit” or “going out.” The word is typical of Greek words denoting suicidal action in that it is not exclusive for suicide, but also refers to an actor’s leaving the stage in the theatre. Anton J. L. van Hoof provides a lengthy list of the many expressions ancient Greeks and Romans used to refer to suicide (243-250).
oneself (βιάσεται αὑτόν, Phd. 61c10), a phrase which may refer to any instance of self-harm, and not only killing. I have translated the texts literally to make clear where this occurs.
“Say these things to Evenus, Cebes: bid him farewell, and tell him, if he is wise, to follow me as quickly as possible.”

ταῦτα οὖν, ὦ Κέβης, Εὐήνω φράζε, καὶ ἐρρῶσθαι καὶ, ἂν σωφρονῇ, ἐμὲ διώκειν ὡς τάχιστα.

– Plato, *Phaedo* 61b
Chapter 1

As the God Leads:  
The Ethics of Platonic Suicide

1.1 The Question

In the Phaedo’s final pages, Plato portrays Socrates’ death as a suicide. The evidence for my claim is substantial. Plato shows Socrates taking the cup of fatal poison (117c), after having already refused the opportunity to escape prison and death (98e-99a; cf. Crit. 54d-e) and announced that he wants to die (Phd. 63b-c; cf. Ap. 40c ff.). He then drinks the poison, requiring neither restraints (Phd. 116c), nor to be told to drink a second time (116e-117a). In the most telling evidence, Plato has even had Socrates characterize his imminent death as a suicide. Socrates says that suicide is impermissible (οὐ . . . θεμίτον, 61c10) except when “a god sends some necessity, such as the case that has now come before us.”¹ The fact that Socrates refers to his own case as one for which a god provides necessity shows he views it as a suicide requiring such permission.

The thesis that Plato presents Socrates’ death as a suicide is puzzling for an ethical reason.² In both texts where Plato discusses suicide, the Phaedo and the Laws, the action is said to be vicious and generally incompatible with living a virtuous life (Phd. 62c; Laws IX.873c). Yet the final words Plato writes in the Phaedo characterize Socrates as especially just (δικαιότατος, 118a).

¹ πρὶν ἀνάγκην τινὰ θεὸς ἐπιέμη, ὡσπερ καὶ τὴν γ νὴν ἡμῖν παροίσαν (Phd. 62c7-9). Recognizing Socrates’ death as suicide has the additional benefit of eliminating the worry that Socrates’ introduction of suicide in the Phaedo is outside the dialogue’s interests. See Archer-Hind (1894: 9). If Socrates’ death is suicide, the introduction of suicide in the dialogue makes sense. Socrates will be most interested in ascertaining that his own death is permissible.
² Socrates’ suicide is also puzzling for pragmatic reasons. In particular, we may wonder 1) how Socrates could be wise if he committed suicide, and 2) how Socrates could possibly have been responsible for his death or intended to die, given that his death also occurred at the city’s behest. I address these other concerns about Socrates’ suicide in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.
Thus, if Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide, Plato must also think that Socrates’ suicide is permissible, that is, consistent with Socrates’ being just. As we have seen, Plato has had Socrates himself suggest that his suicide is exculpated (62c). But can this assessment be correct?

To answer this question, we must first determine what Plato’s account of suicide is. This task would comprise a worthy endeavor on its own. For, as some scholars have noted, Plato’s two texts appear to disagree about the grounds for the prohibition and the conditions of permissible suicide. Plato expresses his reasons in religious terms in the Phaedo, but on legal grounds in the Laws. He also appears to endorse a much broader set of permissive conditions in the Laws than he does in the Phaedo. How, then, are we to have a coherent account of Plato’s view of suicide so that Socrates’ suicide can consistently count as permissible?

In this chapter, I argue that Plato has a consistent account of suicide, one that also permits Socrates’ suicide. After explicating the key texts (Sections 1.2 and 1.3), I show that the same theological and philosophical grounds prohibiting suicide can be found in both texts (Section 1.4), and that the Phaedo’s condition is broad enough to include the Laws’ longer list of conditions (Section 1.5). Finally, I show how Plato can consistently hold Socrates as a permissible suicide by both the Phaedo’s and the Laws’ reasons (Sections 1.6 and 1.7).

3 Although ancient Greeks did not have a single word that can be translated “suicide,” the concept of killing oneself was anything but unknown to them, as seen by the wealth of expressions they used to talk about self-killing (van Hoof [2000: 243-246]; Cooper [1999: 515]). Plato makes do with several expressions for the act, including various phrases interpreted “to kill oneself” (ἑαυτον . . . κτείνῃ, Laws IX.873c3-4; αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι, Phd. 62c7, cf. c2-3, 61e6), and a couple that euphemistically refer to “leaving” or “setting oneself free from” life (ἀπαλάττου τοῦ βίου, Laws IX.854c5-6; ἑαυτὸν ἐκ ταύτης λύειν οὐδ’ ἀποδιδράσκειν, Phd. 62b5).

4 For scholars who raise this puzzle, see Burnet (1911: 24); Cooper (1999); Frey (1978); Geddes (1885: 224, n. 2); Rowe (1993: 130); and Woozley (1979: 58).

5 Suicide in order to avoid doing injustice (Laws IX.854a), under state command, under extreme misfortune, and from extreme disgrace (873c), compared to the Phaedo’s single exception, when “a god sends some necessity” (πρὶν ἄν ἀνάγκην τινὰ θεὸς ἐπιτέμψῃ, Phd. 62c).
1.2 The *Phaedo*’s Religious Prohibition

In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates express sympathy for a blanket prohibition against suicide on the grounds that committing suicide is not right (θεμίτων, 61c10). He attempts to explain this condemnation by using two analogies and providing one exception to the prohibition.

The first analogy is that, just as condemned prisoners are not allowed to leave their imprisonment, so human beings are not allowed to leave their bodies.

“So this explanation is said about these things in secret: that we human beings are in some prison, and that one must neither free oneself nor escape from this prison. And this explanation seems to me to be something both great and not easy to understand” (62b2-6).

A condemned prisoner cannot rightly leave jail until a lawful authority releases her. Any other escape involves unjust evasion of punishment. So, fleeing prison without permission is unjust. Analogously, we can say that human beings are imprisoned in their bodies, and they cannot leave until they are permissibly released. Suicide is wrong for the same reasons that a convict’s escaping prison is wrong. It involves unjustly evading incarceration.

Socrates calls the argument against suicide “great” or “important” (μέγας, 62b5), which may suggest that it merits approval. However, he does not adopt the argument on its own as the

---

6 ὁ μὲν οὖν ἐν ἀπορρήτωι λεγόμενος περὶ αὐτῶν λόγος, ὡς ἐν τινι φρουρᾷ ἐσμέν οἱ ἀνθρώποι καί οὐ δεῖ δὴ ἔαυτὸν ἐκ ταύτης λύειν οὐδὲ ἀποδιδράσκειν, μέγας τέ τίς μοι φαίνεται καί οὐ ράδιος διδεῖν:

7 The *Cratylus* advances a similar notion of the soul’s imprisonment in the body, claiming that “the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is securely kept” (400c, Reeve’s translation). Note, however, that the word used in the *Phaedo*’s φρουρά is not the same as the *Cratylus*’s φρουρά.

8 Commentators have noted that φρουρά, which I have translated “prison,” is ambiguous, and may mean “prison” or “guard-post. See Burger (1984: 32); Cooper (522); Rowe (128). The fact that the *Phaedo* takes place in prison makes the former more likely, and the *Cratylus* reinforces that belief (400c; see previous note). But whatever definition we take will not much affect how the argument is supposed to function. If we take “guard-post,” the argument means humans are stationed as soldiers on duty, and cannot leave their posts. One might prefer this reading because Plato has Socrates speak about maintaining his post (Ap. 28d-e; Crit. 51b-c). Leaving one’s post is unjust evasion of duty (Crit. 51c; Laws IX.854c). Either way we interpret the passage, suicide is prohibited as unjust.

9 The statement may also suggest that Socrates is being tongue in cheek or ironical. However, I think from what follows in the text that we are to think Socrates approves of the explanation. He simply realizes that that more needs to be said to unpack that explanation. After all, he does not condemn the view, but merely says it is difficult to understand.
definitive word on suicide. Instead, he says the analogy is “not easy to understand” (οὐ ῥᾴδιος δοῦχειν, 62b6), and moves on to provide a second analogy. The obvious reason for this abrupt shift is that the first analogy has left too much unexplained.\(^\text{10}\) If the analogy is correct that humans are held as prisoners in their own bodies, then we should have several significant questions. The questions include:

1) Why are we imprisoned?
2) What obligation do we have to remain imprisoned?
3) Who (or what) enforces that imprisonment?
4) What constitutes permissible release?\(^\text{11}\)

The way Socrates has articulated the analogy leaves these questions open, which would certainly explain why the argument could be difficult to understand. Of course, we could reconstruct reasons to make passable responses to some of these questions. A similar argument in Plato’s *Cratylus* suggests an answer to the first question, asserting that a human’s imprisonment in her body is punishment for some ethical failing she had in a previous life (400c).\(^\text{12}\) Under this interpretation, a human being’s imprisonment in her body will be punishment for misdeeds she performed in a previous life. Virtuous persons will be freed from their earthly bodies “as from a prison” when they die (echoing a sentiment in *Phd.* 114c). However, this explanation still says nothing about who or what punishes humans with imprisonment. It is unclear how suicide could possibly be unjust without that enforcing authority – someone against whom committing suicide is an injustice.

---

\(^\text{10}\) In this response, I concur with Warren (2001).

\(^\text{11}\) Similar worries beset the alternate interpretation of φρουρά, “guard-post”: 1) What are we guarding? 2) Why are we obligated to remain at our post? 3) Who (or what) requires us to remain at that post? 4) How can we be freed from that duty?

\(^\text{12}\) Hackforth appears to suggest this as a possible interpretation (1955: 38).
More troubling is that this prohibition does not do anything to explain Socrates’ death. It does not mention how an individual could be granted release, and it contains no exception to the prohibition. If a person’s primary duty is not to run away from the prison of life, then every person should do all she can to remain in that position and to evade death. She should certainly never commit suicide. But if this is the case, we should expect Socrates to have fled his Athenian prison cell at Crito’s behest (Crit. 45e-46a; Phd. 98e-99a), rather than remain to drink the poison and die. A better explanation for the prohibition is needed – one that will provide enforcement and, at the same time, explain the permissibility of Socrates’ own death.

Socrates is aware that the first analogy has left many questions unanswered, so he provides a second analogy to fill in the gaps.

“However, Cebes, this seems to me to be well said, that the gods are our care-takers and we human beings are among the gods’ possessions. Or does it not seem so to you?” “Indeed,” said Cebes. “And so, would you not be angry if one of your possessions were to kill himself, when you had not signified that you wished him to die, and if you had some punishment you could exact, you would exact it?” “Absolutely!” he said. “Then perhaps because of this it is not unreasonable to say that a person must not kill himself until a god sends some necessity upon him, such as the one that has now come before us” (62b6-c9).

The analogy assumes that humans are the gods’ property and that the gods care for their human property. Socrates asks his interlocutor, Cebes, if he would be angry if one of his slaves were to kill himself without Cebes’ permission. Cebes agrees, and swears he would punish his slave if he could. Socrates analogizes that the gods would likewise be angry with their human possessions if

---

13 Which he did. See Crit. 54e; Phd. 98e-99a, 117c ff.
14 οὐ μέντοι ἄλλα τόδε γε μοι δοκεῖ, ὦ Κέβης, ἐδέλεγοθαί, τὸ θεοῦς εἶναι ἡμῶν τοὺς ἐπιμελουμένους καὶ ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐν τοῖς κτημάτοις τοῖς θεοῖς εἶναι. ἢ σοι οὐ δοκεῖς οὗτος; ἔμοι τι, φησίν ὁ Κέβης, οὐκοῦν, ἢ δ’ ὁ δέ, καὶ σὺ ἃν τοὺς σωτοῦ κτημάτων εἰ τι αὐτὸ ἐκεῖ ἀποκτείνοι, μὴ σημηναντός σου ὅτι βούλει αὐτὸ τεθνάναι, χαλεπαίνοις ἃν αὐτῷ καὶ, εἰ τινα ἔχοις τιμωρίαν, τιμωροῦντες τινα, πάντα γ’, ἐφ. ἠσθος τοῖς ταύτῃ σοι ἢκο ἄλογον μὴ πρῶτον αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖνοι δεῖν, πρὶν ἀνάγκην τινα θεοῦ ἐπιπέμψη, ὃσπερ καὶ τὴν νῦν ἡμῖν παροῦσαν.
they were to kill themselves without the gods’ permission. The gods might exact retribution, presumably by punishing the suicide in the afterlife (62b7-c9).  

The analogy discourages suicide on pragmatic and ethical grounds. If a person believes that the gods will punish her, she will have a strong disincentive against committing suicide. Later, we are told that the gods are “good” caretakers of humanity (63b), which provides additional deterrent. No one should sensibly want to leave the good situation they have under the gods’ guardianship. Suicide would be irrational, because it would entail the agent’s willfully leaving such a happy condition. Moreover, since relations between gods and humans resemble relations between human masters and their slaves, stealing one’s life from the gods would be vicious. It would be unjust in the same way that stealing a fellow human’s property is unjust, and impious because one commits the theft against the gods.

This second analogy builds on the foundation provided by the first. Like the first, this second analogy grounds a prohibition against suicide in the claim that suicide is vicious. But the argument adds additional practical discouragement (viz., the threat of divine retribution and the idiocy of fleeing the gods’ good care), and an explicit appeal to an enforcing authority (the gods). However, while the first analogy is silent about the possibility that some suicides may be permissible, the second analogy leaves the possibility available. Plato has Socrates state that Cebes will be angry with his slave for committing suicide only if Cebes has not given some sign to the slave that he wishes him to die. So, if Cebes signifies that he wants his slave to die, the slave may kill himself without angering Cebes. In the same way, a human may also kill herself if a god gives her some sign of necessity to die (61c6-9). Thus, unlike the previous analogy, this

---

15 No specific punishments are related for impermissible suicides in the Phaedo’s closing myth, although they would likely have been included among “wrongful acts of killing” (113e, cf. Rep. X.615c), and punished accordingly.

16 Contra Geddes, who claims the Phaedo is “a condemnation of suicide in every circumstance and form” (224).
second analogy allows an exception to the prohibition, and it is the only exception that makes sense given the gods’ commands. Suicide cannot be a crime against the gods when a god allows it.\textsuperscript{17}

The text is largely silent about what the sign indicating divine necessity to die is, but Socrates provides one example: “the one that has now come before us” (τὴν νῦν ἡμῖν παροῦσαν, 62c9), that is, Socrates’ case. The act that a person must not perform without divine necessity is kill himself. So, when Plato has Socrates indicate that the case before them is one for which god has provided some necessity, Plato has Socrates characterize his death as suicide.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, it is clear that Socrates thinks his suicide is permissible. We will consider later how Socrates’ suicide fulfills that condition.\textsuperscript{19}

\section*{1.3 The Laws’ Legal Prohibition}

The arguments presented about suicide in the \textit{Laws} appear very different from those in the \textit{Phaedo}. The first striking difference is that the \textit{Laws’} arguments are provided in the form of legal codes rather than enigmatic analogies. Plato’s Athenian Stranger\textsuperscript{20} says that the most serious crimes a human can commit are “impious deeds destructive to the state’s condition” (IX.854c6-7).\textsuperscript{21} Suicide is among these crimes because it constitutes the worst kind of murder.\textsuperscript{22} As such,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item This assumes that the gods are good and just, as Plato has Socrates claim (\textit{Phd.} 63b). They cannot be the fickle deities of the Greek pantheon, who appear to revel in creating paradoxical situations for humans to address.\textsuperscript{18}
\item Gallop (1975: 85) provides a similar interpretation.\textsuperscript{19}
\item The Athenian Stranger is never named in the \textit{Laws}. Pangle (1988: 511-512, n.2) notes speculation about who he is. The debate was active even in Antiquity. Cicero (\textit{Lg.} I.5.15) thinks the Stranger represents Plato, while Aristotle (\textit{Pol.} II.1265a) thinks it is Socrates.\textsuperscript{20}
\item ἀνόσια ἔργα καὶ πολιτορθόρα - The exact range of crimes under this heading is unclear, though the list definitely includes temple robbery, treason, and murder (854a).\textsuperscript{21}
\item Suicide is listed among murderous crimes after (in order of appearance) accidental killings, non-accidental killings, murders of slaves, murders of fellow citizens, and murders of kin. Notice that the severity of the crime seems to increase as the list continues. Suicide’s placement as last on the list suggests it may be considered the worst of the murder cases. Consider, also, IX.873c, where it is said that suicide kills one’s own “nearest and dearest.”\textsuperscript{22}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the action must be punished by dishonorable burial: the suicide’s corpse is buried alone, in deserted, nameless places, without headstone or other marker (873d). From the ancient perspective, the penalty was significant because it involved symbolically severing all connections between the suicide agent and her state and kin. Such burial constituted a kind of posthumous exile.

It will strike many people as strange that the Laws prohibits suicide as a crime against the state. In contemporary ethics, we tend to think that suicide is a personal choice, one completely up to an individual. We do not often consider that suicide can have far-ranging effects on society as a whole. As a result, we might wonder how a person’s autonomous choice to kill herself could possibly be considered harmful to the state.

Although Plato does not directly address this concern, the text offers clues for an explanation. Consider the following passage:

“I mean the fellow who kills himself, robbing himself of his allotted part in life, when it is not legally ordered by the state, when he is not forced to it by the occurrence of an excruciating and unavoidable misfortune, when he has not fallen into some irremediable and unbearable disgrace, and imposes this unjust judgment on himself in laziness and in unmanly cowardice” (IX.873c2-8).

Plato has the Stranger clarify what he means by impermissible self-killing. The Stranger says the person who kills himself imposes an “unjust judgement on himself.” The qualification is illuminating, for it suggests that the suicide agent judges himself worthy of death. Normally, we would only encounter such language in a legal context when the state condemns a person to death.

---

23 Such penalties as exclusion from burial were common for suicide in the ancient world. Aeschines (Constr. Ctesiph. 88, 38) notes an Athenian law that the hand of the suicide was to be buried apart from the body it had slain.
24 Morrow (1960: 492). The Laws also refuses burial on native soil to temple robbers, traitors, and murderers of kin. See IX.854e-855a, 856b, 856e-857a, 873a-b.
25 Aristotle expresses a similar sentiment, E.N. V.8.
26 This view is common, but see Battin (1993: 193); Cholbi (2011: 88-89); Seneca (Ep. LXX, LXXVII).
27 λέγω δὲ ὃς ἄνευν κτείνῃ, τὴν τῆς εἰμαρμένης βίας ἀσφαλείρων μοίραν, μήτε πόλεως ταξάμης δίκη, μήτε περιοδύον ἄρκτων προσπέποισε τῆς ἀναγκασθείς, μηδέ αἰσχύνης τινὸς ἀπόρου καὶ ἀβίου μεταλαχῶν, ἄργα δὲ καὶ ἀνανδρίας δειλία ἐαυτῷ δίκην ἀδικον ἐπιθή.
The phrasing here indicates that when the individual, instead of the state, takes it upon himself to provide self-condemnation and execution, he acts unjustly.

The passage does not specify why such an action is unjust. However, a reasonable assumption is that it is because only the city has the authority to pronounce the death sentence upon its citizens. Plato finds rational order for society in law. Law makes it possible for human beings to live together and to achieve their common good (IV.715e-716a, IX.875a-b). Much of the surrounding context in Laws IX makes it clear that law governs even the execution of citizens (854e-855c, 869c, 874b). Thus, if an individual commits suicide, she has done what only the state and its appointed courts should be allowed to do. She has executed herself and, since execution only justly occurs under the state’s authority, she has killed herself unjustly. So the act undermines the state’s authority, which in turn undermines the state’s law and order.

This point suggests another way that Plato may think suicide harms the state. In the Laws, the Stranger repeatedly emphasizes that the goal of legislation is to promote virtue in citizens (I.630d-631a; VI.770c-d). But the Stranger remarks that the suicide agent treats himself and the state unjustly, and exhibits laziness and cowardice. So suicide is vicious. For this reason, suicide can be seen as at odds with the state’s goal to promote virtue in its citizens. If so, it is no wonder that suicide is categorized as a crime against the state.

Nevertheless, the Laws’ prohibition against suicide is not absolute. Plato has the Stranger list four exceptions to the prohibition. The passage above shows that suicide is permissible when

---

28 Cooper (525) agrees with this view.
29 See Morrow (267-270) for the importance of legal proceedings in Plato’s Laws.
30 For discussion, see Annas in Bobonich, ed. (2010: 71-91); Stalley (1983: 35-37). Of course, a puzzle exists about how legislated virtue can really constitute “virtue.” For an argument to that effect, see Hunt (2014).
31 Presumably, if a person kills herself merely to avoid a difficult situation, she has demonstrated a reprehensible tendency to flee life’s difficulties rather than try to address them. Elsewhere, Plato has Socrates remark that cowards are unsuited to philosophy (Rep. VI.486b; cf. V.467a). The Laws suggests that laziness is linked with cowardice (X.900e). The view that suicide exhibits cowardice is not unique to Plato. See Aristotle, E.N. 1116a13-15.
the city commands it, or when an individual suffers extreme misfortune or disgrace. Elsewhere, and for a different case, suicide is not only permitted, it is prescribed. Plato has the Stranger ask us to consider a fellow who is constantly driven to commit a heinously vicious act, such as temple robbery (854a).\(^{32}\) Those persons are admonished to try to rid themselves of their desires to commit such crimes (854b) and to try to purify themselves by performing mystic rites, worshipping the gods, and emulating virtuous people. If these activities fail to eliminate their vicious desires, they are told that death is the preferable alternative: “Looking at death as nobler, rid yourself of life” (854c).\(^{33}\) The passage suggests that suicide is justified – even recommended – when a person’s character is so irremediably bad that she cannot overcome the impulse to commit vicious deeds. Her death, the Stranger remarks, is preferable both for the individual and the state.\(^{34}\)

### 1.4 The Consistent Grounds for Prohibiting Suicide

Scholars have been puzzled about how to obtain a consistent account of Plato’s views on suicide.\(^{35}\) We have seen that the *Phaedo* maintains a general religious prohibition on the grounds

---

\(^{32}\) We have no reason to think that the following account applies only to actual deed specified in the passage, temple robbery. Other instantiations of what *Laws* IX calls the most serious crimes will apply just as well (853a; 854a). The Stranger goes on to discuss treason and murder. Temple robbery is simply his first order of business.

\(^{33}\) καλλίω θάνατον σκεφήμανος ἀπαλλάττου τοῦ βίου.

\(^{34}\) See Chapter 2 for a discussion of how the act may benefit both the individual and the state. It may be questioned how this case relates to the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* prohibits suicide as theft from the gods, while this passage in the *Laws* recommends self-killing rather than stealing a holy object from the gods. But isn’t this just comparing apples to apples – theft from gods to avoid theft from gods? The answer lies in the Stranger’s claim that it is the best thing for people driven to commit evil actions if they cease to live – best for society, but also “best even for themselves” (IX.862e-863a). The Stranger says that such persons are “beyond cure.” Note that, in the event that the individual is unable to expunge her base desires, she will likely succumb to her urge to commit a crime that requires her execution (854e). Presumably, stealing a holy object from the gods and then getting executed would be worse for her than simply taking herself from the gods by executing herself. If “A” is bad and “B” is bad, “A + B” will most assuredly be worse than “A.” But I think it is also likely that something about the individual’s desire to rid herself of her incessant vicious temptations by any means necessary could exculpate her suicide. I discuss this more in Chapter 2.

\(^{35}\) The puzzle is noted in Burnet (1911: 24); Cooper (1999); Frey (1978); Geddes (1885: 224, n. 2); Rowe (1993: 130); and Woozley (58). Only Cooper and Geddes devote much attention to solving the puzzle. Geddes thinks that the *Phaedo* presents the basic ethical grounds of a prohibition, while the *Laws* presents the legal enforcement behind that prohibition. However, his solution oversimplifies the issue. The *Laws* does not merely provide the means to enforce a prohibition against suicide. The dialogue also has plenty of its own to say about why suicide is wrong, and
that suicide is irrational, impious, and unjust. Suicide is permitted only when a god grants some necessity (62c). But the Laws’ grounds for a prohibition are phrased in legal rather than theological terms (IX.873c-d). The Laws also appears to endorse more permissions to suicide than the Phaedo, excusing suicide in four circumstances compared to the Phaedo’s single case. How, then, are we to reconcile the texts?

In what follows, I argue that Plato’s account in the Laws is consistent with that he expresses in the Phaedo. The same theological and philosophical grounds prohibiting suicide are found in both texts, and the Laws’ exceptions to the prohibition can be viewed as more explicit conditions of the Phaedo’s “necessity from god.”

To make this case, it is necessary first to understand something of how Plato treats the gods in the Laws. The first word in the Laws is “god” (θεός, I.624a1), and the question establishing the dialogue’s whole premise is whether law comes from a god or humankind (I.624a1-3). The existence and nature of the gods thus has central importance in the dialogue. Even as he begins founding the city of Magnesia, the Stranger prays to a god to “attend the foundation of the state” and help to settle the laws in the best way (IV.712b). He claims that “a god controls everything, and chance and occasion cooperate with god in guiding human things” (IV.709b). The details are left vague. He does not clarify which god this is, or how that god controls all human things.

---

36 Note that people in Antiquity would have had no trouble conceiving that theological grounds and legal grounds could constitute the same thing. Contemporary scholars’ concerns about the grounds of Plato’s prohibition may be a modern conceit, influenced by history and the genuine concern to keep government and religion separate in a free society.

37 This vagueness is perhaps intentional. See Mayhew (2010).
Even so, he makes it clear that the deity is intimately connected with the city’s foundation and its laws.

The “Myth of Kronos” in Book IV helps show how the god and the city’s laws can be interrelated.

“Kronos knew, as we have explained, that human nature is never able to take control of all human affairs without being filled with pride and injustice. So, thinking on this, he set up then kings and rulers for our cities – not men, but beings godlike and superior: spirits. We do the same now for our sheep and other domesticated animals. We don’t put cattle as rulers over cattle, or goats over goats, but we control them ourselves, because we are a better species than they are. And so the god, who is a friend to humanity, did the same. He put over us spirits who were better than we, who ruled in a way that provided much ease for them and for us, caring for us, providing peace and respect, good laws, and justice to the full, and a state of happiness and harmony among all peoples. And now what this account means, using truth, is that wherever the ruler of a city is not a god but a mortal, there is no rest for people from evils and labors. But it is necessary for us to imitate in every way what life was said to be like under Kronos; an mortal, there is no rest for people from evils and labors. But it is necessary for us to imitate in every way what life was said to be like under Kronos; and in obedience to whatever in us partakes of immortality, we should run our public and private life, our homes and cities, and dignify the edict of reason by naming it ‘law’ ” (IV.713c-714a).38

In brief, the myth professes that in the past, the god Kronos, out of concern for humankind, set benevolent rulers over humanity. Under Kronos’ divine law and guardianship, humanity flourished. Recognizing this good history, humans now should live under law.

Two other Platonic dialogues also refer to the myth of Kronos, and what they say about the myth may help to illuminate its use in the Laws. The Cratylus provides the etymology of the name

---

38 γεγνόσκον ὁ Κρόνος ἄρα, καθάπερ ἡμεῖς διεληλύθαμεν, ὡς ἀνθρωπεῖα φύσις οὐδεμία ἰκανή τά ἀνθρώπινα διοικοῦσα αὐτοκράτερ πάντα, μὴ οὐκ ὅρεος τε καὶ ἀδίκιας μεστοῦσθαι, ταῦτ᾽ οὖν διανοούμενος ἐφίστη τότε βασιλέας τε καὶ ἄρχοντας ταῖς πόλεσιν ἡμῶν, οὐκ ἀνθρώπους ἄλλα γένους θειοτέρον τε καὶ ἀμείνοντας, δαίμονας, οὖν νῦν ἡμεῖς δρόμον τοῖς ποιμνίοις καὶ ἄλλους ἡμερίας εἰσιν ἀγέλα: οὐ βοῦς βοῦν οὐδὲ ἄγας αἰγόν ἄρχοντας ποιοῦμεν αὐτοῖς πνεύμα, ἀλλ᾽ ἡμεῖς ἀὐτῶν διανοούμενοι, ἀμεῖνοι ἕκεινον γένος, ταῦτῶν δή καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἄρα καὶ φιλάνθρωπος ὄν, τὸ γένος ἀμεῖνον ἡμῶν ἐφίστη τό τῶν δαίμονων, ὄ διὰ πολλῆς μὲν αὐτοῖς ῥαστώνης, πολλῆς δ᾽ ἡμῶν, ἐπιμελοῦμεν ἡμῶν, εἰρήνην τε καὶ αἰῶνα καὶ ἑυνομίαν καὶ ἄρσιν καὶ ἄρσιν δικίας παρέχομεν, αὐταῖσιν καὶ εὐδαιμονία τά τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀπηγάζομεν γένη. λέγει δή καὶ νῦν οὐτὸς ὁ λόγος, ἀλλήλα ἅρμας ἡμῶν, οὐς ἄλλοις ἄν τοὺς νῦν ἄρχοντας τοὺς τῶν ἁρχῶν ἀνθρώπων, τοῖς πολίταις τοῦ ἐκείνων ἐκείνων, ἀλλὰ καὶ ταῖς ἀρχαῖς ἀνθρώπων, καὶ οὐκ Ἰλίδας τοὺς τῷ νῦν ἄνθρωπος ἡμῶν, ἀλλὰ τούτω προσφέρεται πάση μηχανή τῶν ἐπὶ τοῦ Κρόνου λεγόμενον βίον, καὶ οἷον ἡμῖν ἄθεστος ἔνεστι, τούτῳ προσφέρεται διηθαὐσκοῦσα καὶ ἀλλ᾽ ἡμῖν ἀρχηγότας τάς τ᾽ ὧν καὶ τάς πόλεις διοικεῖν, τήν τοῦ νῦν διανοομένη ἐπονομάζοντας νόμον.
“Kronos.” “Kronos,” is said to derive from καθαρός (“pure”) and νοῦς (“reason”), and thus means “pure reason” (396b). This etymology suggests a reason why Kronos’ rule could have been good for humanity, namely, that humans were ruled by a god who somehow embodied pure reason. In the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger’s presentation of the myth underscores this interpretation. He says Kronos possessed the knowledge to rule justly and well, so his rule was characterized by perfect peace and prosperity (271e). But now humans rule, and humans lack knowledge of the political art. As a result, humans cannot rule as well as Kronos. Humans must compensate for their innate imperfections by making written laws that imitate as well as possible the best rule that humanity had under Kronos (301e). So legislators write laws with the goal to approximate the excellent life that humanity enjoyed under Kronos’ governance. These laws are mere “imitations of the truth” (300b-c), and are thus inferior to Kronos’ divine rule.39

If we take identities in the *Cratylus* to explain what is happening in the *Laws*, we will see that the *Laws* also holds that Kronos’ rule was good because humans were ruled by a god who somehow embodied pure reason. Kronos could rule justly and well because he knew how to rule. The Athenian Stranger indicates that “law” (νόμος) is etymologically connected with reason (νοῦς).40 Accordingly, living under law is how humans may imitate Kronos’ good, rational divine rule, and how they may approximate the happy condition they had under Kronos’ governance.41 Like the *Statesman*, the *Laws* frequently describes the arrangement of living under law as second-best (793a, e, 807b, 875d). But it is as close as human beings can come to the divine rule of Kronos. The *Laws*’ use of the Kronos story thus establishes relationships between reason, divinity,

---

39 This interpretation of the *Statesman*’s myth agrees with Kahn (2009).
41 Plato thinks humans should want to emulate Kronos’ good rule because their time under Kronos was good, peaceful, and happy. See also Sedley (2003: 38, 91).
and law. It implies that living under the rationally developed law is as close to living under a god’s rule as is humanly possible.

This connection between divinity and law is reinforced soon after, when the Stranger proposes how he would address the new settlers of Magnesia. He claims:

“There is a god who holds in his hands the beginning and end and middle of all beings, who going about accomplishes immediacy in accordance with nature; and following him always is Justice – avenger of those who abandon the divine law – whom the one who is going to be successful (eudaimón) follows in humility and orderliness” (IV.715e-716a).

A god is in charge of “all beings” (cf. X.891e). Justice is another god, following the first god, and she takes vengeance on transgressors against the divine law. Since Justice can take vengeance on transgressors against “divine law,” it follows that a divine law must exist. This law presumably owes its origin to the first god listed in the passage, the god who holds all beings. So it appears that following the law is associated with following the gods.

Plato later makes the link between following the laws and following the gods even more explicit, when he has the Stranger claim that “being a slave to the laws first is how to be a slave to the gods” (VI.762e). Considering the earlier passages that identify divinity with reason and law, this statement suggests two points. First and most obviously, it suggests that following the law entails serving the gods. A person cannot serve the gods when she transgresses the city’s law. If Plato identifies service to the gods with piety (as at least one text might suggest, Euthyph. 12e-13a, 13d), then following the laws will be pious, while not following the laws will be impious.45

---

42 ὁ μὲν δὴ θεός, ὄσπερ καὶ ὁ παλαιὸς λόγος, ἀρχὴν τε καὶ τελευτὴν καὶ 'μέσα τῶν ὧν ἔχειν ἄπαντον ἔχων, εὐθείᾳ περαίνει κατὰ φύσιν περιπορευόμενος: τῷ δὲ ἣς περιπορεύεσθαι δίκη τῶν ἀπολειπομένων τοῦ θείου νόμου τιμωρός, ἢς ὁ μὲν εὐδαιμονήσει μέλλων ἐχόμενος συνέπεται.
44 πρῶτον μὲν τῶν νόμων, ὡς ταύτην τοῖς θεοῖς οὕσαν δουλείαν. I thank Nich Baima for pointing out this passage to me.
45 This point also appears in another early dialogue, the Crito, suggesting that a link between piety and justice carries through Plato’s philosophical career. In the Crito, Socrates relates that one’s relationship with the laws to one’s relationship with one’s parents. If violence against one’s parents is unjust, then it is even more impious to do
Second, the passage suggests that, insofar as law manifests divine reason (from IV.714a), following law is also an exercise of reason. An agent’s failure to obey the law will be irrational.

The evidence suggests that when Plato has the Stranger establish Magnesia’s laws, he does not do so apart from theological considerations. Just law, the law we want in a good society and that will promote the common good (IV.713c-714a), is divine law.\textsuperscript{46} This may mean only that the law originates in reason, but since reason itself is ultimately divine, the Stranger uses theological language. A god rules if reason rules, and reason rules if the state employs just law (cf. VIII.835e). Individual mortals can be \textit{eudaimōn}, and act rationally, piously, and justly only if they follow the just law originating in divine rule, that is, reason.

Further evidence for these points exists even when the Stranger discusses injustice against the state. He says that deeds that lead to the state’s destruction are impious (ἀνόσια, IX.854c-7). Since the Stranger has identified law with divinity and reason, this otherwise obscure statement has an explanation. The Stranger correlates injustice against the state with impiety because he thinks that breaking the city’s laws not only harms the city, but also disrespects the divinity who brought the city’s laws to be (viz., Justice and the god she follows, from IV.715e-716a). Because the law is divine – or at least grounded in reason, which is something divine – it is possible to act against both the city and the deity together. So, if a person commits injustice against the city, she also necessarily commits impiety against the deity.\textsuperscript{47} Any such act is also irrational, insofar as the act transgresses law, which is the manifestation of reason.

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{46} See Annas (2010: 89-91).
\textsuperscript{47} See also Zuckert (2013: 176).
These considerations influence how we understand Plato’s account of suicide in the *Laws*. We will recall that Plato has the Stranger categorize suicide among the impious deeds that destroy the state’s condition (IX.854c ff.). It follows that, when he prohibits suicide as unjust to the city, he also prohibits suicide as irrational and impious. Any suicide that transgresses the law will be seen as not only harming the city, but also as offending the divinity who formulated the city’s law (IV.715e-716a). Moreover, because law is grounded in reason, that particular suicide will also be irrational. So, although it is never said outright that suicide is impious and irrational, suicide will be viewed as impious and irrational by default. It will also constitute injustice against the gods, insofar as impiety involves treating the gods unjustly.

Thus, the *Laws*’ prohibition against suicide is not merely legal, as it first appeared. Once we recognize how the text identifies law with reason and divinity, we see that the *Laws* also prohibits suicide as irrational, and as unjust and impious against the gods. These grounds are the same grounds that we see Plato employ in the *Phaedo*. Thus, Plato’s two texts share the same grounds for prohibiting suicide.

1.4.1 Objection 1

It may be objected that even if the texts share the same grounds for the prohibition, the texts still may not share the same reasons for these grounds. This objection can be pressed in either of two ways:

1) The *Phaedo*’s reasons for the grounds are absent from the reasons provided in the *Laws*.

2) The *Laws*’ reasons for the grounds are absent from the reasons provided in the *Phaedo*.

I must address these points before continuing.
Regarding the first puzzle, in the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates claim that suicide is impious and irrational primarily because it involves unjust “theft” from good gods (62b6-c9; 63b). At first glance, this reason appears absent from the *Laws*. But the reason may well be implicitly present. The *Phaedo*’s argument calls the gods “caretakers” (ἐπιμελουμένους) and human beings their “possessions” (κτήματα). Plato does not abandon these titles in the *Laws*. On the contrary, he twice has the Stranger use exactly the same language to express the same idea: humans are the gods’ possessions.

Passage 1: Stranger: “And indeed we say that all living creatures are possessions [κτήματα] of gods, like even the whole universe.” Kleinias: “Of course.” Stranger: “So whether you argue that these possessions count for something little or much to the gods, in no way would it be proper for our owners to neglect us, since they are most careful and best” (X.902b7-c3).48

Passage 2: “But gods and spirits are fighting on our side, the gods and spirits whose possessions [κτήματα] we are” (X.906a).49

The first passage is particularly informative. It occurs in response to Kleinias’ objection that the gods care nothing about human interests. The Stranger, just as Socrates in the *Phaedo*, replies that the gods are good (X.901e; cf. *Phd*. 63b). As part of their goodness, the gods neglect nothing, least of all their human possessions (κτήματα). So the gods must care about humans. The Stranger later calls the god a “caretaker” (ἐπιμελούμενος, X.903b5; cf. 902c3), the same title that applied to the gods prohibiting suicide in the *Phaedo*.

The similarities between the *Laws*’ passages and the *Phaedo*’s second analogy are suggestive. The *Phaedo* recognizes suicide as impious because the gods are good and care about their human possessions. These same assumptions exist in the *Laws*. Since the gods care about

---

48 Ἀθηναῖος: θεόν γε μὴν κτήματά φαμεν εἶναι πάντα ὑπὸ σοὶ θνητά ζῆσα, ὡσπερ καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν ὄλον. Κλεινιάς: πῶς γὰρ οὐ; Ἀθηναῖος: ἢδη τοῖνυν σεμικρὰ ἢ μεγάλα τις φάτω ταῦτα εἶναι τοῖς θεοῖς: οὐδὲντέρῳς γὰρ τοῖς κεκτημένοις ἡμᾶς ἀμελεῖν ἀν εἰπὶ προσήκουν, ἐπιμελεστάτος γε οὕσι καὶ ἄριστος. 49 ξύμμαχοι δὲ ἡμῖν θεοὶ τε ἀμα καὶ δαίμονες, ἡμεῖς δ’ αὐτοῖς κτήματα θεόν καὶ δαμόνων:
their human possessions in both texts, humans will have the same reasons to remain under the benevolent gods’ care in the Laws as they have in the Phaedo. Thus, the Laws shares the Phaedo’s reasons grounding a prohibition against suicide.

However, the second puzzle has more teeth. In the Laws, the primary stated reason grounding the prohibition is that suicide harms the state. The concept of harming the state is noticeably absent from the Phaedo’s explanation of the prohibition. But I think its absence is explainable and, at any rate, does not lend much difficulty to the texts’ consistency.

The absence may be explained by the fact that Plato has a narrower goal in the Phaedo than he has in the Laws. Socrates in the Phaedo concerns himself with the general grounds for prohibiting suicide. However, given that he is going to commit suicide at the dialogue’s conclusion, Socrates is ultimately interested in the particular exception that allows his own suicide (62c). Because the city demands his death (Phd. 116c; Ap. 39b), he is not worried that his suicide is an injustice against the city. Any possible injustice would have to be against the gods, or against his friends and family. As a result, Socrates does not consider the Laws’ reasons in the Phaedo. He has no need to. Thus, it should not trouble us that Plato does not mention the same legal reasons for a prohibition in the Phaedo that he does in the Laws. It is enough that he takes up the Phaedo’s theological grounds in the Laws as a common thread between the texts.

---

50 I thank Eric Brown for suggesting this response to me. It will be objected that Socrates thinks his death is bad for the city (Ap. 39c-d). But here we must distinguish between saying “X is bad for Y” and saying “X does bad to Y.” To say Socrates’ death is bad for the city does not mean that Socrates treats the city unjustly.

51 Notice that this point suggests Geddes got something right: the Laws does talk about enforcing the Phaedo’s prohibition against suicide.
1.4.2 Objection 2

The emphasis I have placed on Plato’s theological prohibitions of suicide may seem unsatisfying. Such arguments will be useless to those who deny that we human beings are possessions of a caring god.\textsuperscript{52} To alleviate such concerns, we might consider whether Plato’s arguments against suicide have a shared philosophical ground in both texts aside from religious convictions. I think it can.

We can identify such grounds if we understand Plato’s reasons regarding “the gods” merely as reasons regarding some higher order within which we live. What if, instead of understanding this idea as an explicit concern about the city’s gods, we instead took it to mean that we ought to live lives that respect and care for our fellow citizens? This response is promising, for it would mean that we should generally not commit suicide because suicide will exhibit injustice to our loved ones. On this understanding, suicide would be wrong because it would involve deliberately fleeing the role one has as a friend, family member, and member of society.\textsuperscript{53}

We can identify something that supports this idea implicit in the \textit{Phaedo}. Late in the dialogue, Plato has Socrates say that all things in the world are arranged in accordance with the good (97b8 ff.). Since “all things” are arranged in accordance with the good, it would follow that every human being’s life is essentially good. Suicide could be said to involve a willful departure from the higher order within which the human being resides, rather than as “fleeing” or “stealing from” the gods (62b-c). If an agent kills herself, she takes herself away from the world or society.

\textsuperscript{52} Cp. Bostock: the “mere fact that the gods do want us to do something cannot ever be the final answer to the question why we ought to do it” (1986: 19).
\textsuperscript{53} Dorter (1982: 25) expresses a similar sentiment.
to which she somehow contributes an integral part. Those around her could be made worse off because of her action. So she (generally) ought not to kill herself.\textsuperscript{54}

The major strike against this argument is that Socrates may be accused of exhibiting callous indifference towards his friends and family as he contemplates his own suicide.\textsuperscript{55} Most notably, Socrates has his wife, Xanthippe, escorted away without acknowledging her concern for himself and his friends (\textit{Phd. 60a-b}). He also waves off his friends’ complaints that he wrongs them by dying (63a; \textit{Crit. 45d-e}).

However, I think the reason for Socrates’ seeming indifference is that Socrates understands himself as facing one of the few circumstances that allow him to discount his friends’ and family’s interests. He claims that a god has sent him some necessity (\textit{Phd. 62c}). Along with that, Socrates never denies that his friends’ and family’s interests are important. However, he does say that living well and acting justly is the most important (\textit{Crit. 53c}). Although I reserve most of this discussion for later,\textsuperscript{56} it will be sufficient for the current purpose to note that Plato’s account of suicide does not require that an agent remain alive no matter what. Neither the \textit{Phaedo} nor the \textit{Laws} holds an absolute prohibition against suicide. So at least some circumstances do not require an agent’s remaining alive out of an overweening commitment to the common good, or to the good of one’s friends and family. But is what the two texts have to say about the exceptions to the prohibition consistent?

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{54} We see similar arguments against suicide raised in contemporary literature. Some scholars note that suicide is impermissible if, by committing suicide, the agent reneges on some benefit she provides or some duty she holds to another person – especially to a friend or family member. See Cholbi 62-64. Occasionally, this concept is expanded to society as a whole. The argument takes the general form that society depends in some way on goods or services the individual provides, and that the individual can no longer provide those benefits if she commits suicide. See, especially, Kant (6:422); Cholbi (58-60).

\textsuperscript{55} Others have noted this seeming indifference and even rudeness. Dorter notes that Socrates almost seems to “go out of his way to insult his companions” (34).

\textsuperscript{56} See Chapter 2.5 of this dissertation.
1.5 The Consistent Exceptions

In the *Phaedo*, Plato has only had Socrates provide one set of permitted circumstances ("necessity from god"), and one example of such circumstances (Socrates’ case). The worry is that this single exception may be unable to correlate with the *Laws*’ four, more particularized exceptions. I argue that the texts’ exceptions are consistent because the *Phaedo*’s single exception is broad enough to encompass the *Laws*’ exceptions.

Consider the key text from the *Phaedo*:

"Then perhaps because of this it is not unreasonable to say that a person must not kill himself until a god sends some necessity upon him, such as the one that has now come before us" (62c6-9).57

Concealed within this statement is a significant phrase, specifying that the necessity from god occurs in cases “such as (ὡςπερ) the case that has now come before us.” This phrase suggests that the case before the dialogues’ interlocutors – Socrates’ case – is an example. More to the point, Socrates’ case is merely one example of necessity among all other possible cases that may exist. Indeed, there is little reason to indicate that Socrates’ case is “such” a case of necessity if his is the only example of necessity. At the very least, this indicates that the *Phaedo*’s single example of necessity is compatible with the existence of other examples. I suggest, as other scholars have assumed,58 that this includes the cases in the *Laws*.

The greatest difficulty for this reading is that Plato has provided us scant information about what form the divine necessity takes or how it is to be recognized. However, we do know that Socrates indicates to Cebes that a slave could kill himself if the master gives some “sign” that such

---

57 ἵσως τοίνυν ταύτῃ σοι άλογον μὴ πρότερον αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνῃ η δεῖν, πρὶν ἄνάγκην τινά θεὸς ἐπιπέμψη, ὡςπερ καὶ τὴν νῦν ήμίν παροῦσαν.

58 To my knowledge, no explicit argument for this claim has been presented. The following scholars assume the claim without substantive argument: Warren (100); Cooper (525); Rowe (130); Geddes (224); Archer-Hind (9).
is his wish (62c2). This requirement suggests that a god’s necessity might not appear in the form of a direct command. Some less obvious clue or gesture may suffice, and it may very well be up to the individual to determine whether she has received such a sign.

It may help to consider ancient Stoic views of suicide to elucidate this point. The Stoics accepted the same claim that Socrates provides in the *Phaedo*.\(^{59}\) The Stoics thought that suicide was appropriate in many circumstances, and that a divine sign would appear to show when it was time.\(^{60}\) Diogenes Laërtius reports that the Stoics allowed suicide “for the sake of one’s country or friends, and in the case of intolerable pain, handicap, or incurable disease” (VII.130; cf. *SVF* III.768). So, for instance, in incurable disease, the disease itself would be the divine sign of necessity to die.

It is not difficult to perceive how the cases in the *Laws* could constitute signs of a similar nature.\(^{61}\) Consider the *Laws*’ first case: suicide at the state’s command. The sign of necessity is the state’s decree that the person should kill herself. Unquestionable necessity resides in this fate, insofar as the suicide agent could be motivated by the state’s external force.

The second case is suicide because of grievous misfortune. This misfortune will constitute the sign of necessity to die. The Stranger also says that the suicide is “forced” (ἀναγκασθείς) to her action by the occasion of her unfortunate circumstances. So necessity exists for this suicide as well. The suicide is somehow motivated to commit suicide by the grievous misfortune.

\(^{59}\) It is likely that the Stoics took this passage in the *Phaedo* as the basis for their own thoughts on suicide’s permissibility. See Griffin (1986: 72); Rist (1969: 243); Warren (100).

\(^{60}\) The difference is that the Stoics explicitly claim that human reason will be able to identify that sign. Griffin: “[Their] doctrine can be described as an internalization of Socrates’ divine necessity so that it becomes a dictate of man’s own reason, which tells him when life according to nature is no longer possible. This modification of Platonism was made possible by the Stoic belief that the divinity of the world is immanent” (72).

\(^{61}\) Some may question the use of retroactively applying Stoic views to understand Plato’s. But it is likely the Stoic views themselves came from Platonic roots. It is also worth noting that many of the conditions listed as permissible occasions for suicide in D.L. (VII.130) and in the Stoics’ “Banquet List” of *SVF* (III.768) overlap with the conditions Plato has the Stranger propose in the *Laws*. 23
A similar story can be told about the third case, suicide under acute disgrace. If a person is living well, but then falls into an irremediable and unbearable disgrace that mars her life (for example, if she irreversibly loses face before her city), this disgrace will itself constitute the sign of necessity to die. The acute disgrace will motivate the agent to commit suicide.\textsuperscript{62}

The fourth permissible suicide is suicide to avoid performing a heinous deed such as treason, temple-robbing, or murder. It is possible to view even this case as having necessity if we recognize that, in the event that the individual is unable to purify herself of her vicious desires, she will likely succumb to her urges to commit a heinous crime that requires her execution (IX.854e). Thus, she will die just as surely as if she had preemptively killed herself before committing the crime. Death is inevitable for her, one way or the other, if she is unable to free herself from her vicious impulses. The sign of necessity can be made known to her through her inability to purify herself of her vicious desires.

So it is possible to understand all the \textit{Laws}' permissible suicides as more explicit instantiations of the \textit{Phaedo}'s sign of necessity. It remains only to clarify how these cases could constitute signs of necessity from a god, as the \textit{Phaedo} requires (62c).

Since the \textit{Laws}' passages do not explicitly specify anything divine about the circumstances, it may be objected that divine necessity is absent in these cases. But this absence will not be troubling once we recall that the \textit{Laws} assumes that a god is in charge of human affairs.\textsuperscript{63} If a god is ultimately in charge of all human things, then that god is responsible for bringing about these circumstances. Any necessity facing the excused suicides in the \textit{Laws} can therefore be understood as divine, thus satisfying the \textit{Phaedo}'s requirement.

\textsuperscript{62} Cooper suggests that this could be understood as the result of internal coercions (525).
\textsuperscript{63} Plato has had the Stranger remark that “a god controls everything, and chance and occasion cooperate with god in piloting all human affairs.” ὡς θεός μὲν πάντα, καὶ μετὰ θεοῦ τίχη καὶ καιρός, τάνθρωπον διακυβερνῶσι σόμπαντα (\textit{Laws} IV.709b).
1.6 Socrates’ Suicide

Finally, we are able to consider the question that prompted this essay. How is Socrates’ suicide supposedly permissible? Plato has had Socrates say that suicide is impermissible (οὐ...θεμίτον, 61c10) except when “a god sends some necessity, such as the one that has now come before us” (62c7-9). If Plato thinks Socrates commits suicide permissibly in the Phaedo, we must suppose that Socrates has had some message or allowance that constitutes a sign from god. But what is it?

One possibility scholars have proposed is that Socrates’ sign of necessity is something divine, namely, Socrates’ daimonion (a lesser divine spirit). Plato records that a daimonion would sometimes appear to Socrates to stop him from performing a task he had contemplated performing. One occasion especially seems to provide evidence that the daimonion is the sign of necessity to die. After Socrates is sentenced, Plato has Socrates note that the daimonion did not oppose him during his defense (Ap. 40b-c). Since Socrates’ daimonion only appears to stop him from doing something bad, Socrates interprets his daimonion’s absence as a sign that his actions leading to his sentencing and death were right and in accordance with divine will. From this, he takes it that his death is good for him.

Since the necessity facing a permissible suicide is supposed to be divine, it may seem appropriate that a divine spirit would grant Socrates the permission to kill himself. Indeed, the fact that Plato has Socrates call the daimonion a “sign” (σημεῖον, Ap. 40c3) may suggest an implicit

---

64 πρὶν ἀνάγκην τινὰ θεὸς ἐπιπέμψῃ, ὡσπερ καὶ τὴν νῦν ἡμῖν παροῦσαν.
65 Warren expresses tentative sympathy for this view (100).
connection to the *Phaedo*’s sign of necessity from god (cf. μὴ σημήναντός σου ὃτι βούλει αὐτὸ τεθνάναι, 62b-c).

Unfortunately, the interpretation that the *daimonion* provides the sign of necessity has one glaring problem. The *Laws* mentions nothing as a condition for permissible suicide that even remotely resembles the *daimonion*’s purported role in Socrates’ life. Thus, if Socrates’ *daimonion* provides Socrates’ required sign of necessity, then it would be an occasion completely absent in the *Laws*. To me, this is an unacceptable result.

A better explanation would guarantee that the necessity Plato can attribute to Socrates in the *Phaedo* is one that is also mentioned in the *Laws*. In other words, Socrates must kill himself because of extreme disgrace, a desire to avoid performing heinously vicious acts, extreme misfortune, or civic order (IX.854a, 873c).

Two of these conditions are obvious non-starters. First, it is clear that Socrates, at least as Plato presents him, does not suffer disgrace at his life’s end. Plato has Socrates claim that he has done no wrong worthy of punishment (*Ap.* 36b-d), which suggests that Socrates thinks he has done nothing for which he ought to feel disgrace. Second, given Socrates’ avowed commitment to virtue (*Ap.* 32a-e, 35d; *Grg.* 522b-d; *Phd.* 69d), it seems equally unlikely that Plato would think Socrates is plagued with the desire to perform heinously vicious acts that would cause him to see death as preferable to continued life. That leaves two serious contenders, either extreme misfortune or conviction by the state. If either of these options applies to Socrates’ case, we have a way forward.

---

67 Although Plato has some of Socrates’ interlocutors consider it disgraceful for Socrates to practice philosophy (e.g., Callicles at *Grg.* 485a-e), it is doubtful that Plato would agree with this assessment, since he has Socrates argue so vehemently against it. It may also be argued that Socrates would be disgraced if he had failed to follow the city’s laws. But this statement is counterfactual. Socrates does not fail to follow the city’s laws, so he is not disgraced in that way.
One author has suggested that Socrates’ sign of necessity is extreme misfortune. In particular, Socrates receives permission to die through the sign of being unjustly condemned to death. The interpretation assumes that Socrates is innocent, and that the Athenians have wrongfully convicted him of impiety and corrupting the youth.

The interpretation has much to commend it. After all, it could be considered unfortunate if someone were condemned to die unjustly. Plato even has one of Socrates’ interlocutors in the Gorgias, Polus, remark about just such a case, “Surely the one who is put to death unjustly is the one who is both pitiable and miserable” (469b).

But the interpretation does not succeed. Socrates shoots down Polus’ remark when he claims that being put to death unjustly does not make a person miserable. Rather, committing vicious actions make a person miserable (469b-c). Moreover, Socrates seems to deny that any truly good person can suffer misfortune when he claims that “you will suffer nothing terrible if you really are a fine and good person, one who practices virtue” (527d; cf. Ap. 41c-d). As long as Socrates practices virtue, it is unlikely that he would find extraordinary misfortune in the state’s condemnation, even if that condemnation were unjust. So the interpretation that Socrates finds necessity in some great misfortune is untenable.

That leaves only one serious contender for Socrates’ suicide to be consistently permissible under both the Phaedo’s and the Laws’ reasons: a state’s order to commit suicide. This option clearly applies to Socrates’ case. We know that the state condemned Socrates to die (Ap. 38c; Phd. 98e-99a). We also know that his death sentence was to drink poison by his own hand (Phd. 116d).

---

68 Rowe (130).
69 Rowe does not defend this assumption, but substantial evidence exists to suggest Socrates is innocent of the charges. On the controversy here, see Burnyeat (2002) and Parker (2002).
70 Ἡ ποι ὁ γε ἀποθήκης ἀδίκος ἔλεενός τε καὶ ἀθλιός ἐστιν.
71 οὐδὲν γάρ δεινόν πείσῃ, ἡν τῷ ὅτι ἡς καλὸς κάραθος, ἀσκόν ἀρεγῇν.
ff.). In the *Phaedo*, after Socrates has already established that he has received necessity from god (62c), he explicitly associates his death with the Athenians’ conviction. The reasons (αἰτίας, 98e1) he provides for his death are “that the Athenians decided that it was better to condemn me, and therefore I have decided that it was better for me to sit here and that it is just for me remaining to suffer whatever judgment they order” (98e2-5).72 Accordingly, Socrates chooses to commit suicide only after recognizing that his state has convicted him.

The evidence suggests that the best interpretation for Socrates’ sign of necessity is that the state convicts him to die. This interpretation works well with the *Phaedo*, because the state can provide a sign of necessity. Insofar as a god is in charge of all human things (*Laws* IV.709b), that sign may be said to be from a god.73 This interpretation of the sign also fits with the *Laws*, because the *Laws* lists self-killing under civic order as a permissible suicide. Finally, this interpretation resonates with passages in the *Crito* (46b) and the *Phaedo* (98e) where Plato has Socrates associate his death with the state’s conviction. So the state’s conviction is the sign indicating to Socrates that he may commit suicide permissibly.

1.7 Response to Objections

Some may object that Socrates could not have committed suicide if the state ordered him to do it. After all, we tend to think that suicide requires the agent’s own intentional and responsible choice, and it seems unlikely that a compelled suicide is really up to the agent. Ancient readers would not have had the same response. The Athenian speech-writer, Lysias, remarks on deaths of

72 ἐπειδὴ Ἀθηναίοις ἐδοξε βέλτιον εἶναι ἐμοὶ καταψηφίσασθαι, διὰ ταῦτα δὴ καὶ ἐμοὶ βέλτιον ἀδ ἀδικοῦτα ἐνθάδε καθησαίτα, καὶ δικαιώτερον παραμένοντα υπέχειν τὴν δίκην ἢν ἢν κελεύσωσιν.

73 This point dispenses with Rowe’s single objection against Socrates’ necessity being the state’s conviction. Rowe thinks the state’s conviction cannot be “from god” because the state consists of human agency and responsibility, not divine (130). But since all human affairs are under god’s command (*Laws* IV.709b), that will not be a concern for Plato.
this kind. He writes that those the Thirty Tyrants condemned to death were “forced to become self-murderers.”

Here, even in circumstances where a clear compulsion for the agents to kill themselves exists, the agents performing the deed still receive the title “self-murderer.” It suggests the ancient conception is that the agent is still somehow responsible for killing herself, even if she performs the deed at another’s command. I argue elsewhere that Socrates, as Plato presents him, is immune to arguments that say he is not responsible for or did not intend his death.

Others may protest that something yet needs to be said to explain why Socrates should call the *daimonion* a “sign” (*σημείον, Ap. 40c3), if it is indeed the case that the *daimonion* does not provide the sign of necessity to die. I reply that the *daimonion* is a “sign” – as Socrates indicates. But it is best understood as a sign verifying or contravening a course of action that Socrates is thinking about performing, not as a sign of necessity to die. At best, the *daimonion* provides Socrates an indication that something he is contemplating doing is bad (in which case the *daimonion* appears) or, possibly, good (in which case the *daimonion* is presumably absent). It is not itself a sign of necessity for Socrates to do something positive, as would be required if it were to indicate that committing suicide was permissible. However, the *daimonion* can constitute a sign that Socrates may interpret to mean that his decision to abide by the state’s ruling is a just and right decision. So, when Socrates’ *daimonion* does not appear at the *Apology*’s conclusion or in the intervening time between his conviction and his death in the *Phaedo*, Socrates can take its absence

---

74 φονεύως αὐτῶν ἡνάγκασαν γένεσθαι (*Contr. Era. XII.17, 96)
75 See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
76 All instances when Socrates mentions his daimonic sign are cases where he is stopped from doing something. We have no example of the *daimonion* giving him a positive directive, except in the loose sense that Socrates takes its lack of appearance to be a sign that he should continue doing what he was already doing (Ap. 40a-c). See Vlastos, et al. in Smith & Woodruff (2000: 176-204), for discussion.
as a further indication that the action he has already chosen (viz., killing himself) is the right action for him to do.\textsuperscript{77}

Finally, it may be objected that it does not make sense for Socrates’ sign of necessity from god to be a civic ruling that is quite possibly unjust. As we have seen, Socrates is portrayed as just (118a), and Socrates himself protests that he has knowing done nothing worthy of punishment (\textit{Ap}. 36b-d). Beyond that, Socrates himself suggests that his trial may not be optimally just since it was tried in only one day.\textsuperscript{78} So his conviction may seem undeserved. How, then, could Socrates’ sign of necessity to die be an unjust verdict?

I think the key here is that Socrates does not mindlessly follow the city’s ruling. He claims in the \textit{Apology} and the \textit{Phaedo} that he follows the god above all. The god he follows is one who commands him to philosophize in Athens (\textit{Ap}. 22a, 23b, 29c-30a, 38a; \textit{Phd}. 60e-61a). His task is to exhort his fellow citizens, disabusing them of their false opinions, and encouraging them to be self-reflective. The god commands humans to use reason in all circumstances. Thus, to obey the god is simply to do what seems best after doing some serious reasoning, that is, philosophizing.\textsuperscript{79} So when Socrates says he obeys the god, he does as reason bids.

Socrates tells us of two occasions when he defied the city’s ruling. The first time, he refused to partake in the trial of ten generals as a group (\textit{Ap}. 32b). The second time, he refused an order to arrest Leon of Salamis (32c-d). The rationale he cites for his refusal is that the city’s orders did not seem just or pious. Yet the only obvious evidence for his claim is his own reasoned

\textsuperscript{77} As he claims to do at the \textit{Apology}’s conclusion. In this view, I concur with Jones (2013).
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ap}. 37a7-b2; cf. Brickhouse & Smith (1989: 42, n. 147 and 75-76), and Shaw (2011: 195, n. 29).
\textsuperscript{79} For a similar account of Socrates’ religion, see Weiss (15-23).
conviction that the order was unjust.80 If his reason had told him otherwise, he presumably would have seen no difficulty, and would have changed his actions accordingly.

We have good evidence that this answer also applies to his suicide. We saw earlier that Socrates sums up his reasons to carry out the death penalty by saying this: “that the Athenians decided that it was better to condemn me, and therefore I have decided that it was better for me to sit here and that it is just for me remaining to suffer whatever judgment they order” (Phd. 98e2-5).81 Socrates does not die simply because he recognizes the city’s conviction. Rather, he “decided” to carry out that judgment after determining that that action would be the just action. As he claims to have done in the cases in the Apology, Socrates chooses his actions through the reasoned consideration of whether the proposed actions are just for him to do. He follows the god, because he follows his reasoned consideration of what is right. In that sense, the city’s conviction is a sign of necessity to die only because Socrates’ reason and the god verify that it is the sign.

The events of the Crito support this interpretation. After Crito tries to persuade Socrates to flee prison, Socrates summarizes his refusal by saying: “So let it be, Crito, and let us act in this way, since this is the way the god is leading” (54d-e).82 Socrates tells Crito to let it be, that is, to stop trying to convince Socrates to escape, and to act in this way, as the law commands. But the reason Socrates gives is not “since this is the way the laws are leading.” Rather, the reason he gives is “since this is the way the god is leading.” The difference is crucial.83 The law requires that Socrates die. But if we take Socrates at his word, he does not die solely because the law

---

80 Some scholars have argued that another reason may lie behind these refusals. In particular, Socrates was ordered by a tyrannical regime to arrest Leon, and it is possible that Socrates did not recognize that regime as a legitimate authority. See, esp. Brickhouse & Smith (1989).

81 ἐπειδὴ Ἀθηναῖοι ἔδωκε βέλτιον εἶναι ἐμοῦ καταψηφίσασθαι, διὰ ταῦτα δὴ καὶ ἐμοὶ βέλτιον ἀν ἰδέοκτα ἑνδόκειν καθήσασθαι, καὶ δικαιώματον παραμένοντα ὑπέχειν τὴν δίκην ἢν ἄν κελεύσωσιν.

82 Ἐα τοίνυν, ὦ Κρίτων, καὶ πράττομεν ταὐτῇ, ἐπειδὴ ὁ θεὸς ὑφηγεῖται.

83 Weiss also points out the importance of this distinction (144).
commands it. Rather he does as the god leads, and the way the god leads happens to be going the same way as the law. Socrates would perhaps not go along with the city’s ruling at all if he were not also convinced that the god led him in that way. He does as reason tells him is best, the same as he claims to have done throughout his entire life (46b).

We may note that Socrates specifically claims that he would defy the city in one particular circumstance: if it commanded that he quit philosophizing. He would refuse that order because it would directly contradict the divine command (Ap. 29d-e; 38a). So the one example we have that Socrates would disobey this court is if it were to command him to go against the god. Socrates will not go along with the court if it contradicts the god’s will. He cares only about what is just for him to do, and what is just to do is simply what reason and the god lead him to do. In that respect, he will commit suicide without concern for whether the city’s conviction is just or unjust, caring only that his own actions remain just. It simply happens that the city’s conviction is the sign making him aware that his suicide is permissible.

Naturally, we will wonder why reason and a supposedly good god would lead him that way. A couple of explanations lend themselves to consideration here. First, it might be argued that Socrates recognizes the city’s conviction is just by some definition, and that he is obliged to follow through because of his own commitments to justice. Perhaps Socrates really was guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth.84 Or maybe his conviction was just because it followed proper legal procedure,85 or because Socrates was contractually obligated to obey the laws.86

---

84 This may be true by the city’s definition. It is obvious how Socrates’ talking about Reason as a deity might not sit well in the Athenian environment of multiple deities. See Burnyeat (2002).
85 We know that Socrates’ trial clearly followed Athenian legal procedure, since Socrates complains about this in the Apology (37a-b).
86 See Gallop (79-84); Woozley (80). A passage in Crito may indicate that Socrates is bound to follow legal procedure because of an implicit agreement he has made by living in Athens for seventy years (51d-e, 52d-53a). He had plenty of opportunity to evade the law before his trial. It may well be that it was unjust for him to fail to obey the law now, when he simply doesn’t like what it has to say.
All of these explanations assume that Socrates’ commitment to justice includes a commitment to the city’s laws above all. But this thesis would be problematic, given the passages we have seen in which Socrates claims to prefer reason and the god. The passages suggest that, although Socrates recognizes the law, his own reason guides his actions more than any legal procedure.

I prefer another explanation – one that better accounts for Socrates’ agency and commitments to reason. Consider if, instead, Socrates’ suicide is the culmination of his philosophical mission. Socrates was seventy years old at the time of his trial. He reports that his death would soon come to him regardless of Athens’ sentence (Ap. 38c; cf. Crit. 53d-e).\textsuperscript{87} Undoubtedly, a quiet death would have its advantages. But if what we are told in the Apology is true, a quiet death for Socrates would have come at the cost of his giving up philosophy (38a).\textsuperscript{88} Since Socrates pursues philosophy at the god’s command (22a, 23b, 29d-e; Phd. 60e), abandoning philosophy would have been unjust. Consequently, Socrates realizes that he cannot give up philosophy. Reason then leads him to see suicide as the just and better option, and to recognize the city’s conviction as the permission he needs to avoid a continued life in circumstances he would deem intolerable.

Socrates’ action is no less suicide because he sees suicide as the better option, even if the alternative to suicide is a compelling disincentive to remain alive. Many suicides are committed under duress of some kind, such that Option A, continuing to live, seems worse than Option B, committing suicide. In those circumstances, the perceived badness of A is a good reason to view

\textsuperscript{87} This sentiment is echoed by Xenophon’s Socrates as well (Xen. Ap. 8-9).
\textsuperscript{88} A passage in the Crito suggests that Socrates would have difficulty philosophizing even if he fled Athens (53b-d).
B as superior. In Socrates’ case, there will be little cost to him for committing suicide, since he is going to die soon anyway (Ap. 38c). But there might be much for him to gain if, as he hopes, he gets to continue philosophizing in the afterlife (Phd. 67b-c; Ap. 40c) and he can maintain his own justice until his end.

89 I show in Chapter 3 that Socrates’ intending to act as justice requires does not mean he did not also intend to die.
Chapter 2

The Wisest Death:
Wisdom and Suicide in Platonic Ethics

2.1 The Question

At the *Phaedo*’s conclusion, we see Socrates calmly pick up the poison and drink (117c). Despite his own assertions that he is unsure what death is (66d-67a), he claims to have “great hope” that his death will be good for him (*Phd*. 67b-c; cf. *Ap*. 40c). He commits suicide in apparent serenity, seemingly unconcerned about his action.

Yet the *Phaedo*’s final words also report to us that Socrates was the wisest (φρονιμώτατος, 118a) of all known men.¹ If we take these closing words at face value, we have strong reason to think that Plato desires us to view Socrates as wise.² This assessment is puzzling. For if Plato thought that Socrates was really a wise man, then Plato must also have thought that Socrates’ committing suicide was somehow compatible with his being wise. But how could that be?

This question rides on more general puzzles concerning Plato’s ethics of suicide. Plato’s ethics are often understood as eudaimonist, on the grounds that Plato’s Socrates sometimes suggests that good reasons for action must culminate in the goal of *eudaimonia* (happiness,

---

¹ Compare to a similar attribution of wisdom to Socrates in the *Apology* during Socrates’ defense (21a). The biographer Diogenes Laërtius also reports about Socrates’ wisdom at the point of death (II.46).
² Because Plato wrote in dialogue form, scholars often note that it is difficult or impossible to determine what Plato’s views are. (See Press ed. [2000] for recent arguments about Plato and the dialogue form.) In this chapter, I seek to construct plausible interpretations of Plato’s views and see how they fit together. I assume that, because the views are included in the dialogue, we know that these are views Plato took seriously, and it is at least possible that Plato endorsed them.
success, or well-being). For the purposes of this essay, I will accept this assumption.

Understanding Plato’s ethics as eudaimonist raises two related concerns about his account of suicide. First, we might worry that his ethics of suicide is too permissive, allowing too many people to kill themselves off at a whim. Conversely, we might worry that his ethics are too exclusive, not allowing everyone to commit suicide who may be better off dead.

In this chapter, I address these worries. I provide a brief background of eudaimonia (Section 2.2) before addressing each concern in turn (Sections 2.3 and 2.4). I argue that Plato’s account of suicide coheres with a eudaimonist framework, and I explain Socrates’ suicide in light of that discussion (Section 2.5).

2.2 Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia has no English equivalent. In Greek, it may be translated as “having a good spirit,” but it is more often translated as “happiness” or “success.” Eudaimonists believe that everyone wants to be eudaimōn (happy, successful). Indeed, in the Euthydemus it is said that asking whether people wish to be eudaimōn is a “ridiculous” question, since the answer is self-evident (278e). Everyone desires to succeed in life. Moreover, they want to succeed for its own sake. Ask anyone why they want to succeed, and the answer will always be that that is the best...

---

3 See, e.g., Charm. 171e-172a; Euthyd. 278e, 280b; Grg. 468b-d; Laws 864a; Meno 77c-78b; Prt. 352b-358e; Rep. 443e, 505e. I discuss several of these passages below.

4 Whether Plato’s ethics are eudaimonist is sometimes disputed. For arguments that Plato was not a eudaimonist, see Moore (1903: 97-105) and White (2002: 45-81). The majority of scholars take him to be some kind of eudaimonist. See Annas (1999: 31-51), Brickhouse & Smith (1994: 73-136), Irwin (1995: 248), Price (2011: 9), Vasiliou (2008), Vlastos (1991: 200-232), Warren (2001). I do not address the question of whether Plato or Socrates was a psychological or a rational eudaimonist. For a good survey of the textual evidence for both positions, see Bobonich (2011).

5 A few philosophers have raised the first question in passing, including Ahrens (1995), Dorter (1982), and Eckstein (1981), but they have kept their discussion limited only to the wisdom of Socrates’ choice to die, dismissing the more general concern about Plato’s view of permissible suicides. Scholars who have raised the second question include Battin (1993) and Warren.
there is (cf. Rep. II.357b; Sym. 205a). Eudaimonia is the highest good for human beings, and “final” in the sense that nothing beyond it is required. It is the ultimate end of human action (Rep. VI.505e). But just what is this highest good?

Plato often has Socrates identify eudaimonia with living well and performing virtuous activity. Consider the following passage:

“So it is most necessary, Callicles, that the prudent man, as we have shown, being just and brave and pious, is a completely good man, and that the good man does well and finely whatever he does, and that he who does well is blessed and successful, while the wicked man, who does badly, is miserable” (Grg. 507b-c).6

The passage shows that being virtuous is the means by which a person can live well, and that in turn allows him to be eudaimōn. A similar thought appears in the Charmides:

“And so a house would be well-run and a city well-governed by means of prudence, and likewise for all things prudence ruled. For with error abolished, and rightness leading, it would be necessary for people to do well in all they did, and doing well, to be successful” (171e-172a).7

According to these passages, being eudaimōn is equated with doing well, and doing well requires doing virtuous activity. In the Crito, Socrates clarifies that “living well and living justly are the same” (48b).8 Living well is the same as living virtuously. So the good life is the same as the virtuous life. In that case, “being eudaimōn” and “living virtuously” must be identical. So eudaimonia just is virtuous activity.9

---

6 ὥστε πολλὴ ἄνάγκη, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, τὸν σώφρονα, ὦσπερ διήλθομεν, δίκαιον ὃντα καὶ ἀνδρεῖον καὶ ὅσιον ἄγαθον ἀνδρα εἶναι τελέως, τὸν δὲ ἄγαθον ἐν τῇ καὶ καλῶς πράττειν ἂν πράτετ, τὸν δ᾽ ἐν πράτοντα μακάριον τε καὶ εὐδαίμονα εἶναι, τὸν δὲ πονηρὸν καὶ κακῶς πράτοντα ἄθλιον:

7 καὶ οὕτω δὴ ὑπὸ σοφροσύνης οἰκία τε οἰκουμένη ἐμελέτην καὶ καλῶς οἰκεῖσθαι, πόλις τε πολιτευομένη, καὶ ἄλλο πᾶν ὑπὸ σοφροσύνης ἔρχομαι ἐκακεμένη, ἐν πάσῃ πρᾶξι καλῶς καὶ ἐν πράτοις ἄναγκαιον τοὺς οὕτω διακεμένους, τοὺς δὲ ἐν πράτοντάς εὐδαιμόνας εἶναι.

8 τὸ δὲ ἐν καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως ὅτι ταὐτὸν ἐστιν.

9 Other philosophers who came after Plato and Socrates say that eudaimonia is virtuous activity, including Aristotle and the Stoics.
However, some scholars\textsuperscript{10} have asserted that virtuous activity is insufficient for \textit{eudaimonia}, claiming that other goods, such as health, wealth, or power, are also required. In that case, \textit{eudaimonia} would require virtuous activity plus some combination of these other goods.

To address this argument properly would require a different project than I have undertaken here. So I will only respond briefly why I think the notion is unpersuasive. Consider the example of health. Undeniably, health can be a good thing (\textit{Rep}. II.357b-c). But sometimes it isn’t good (\textit{Euthyd.} 278c-282d; \textit{Men.} 87e-88a). If things like health are to be necessary for \textit{eudaimonia}, it strikes me that they should be good unconditionally. But health is not like that. For example, a healthy person may be drafted to serve in an unjust tyrant’s army.\textsuperscript{11} Such service would require an agent to perform vicious acts, which would be detrimental to \textit{eudaimonia} rather than beneficial. The person would be better off if she were not healthy, so that she could not be drafted to perform vicious acts. In this case, health’s being a good at all is conditional upon its being used virtuously. Presumably similar arguments work against other goods. Such arguments appear in Plato’s dialogues about health (ibid.), wealth (\textit{Men.} 78e-79a; \textit{Rep.} IX.589d) and ruling power (\textit{Grg.} 470b-c).

Moreover, the fact that \textit{eudaimonia} has no end beyond itself sets it apart from other goods like health, which do have a further end (cf. \textit{Rep.} II.357b-c). People pursue health in part because it leads to other ends like pleasure, or even the ability to perform more virtuous actions. But they do not pursue health exclusively for its own sake as they pursue \textit{eudaimonia} (VI.505e; \textit{Sym.} 205a). For these reasons, I proceed with the assumption that virtuous activity is necessary and sufficient for \textit{eudaimonia}.

\textsuperscript{10} Most notably, Vlastos.
\textsuperscript{11} An example attributed to the Stoics by Sextus Empiricus (\textit{M IV.66}).
2.3 Is Plato’s Account Too Permissive?

Assuming that *eudaimonia* is an activity, we might be tempted to think that a further requirement should be necessary for *eudaimonia*, namely, “being alive.” After all, a person cannot perform any activity if she is dead! This point raises an interesting challenge for Plato’s account of suicide. After all, Plato allows suicide in four circumstances, including when the state has ordered the agent to commit suicide, when the agent is under extreme distress or disgrace, and when the agent seeks to avoid performing a heinously vicious deed (*Phd.* 62c; *Laws* IX.854c-d, 873c-d). But how could any agent desiring *eudaimonia* ever reasonably choose to kill herself? Performing such an action would destroy any future opportunities the agent might otherwise have to perform virtuous actions and contribute to her *eudaimonia*.

The objection is related to a standard objection that suicide is somehow irrational. Immanuel Kant raises the problem in his *Groundwork* and *Lectures on Ethics*. Suicide, Kant thinks, is irrational because the action willfully uses one’s own agency to cut off all future possibilities of agency.¹² The problem is not often raised for Plato’s account.¹³ But the concern exists because Plato allows suicide even though his ethics would seem to value a continued life. After all, a continued life seems essential in order to perform future virtuous activities.

However, we should be careful to distinguish “living” from “living well” here. We saw that “living well” and “living virtuously” are identified with *eudaimonia*. Living badly or living

---

¹² “[Suicide] transcends all limits on the use of free choice, for the latter is only possible insofar as the subject exists” (*Lectures* 27:370). The argument appears somewhat differently in the *Groundwork*, where the choice to kill oneself from self-love is presented as incompatible with the universal law of nature: “It is then seen at once that a nature whose law it would be to destroy life itself by means of the same feeling whose destination is to impel toward the furtherance of life would contradict itself” (4:422).

¹³ Ahrensford and Eckstein come closest to addressing this question, but they focus only on the wisdom of Socrates’ choice to die. But even if Socrates’ choice is wise (or not, as Eckstein argues), it is another matter whether the suicides Plato permits are compatible with his ethics.
viciously is not so favored. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates tells of a ship’s captain who might consider the lives he could save from drowning:

“So he reasons that, if someone with great incurable illness of the body did not drown, this fellow is miserable because he did not die, and has not been benefitted by [the captain]. But if someone has many incurable diseases in what is more valuable than his body, his soul, life for that fellow is not worth living, and [the captain] will not help him if he saves him from the sea . . . But he knows that it is not better for the wretched man to live; for he must live badly” (51a-b).¹⁴

A lot is happening in this passage, but I want to draw attention to the last part in particular. The captain should reason that the person who lives badly is better off dead (cf. 507c; *Crit.* 48b; *Rep.* I.353e-354a). In that case, “life” is like the earlier example of “health.” It is open to qualification. Life may sometimes be a good thing, when it is lived well. But other times, life may not be good, and may even be detrimental. I argue that Plato allows suicide in some of these latter cases. They are situations when a continued life can no longer benefit the agent – situations in which the agent is better off dead.

To see how Plato can make this argument, it will be most helpful to consider the first permitted suicide in the *Laws*.

“Someone may say this to a person whom an evil desire drives by day and night to steal some holy object: ‘Dear fellow, . . . when any of these thoughts enters your head, seek the rites that free from guilt, seek the shrines of curse-lifting gods and supplicate them, seek men who are reputed to be virtuous . . . And if it happens that your illness abates, that is well. But if not, looking at death as nobler, rid yourself of life’ ” (IX.854a-c).¹⁵

---

¹⁴ Λογίζεται οὖν ὅτι οὖκ, εἰ μὲν τις μεγάλος καὶ ἁνίατος νοσήμασιν κατά τὸ σώμα συνεχόμενος μὴ ἀπεπνήγη, οὔτος μὲν ἀθλιός ἦστιν ὅτι οὖκ ἀπέθανεν, καὶ οὐδὲν ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ ὑφέληται: εἰ δὲ τις ἄρα ἐν τῷ τοῦ σώματος τιμωτέρῳ, τῇ ζωᾷ, πολλὰ νοσήματα ἔχει καὶ ἁνίατα, τούτῳ δὲ βιωτὸν ἦστιν καὶ τοῦτον ὑψίστα, ἀντε ἐκ θαλάττης ἀντε ἐκ δικαστηρίου ἐὰντε ἄλλοθεν ὀποθενοῦν σῶσθαι τοὺς, ἀλλ᾽ οὕτω οὐκ ἀμεινόν ἦστιν ζῆν τῷ μικρότερῳ ἁνθρώπῳ: κακὸς γὰρ ἁνάγκης ἦστιν ζῆν.

¹⁵ Λέγει δὲ τις ὅτι ἄκείνῳ . . . ὅτι ἐπιθυμία κακὴ παρακαλοῦσα μεθ᾽ ἠμέραν τε καὶ ἕπεξείρουσα νύκτωρ ἐπὶ τοῦ τοῦ εἰρήνης ἔχει συλήσοντα, τάδε: τὸ δειγμάτικον, οὐκ ἁνθρώπινον σε κακὸν οὐδὲ θείον κινεῖ τὸ νῦν ἐπὶ τὴν ἱεροσυλίαν προτίμησαν ἐννυμία, οὔτε τοῦ σε τὶς ἐμφύομενος ἐκ παλαιῶν καὶ ἀκαθάρτων τοῖς ἁνθρώποις ἀδικημάτων, περιφρούρων ἀλλιπροσέγοντος, ἀλλ᾽ ἐνελαβείσθαι χρησιν παντὸς ὑπερβοῦσα: τίς δ᾽ ἦστιν εὐλάβεια, μᾶλ. ὁταν σου προσπίπτῃ τι τὸν τοιοῦτον δογμάτων, ἢ ἔπι τὰς ἀποδοξασμάτησις, ἢ ἔπι τὰς ἀποτροπαιῶν ἱερὰ ικέτης, ἢ ἔπι τὰς τῶν λέγομένων ἁνδρῶν υμίν ἀγαθον συνουσίας, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄκουε, τὰ δὲ πειρῷ λέγειν αὐτὸς, ὡς δεῖ τὰ καλά καὶ τὰ δίκαια
Plato has the Stranger ask us to consider a fellow who is constantly driven to commit a heinously vicious act, such as temple robbery. Such persons are admonished to try to rid themselves of their desires to commit such crimes and to purify themselves by performing mystic rites, worshipping the gods, and emulating virtuous people. If these activities fail to eliminate their vicious desires, they are told to view suicide as the preferable alternative. The passage suggests that suicide is recommended when a person’s character is so irremediably bad that she cannot overcome the impulse to commit vicious deeds. Her death, the Stranger remarks, is better both for the individual and the state.

It is easy to understand how it could be best for society that such individuals remove themselves. Because such persons are constantly driven to commit acts that are destructive to the state (854c), they risk disrupting the state’s order and security. The state will conceivably be better off without them. But how could such individuals be better off dead for their own sakes as well?

The surrounding context in the *Laws* illuminates this supposed “benefit.” The Stranger says that performing heinous actions is destructive to the individual who does them (862e; cf. *Grg.* 469b). Persons who do such deeds, he says, are “beyond cure.” And indeed, the person whose suicide is being considered is said to have an “illness” (854c). The terminology suggests a medical analogy. The person who is constantly fighting her impulses to perform vicious actions is like someone who has a disease. If she cannot overcome her vicious impulses, then it would be as if the diseased person’s medicine or treatment regimen is ineffective. She may in fact be too far gone to cure.

---

πάντα ἄνδρα τιμάν: τάς δὲ τῶν κακῶν συνουσίας φεύγε ἀμεταστρεπτί. καὶ ἐὰν μὲν σοι δρῶντι ταῦτα λωφᾷ τι τὸ νόσημα: εἰ δὲ μὴ, καλλίω δάντων σκεφτάμενος ἀπαλλάττων τοῦ βίου.

16 We have no reason to think that the following account applies only to actual deed specified in the passage, temple robbery. Other examples of what *Laws* IX calls the most serious crimes will apply just as well (853a; 854a).
Those who are incurably ill are discussed in a short but difficult passage of the *Republic*. In that passage, Plato has Socrates defend rules for medical practice that would require persons who are incurably ill not to be medically treated, but to be allowed to die (III.405c-410a). The stated reason for this harsh-sounding rule is that the person who constantly concerns herself with medical treatment to keep herself alive will no longer have the time, energy, or mental stamina to do her work within society or – more importantly – to foster her own continued virtue. Consider this: if a person spends her all her waking hours undergoing painful medical treatments and fretting about her health, she will have no time left over to devote to virtuous activities or to helping her fellow citizens. She will be too drawn out from trying to keep herself alive and functional. As a result, she can no longer be productive for herself or for her society. Socrates says that such a person should consider life to be of no use (406b-d). She is better off dead, purely because she could not continue to live well in such circumstances.\(^\text{17}\)

Similarly, the person in *Laws* IX.854a-c who has incurable vicious impulses may be so overwhelmed by constantly trying to control her desires, that she cannot do anything else. While she puts forth all her efforts into restraining her vicious desires, she cannot perform virtuous deeds. As a result, she is unable to live well. But – what is worse – she may end up living badly. If she is unable to expunge her vicious desires, she risks contributing negatively both to herself (by committing a vicious deed) and to her society (by disrupting its peace and security). The suggestion that she is “better off dead” indicates no more than that she only harms herself by staying alive. Her death will benefit her because it will stop her from continuing to live a life that

---

\(^{17}\) Note that he must have a very particular case in mind here: a chronic, incurable illness that will not improve over time. Presumably, it is also an illness that requires constant medical attention. An incurable condition that can be easily controlled or that is not terribly disaffecting will not count.
is unable to be eudaimôn. Committing suicide is a preemptive strategy, the only possible cure if her own attempts at expiation and purification have failed.

The passage suggests how Plato could think suicide is beneficial. Suicide may benefit an agent when it keeps her from living a life with negative value, one in which eudaimonia could not possibly be achieved or maintained. These circumstances may arise when a person becomes incapable of engaging in virtuous activity, or if a person faces a situation in which she can only perform vicious actions. Because it would impossible or extremely difficult to live well in such conditions, she would be better off dead.

The answer I am recommending is a Stoic one. Like Plato, the Stoics believed that an agent cannot live a good life without virtue (D.L. VII.102). So, when it happens that some adverse circumstance (for instance, disease or extreme shame) makes performing virtuous activity extremely difficult or impossible, the Stoics think suicide becomes a reasonable option. Suicide is reasonable precisely because the agent’s eudaimonia is unattainable or can even be hampered by a continued life (SVF III.763, 765-6; D.L. VII.130; Seneca Ep. LXX).

This response can easily apply to Plato’s other permissible suicides (at Laws IX.873c-d). In the first case, a person whose state has ordered her to commit suicide would conceivably be obligated to obey. Failing to obey would be unjust. Since committing injustice is worse than

---

18 I am with Warren (100) and Rist (1969: 235 ff.), who both emphasize similarities between Plato’s and the Stoics’ accounts of suicide. Indeed, it is possible that Socrates and Plato are more Stoic in their commitments than is often realized. Consider Brown (2006). Cooper (1999: 526) denies this claim, saying that Plato explicitly disregards the sorts of considerations that allow the Stoics to commit suicide.

19 It is an open question whether an agent is obligated to obey an unjust command or unjust state, since Plato’s Laws provides a specific context that may not apply to every state everywhere. The Laws has as its task the job to form a society as close to perfectly just as possible (IV.713c-718c). Thus, the situation in which suicide is required at the state’s direction may only be when it is commanded within the context of an approximately-just state like the Laws’ Magnesia. As I argue elsewhere, although Socrates recognizes his city’s conviction as the god’s sign of necessity to die, he commits suicide for reasons in addition to the state’s command (see Chapter 1.6 and Chapter 3.2.4). So it is at least conceivable that some state-ordered suicides might not be obligatory.
death (Grg. 469b), the individual is better off dead than committing injustice. She could not be eudaimōn if she remained alive unjustly.

The second case involves a person suffering “excruciating” and “unavoidable” (περιωδύνω, 873c) misfortune. The qualifications indicate that Plato is considering misfortune of such magnitude that things could not conceivably improve enough to allow a life of continued virtue. We have seen how Plato has Socrates claim that a person who is incurably ill should think life is “no use” to her if she has to neglect her work and always be concerned with her illness. He goes on to suggest that a person cannot be eudaimōn if she is overcome by her own pain or suffering. Such a person, he says, should either recover, or should “die and escape trouble” (Rep. III.406d). Presumably, he thinks that the suffering person is too concerned with her own misery to attend to her virtue or to aid her fellow citizens (407b). As a result, she is incapable of performing virtuous actions. She is better off dead, precisely because living well is impossible.

This argument suggests that Plato could allow suicide to those afflicted by misfortune because their living well is no longer possible. Certainly, suffering from a painful, incurable disease or experiencing a traumatic loss are significant impediments to living a good life. When pain or grief have no prospect of alleviation, they can become all-consuming, making a good life difficult, if not impossible. At the very least, it will become more difficult for the agent to perform virtuous activities. For example, a significant loss of physical health makes it impossible to perform certain courageous acts in battle, while extreme depression may hinder living prudently. Committing suicide could quite possibly prevent the agent from continuing to live a life which she could no longer live well.

One would do well to consider Aristotle’s thoughts on extreme misfortune to motivate this conclusion. Aristotle writes: “the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as
is told of Priam in the Trojan cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly nobody calls eudaimōn” (E.N. 1000a). Priam was a mythical king of Troy, blessed with wealth, family, and power. He lived just long enough to watch his children butchered and his city destroyed. Aristotle’s implication is that Priam is denied eudaimonia – despite his excellent youth and prime – purely because of the misfortunes he suffered late in life. He might perhaps have achieved eudaimonia if he had died earlier, before all the good of his life was outbalanced by a single blow of fortune. For this reason, the person wishing to be eudaimōn should consider whether a continued life would irreparably destroy her status and hopes of being eudaimōn. If the answer is “yes,” then suicide could be an option.

A similar answer could explain the third case, a person overtaken by some “irremediable and unbearable” (ἀπόρος καὶ ἀβίω, Laws IX.873c) shame. Presumably, the cases under consideration are cases of such magnitude that the shamed agent has irreversibly lost her dignity. Such persons cannot escape their shame, and they must live under stigma or guilt for the rest of their lives. They may become all-consumed by the repercussions, much as the incurably ill person in the Republic is all-consumed. It would be difficult for them to perform virtuous activities for the city or for their fellow humans. In such cases, eudaimonia would be out of reach. Since they could not live well, they would be better off dead.

2.3.1 Objection 1

Someone may object that I have made Plato’s account appear too permissive of suicide. But the conditions clarify that Plato’s account is not overly permissive. Rather, the situations must

---

20 It is doubtful whether Aristotle would think suicide would be a proper way for Priam to have avoided such circumstances. His account of suicide is more restrictive even than Plato’s. However, Aristotle does make the point very well that some circumstances can arise in which a continued life will undermine the agent’s eudaimonia.

21 Presumably, scholars who think Plato never permits suicide hold this view. See Geddes (1885: 224, n. 2).
be so extreme that an agent’s achieving or maintaining *eudaimonia* is impossible, given her current conditions and expected life trajectory.

The *Laws*’ first permissible suicide clearly makes this point. It says that a person tempted to perform a heinous deed should see suicide as a good option *only after her attempts to purify herself have failed* (IX.854b-c). This qualification suggests that the number of actually permitted suicides is going to be quite small. The fact that a person has to recognize her situation as permissible is itself a significant constraint. Many vicious people will be incapable of recognizing their vice. Of those who do recognize their vice, we can surmise that at least some attempts to curb their vicious desires will be moderately successful. After all, before considering death as preferable, a person should first to try to eliminate her base desires by worshipping the gods, performing purification rites, and emulating virtuous people. She should commit suicide only if those attempts fail, and she realizes that living well is completely beyond her grasp.

If we expand this point to cover the other permissible suicides, suicide will be a legitimate option only when a person recognizes that the deterioration of her life is immense and completely irreparable. Some situations of pain, suffering, or disgrace will go away on their own, or can be overcome. Suicide will not be an option in such cases, precisely because the situations will have little effect on one’s *eudaimonia*. But when unbearable pain or grief, loss of dignity, or certain psychological conditions – for example, overwhelming depression or the urge to commit a heinous crime – have no prospect of alleviation and are all-consuming, suicide can confer benefit. It will allow the agent to leave life before these things can irreversibly cripple her *eudaimonia*.
2.3.2 Objection 2

Another person may object that, because Plato thinks virtuous activity is sufficient for *eudaimonia*, it makes no sense for him to allow suicide based on externals like misfortune and shame – things that should only coincidentally intrude on a virtuous agent’s life. But the account I have reconstructed does not say that Plato allows suicide purely because of the externals. Rather, he allows suicide only when it is no longer possible to maintain one’s *eudaimonia*. It may be that the presence of certain externals can confer a negative influence on an agent’s ability to perform virtuous actions. But the real reason why suicide is permitted in those circumstances is that a continued life could not maintain *eudaimonia*, not simply that the externals exist.

2.3.3 Objection 3

Finally, someone might object that it would exhibit more virtue for the one who would be *eudaimōn* to continue to live, rather than to commit suicide. Perhaps they will argue that it shows more courage to fight on in the face of misfortune or shame, but cowardice to give in and die.²²

However, it is far from certain that committing suicide to avoid something unwanted is cowardly. We often choose to avoid things, and are not deemed “cowards” for doing so, but rather “prudent.” Suppose that you are on a strict diet and know that attending an all-you-can-eat buffet invites disaster. You might think you would be better off if you would avoid temptation by evading the buffet entirely, rather than enter the buffet in a quite possibly futile attempt to prove you can defeat temptation. Similarly, it might be more prudent for an agent to avoid a part of life in which

---

²² This is a familiar argument. Plato has Crito argue against Socrates’ suicide on these grounds (*Crit*. 45c-d). Aristotle also assumes that some acts of suicide exhibit cowardice: “But to die to escape from poverty or love or something distressing is not brave but rather cowardly; for it is softness to flee from what is painful, and the person endures death not because it is good, but to flee from evil” [*E.N.* 1116a13-15]).
she suspects her *eudaimonia* will be severely impinged, rather than for her to willingly endure the experience and hope that she might come through it unscathed. It would be no more cowardly to commit suicide in this case than it would be for you to avoid a buffet with many cakes and martinis on offer. It may be the real courageous choice: to protect one’s *eudaimonia*, even to death.

### 2.4 Is Plato’s Account Too Exclusive?

Plato permits suicide when a continued life can no longer maintain *eudaimonia*. Even so, the circumstances in which he permits suicide are severely limited. Presumably, many people do not relish performing virtuous activities (*Rep.* II.359a ff.), and are therefore incapable of achieving *eudaimonia*. Vicious persons would be better off dead, Socrates says, because they cannot live well (*Grg.* 469b, 507b-c 512a-b; cf. *Rep.* I.354a and the Stranger at *Laws* IX.854c).  

Thus, we face a question that is the reverse of the one that we just considered. Since most people cannot achieve *eudaimonia* anyway, why shouldn’t they all just go out and kill themselves?

The *Phaedo* introduces a related puzzle about another and surprising case: that of philosophers. Socrates leaves a startling message for the sophist, Evenus: “Tell these things to Evenus, Cebes: tell him farewell and, if he is wise, to follow me as quickly as possible” (*Phaedo* 61b9-c1).  

The message is alarming, because it appears to invite Evenus to kill himself. And indeed, Socrates claims that Evenus should be willing to die if he is a philosopher.

---

23 It is possible that the situations permitting suicide are more likely to be met for vicious persons than for virtuous persons. Virtuous persons are less likely to be driven to commit heinous deeds or to do things that require the state to order their suicide. The *Gorgias* also says that virtuous persons are untouched by terrible things (527d; cf. *Ap.* 41c-d), suggesting that misfortune is less likely for them as well. However, I think it possible that an unavoidable misfortune or shame could still affect the virtuous person. The earlier example about a healthy person being drafted into an unjust tyrant’s army could still apply. The circumstance itself will not directly affect her virtue. But it will make performing virtuous activities more difficult, which is what harms her *eudaimonia*.

24 ταύτα οὖν, ὦ Κέβης, Εὐήνῳ φράξε, καὶ ἐρράσθαι καὶ, ἂν σωφρονῇ, ἐμὲ διώκειν ὡς τάχιστα.
Socrates emphasizes that philosophers, who are literally “lovers of wisdom,” desire wisdom. But true wisdom is impossible to achieve in earthly life. While the philosopher is alive, she is a composite being, composed of an immaterial soul and a material body. The body holds the soul until death, at which time the soul is freed from the body and the body becomes an inanimate corpse. Until then, the soul is subject to the body’s physical limitations. It relies on the body’s physical senses (sight, touch, etc.) to receive information about the world. But these senses are unreliable and misleading. So information obtained through the senses is uncertain. Only when the soul escapes from the body can the soul possibly obtain true wisdom. Socrates says:

“But it seems to us that, if we are ever to know anything purely, we must escape the body and observe things in themselves with the soul alone. And then it seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, obtain that which we desire and say we are lovers of, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows, not while we live. For if it is impossible to know anything purely with the body, then one of two things must follow: either it cannot be obtained at all or only when we are dead. For then and not before will the soul be by itself apart from the body” (66d-67a).

According to this passage, death will benefit Evenus (if he is a philosopher) and other philosophers because it will possibly enable them to achieve true wisdom (61d, 62d, 64a). Meanwhile, death will presumably benefit vicious persons because it will keep them from living badly. It is beginning to look like everyone is better off dead!

---

25 Consider the example given in Rep. X of something that appears bent in water and straight when out of water (602c). What our eyes see in the water is deceptive, and not indicative of how things really are.

26 ἄλλα τῶν ὄντων ἢμιν δεδεικτα ὅτι, εἰ μὲν ἄλλομεν ποτὲ καθαρὸς τὸ ἐξεσθαί, ἀπαλλακτέον αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτή τῇ ψυχῇ θεατέον αὐτὰ τὰ πράγματα: καὶ τότε, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἢμιν ἔσται οὐ ἐπιθυμομένον τὸ καὶ φανέν ἐρασται εἶναι, φρονήσεως, ἐπειδὴ τελευτήσαμεν, ὡς ὁ λόγος σημαίνει, ζῶσιν δὲ οὐ. εἰ γὰρ μὴ οἶδον τὸ μετὰ τοῦ σώματος μηδὲν καθαρὸς γνῶναι, διὸν θάτερον, ἢ σοφίᾳ ἔσται κτήσασθαι τὸ εἰδὸν ἢ τελευτήσασιν: τότε γὰρ αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὐτὴν ἢ ψυχὴ ἔσται χωρίς τοῦ σώματος, πρῶτον δ᾽ οὐ.

27 Plato was clearly sympathetic to the ancient sentiment that being dead is better than being alive. Consider Ap. 38a5-6 compared to Epicurus, Ep. Men. in D.L. (X.126-127); Homer, (II, XXII.481); Euripides (Tro. 636-637); Aristotle (E.E. 1215b15-1216a10). I am unaware of any place in the dialogues where Plato touts life’s superiority over death, but several places exist where he seems to place death above life. See esp. Ap. 40b-41a, Phd. 66d-67a, Laws VIII.828d. On this, see also Dorter (17-18).
philosophers and vicious persons not hasten their deaths by committing suicide? Perhaps we should all, if we are truly wise, follow Socrates when he dies.28

2.4.1 A First Stab

But here Plato has Socrates introduce a possible paradox. For Socrates follows his message to Evenus by saying that “perhaps” Evenus will not commit suicide, because that is not right.29 The problem is that, even though suicide appears prudentially beneficial in some cases, suicide is generally a prohibited action. But how can it be claimed both that some people are better off dead, and also that suicide is not right? Shouldn’t we rather allow people to die, if death is what will benefit them?30

The supposed contradiction between these views assumes a dichotomy between a prudential good (what is in an agent’s non-ethical best interest) and an ethical good (what an agent ought to do). But Plato denies any distinction between prudential and ethical goodness. Since eudaimonia just is virtuous activity, it follows that no vicious deed can help an agent achieve her eudaimonia – even if the action may otherwise seem prudentially beneficial (see Rep. IX.589d-e; Crit. 48c-d). Indeed, vicious activity can only hinder eudaimonia. Thus, if suicide is really unjust,

28 The dialogue Axiochus urges the same question. Socrates eases the dying Axiochus’ fears of death by emphasizing how miserable earthly life is. He says that we should not fear death, because the hereafter is so much better than our current existence. But if the afterlife is really better for us than life on this earth, it would seem advisable not to remain alive. Rather, it would behoove us to flee this life as quickly as possible by committing suicide (Ax. 366a-b).
29 Both the Laws and the Phaedo argue that suicide under ordinary conditions is impious, unjust, and irrational. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
30 This question perplexes Socrates’ interlocutors as well. Cebes asks, “Socrates, how do you say that it is not right to do oneself violence, and yet that the philosopher will be willing to follow one who is dying?” (61d3-6). How exactly Cebes and Simmias are puzzled about the prohibition is a matter of debate, since the following passage, Socrates’ response to the question at 62a, consists of a locus vexatus that has caught the interest of several scholars. See most notably Gallop, who provides a thorough analysis of many possible modalities in this passage (79-83). See also Burger (1984: 31), Eckstein 48, Hackforth (1955: 191), Warren 95. For my purposes in this chapter, this debate has no significant ramifications and would prove distracting, so I leave the puzzle aside here.
prohibiting it will be consistent with Plato’s eudaimonism. No one desiring *eudaimonia* (which is everyone, see *Euthyd*. 278e) should ever commit suicide impermissibly, whether she is a vicious person, or a philosopher who desires wisdom. It will not serve her *eudaimonia* to perform a vicious action.

However, this response will be unsatisfactory if we are at all inclined to question Plato’s arguments that suicide is ordinarily vicious. According to the *Phaedo*, suicide is vicious because it constitutes theft from the gods (62b; cf. *Laws* X.902b-c). In the same way that it would be wrong for a slave to flee her human master, so it would be wrong for a human being to flee her divine caretakers by committing suicide.

We might object to Plato’s argument, first, by claiming that the argument accepts three potentially false assumptions:

1) Gods exist.
2) We are immortal, and will live on in an afterlife.
3) The gods are our caretakers, and we humans are the gods’ possessions (slaves).

Any or all of these assumptions may be questioned. However, since I seek primarily to examine whether Plato’s beliefs can form a coherent whole, I leave aside questions concerning whether gods exist or whether we are or could be immortal. A more interesting objection pertains to the final assumption. For, even if we grant that gods exist and humans are their slaves, we might think that limits should exist on a slave’s obligations to remain under her master’s control. Even supposing that a well-treated slave is somehow obligated to remain subject to her master, it may not be the case that a mistreated slave is so obligated. Similarly, human beings may not be

---

31 Warren also voices these objections.
32 Margaret Pabst Battin offers this objection: “[Although] a well-treated slave might have some obligation to remain, a mistreated slave does not. Analogously, the person who escapes from an unusually cruel servitude in life cannot be said to have done wrong” (222).
obligated to remain alive under their divine caretakers if their lives should become unbearable or, in the philosopher’s case, if life frustratingly keeps her from attaining wisdom. After all, if life becomes unbearable, filled with inordinate pain and frustration, we might think that the divine caretakers have failed their tasks. A person might not act viciously if she flees from cruel or inept gods.

However, even if it befits our modern sensibilities that slaves should be obligated only (if at all) to kind masters, it is doubtful that this idea correlates well with the institution of slavery as it existed in ancient Athens. A slave would have been equally obligated to a cruel or inept master as she would have been obligated to a kind one. Analogously, a person may be just as obligated to cruel or inept divine caretakers as she is to kind ones. So, whether she flees a good or bad situation without permission, she still exhibits vice that undermines her eudaimonia.

Moreover, Plato avoids the objection entirely when he has Socrates note that the gods are good caretakers (63b; cf. Rep. III.388c ff.; Laws X.902c). If the gods really good, they cannot be unduly cruel or inept. Such characteristics would be incompatible with their goodness. As a result, human beings should have no rational reason to desire fleeing the gods’ rule.

Yet perhaps we should wonder whether the gods really are cruel and capricious, contrary to Plato’s assumption. After all, if the gods were really good masters who cared for their human possessions, why would they allow situations of horrific misfortune or shame to intrude upon some human lives in the first place? Why would they not allow vicious persons and philosophers to commit suicide without requiring such horrific signs? It would seem that both vicious persons and philosophers are better off dead. Not allowing them the benefit of suicide may impugn the gods’

---

33 Battin also points out this objection to her argument (ibid.).
goodness, and make the sign of necessity to die a merely arbitrary benefit that they provide on a whim.\textsuperscript{34}

This concern is troubling, but it is not insurmountable. All Plato needs to say is that the gods do allow suicide if it is truly in an agent’s best interest, and that remaining alive until then is in the agent’s best interest. But how might Plato say such a thing?

\textbf{2.4.2 Another Response}

What is needed is some way to show how staying alive could work for a person’s long-term benefit, even when it seems that immediate suicide would prudentially benefit her. This is a tall order, but Plato tries to meet it for philosophers by arguing that philosophers have an alternative way of dying.

First, Plato has Socrates define “death” as the “separation of the soul from the body” (\textit{Phd.} 64c). When a person dies, her body and soul separate completely and exist apart from each other. The body becomes a corpse and decomposes. The soul passes on to the afterlife.

Plato next has Socrates expand this definition of death to allow a kind of death that can occur to a certain extent while one is alive. He claims that certain pleasures are bodily – those having to do with food, drink, or sex, for example (66b) – and that these pleasures keep the philosopher from focusing on philosophy (66d). He then claims that the philosopher will not be concerned with pursuing bodily pleasures, but only with her soul’s pleasure, which is obtained by pursuing wisdom. The philosopher will desire to “release” her soul from association with the body as much as she can while alive, training herself to avoid bodily pleasures that distract her soul from

\textsuperscript{34} On the sign of necessity, see Chapter 1. Warren (101) also worries about the potential arbitrariness of the sign of necessity.
pursuing wisdom (65a; 114c). This may also constitute a kind of “death.” For it will also involve separating the philosopher’s soul from her body via her own attempts to purify her soul from bodily influences and desires.\footnote{Scholars disagree about how to understand these passages. Some understand this to refer to a kind of asceticism, that the philosopher should train herself to avoid bodily things entirely. For this view, see Butler (2012), Gallop (1975: 88) and Irwin (1977: 64). Others understand the philosopher’s attitude to be evaluative, that the philosopher should simply train herself to view bodily things as not having any value. See Woolf (2004).}

The philosopher seeks above all else to separate her soul from her body, since that separation is necessary to achieve wisdom. But, because of how Plato has had Socrates define death, a philosopher may separate her soul from her body to some extent while she is yet alive. She can do this by purifying herself as much as she can of bodily pleasures and pursuing philosophy.

But how can this notion help us when we consider Plato’s views of suicide? Consider this passage:

“And thusly is seems that while we live, we shall be nearest to knowledge if we keep ourselves as much as possible from the body and do not associate with it any more than it is necessary, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god himself releases us” (67a).\footnote{καὶ ἐν ὃ ἢν ζῶμεν, οὕτως, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἑγγυτάτω ἐσόμεθα τοῦ εἰδέναι, ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν ὁμιλῶμεν τὸ σῶματι μηδὲ κοινωνώμεν, ὅτι μὴ πάσα ἀνάγκη, μηδὲ ἀναπηρικόνεν τῆς τοῦτον φύσεως, ἀλλὰ καθαρεύομεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, ἐκς ἃν ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἀπολύσῃ ἡμᾶς.}

By having Socrates claim that “we purify ourselves from the body until the god releases us,” Plato has tied the notion of the god’s final release to the philosopher’s own attempts to purify herself. A philosopher desires death and prepares for the complete, final physical separation of her soul from her body by attempting to purify her soul of bodily concerns as much as she can while alive. But the argument suggests a further point. The philosopher will not separate her soul from her body completely \textit{until the god releases her from life}. On one hand, the passage may mean that
natural death frees the philosopher. But the passage has the additional ramification that the philosopher will also not kill herself until the god releases her.

This thought suggests that the philosopher’s purification is closely linked with death’s ability to benefit her. A god will grant permission to die – “releasing” the person from life – after she has prepared herself for death. The reason why is unstated. But I think it is a possible explanation is that the philosopher’s soul can only enjoy true wisdom in the afterlife if it has been prepared through purification during this lifetime to receive such benefits. If the philosopher dies without purification, her soul may not be ready for death to benefit her.37

Other Platonic evidence about purification can support this interpretation. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates give a speech about love that Socrates later claims is “horrible” (δεινός, Phdr. 242d). Because it was such a bad speech, Socrates insists that he must purify himself (καθήρασθαι, 243a) before he can go on to give a better account. To do otherwise would mean not only that he would risk impiety (given that the subject matter he is discussing is divine38), but also that he could not obtain the correct account of love.

The passage suggests that purification of one’s soul from wrong ideas is necessary before one is ready to advance to more correct knowledge. Purification is also necessary to avoid impiety. Analogously, it may be that the *Phaedo* is suggesting philosophers must use this earthly life to try to cleanse themselves from improper ideas before they can be ready to obtain true knowledge and wisdom in the hereafter. They must prepare themselves for the final separation of body and soul by trying to purify their souls of bodily concerns as much as possible in this life. To kill themselves

---

37 Warren (104) and Ahrensdorf (38-39) argue similarly.
38 Cobb (1993: 147-148) emphasizes the divine nature of Socrates’ subject in this passage as grounds for concern that he has risked impiety by his trite treatment of love.
preemptively would be just as ineffective and impious as if Socrates had concluded his discussion of love in the *Phaedrus* with his horrible speech without having attempted to purify himself.

This argument indicates that the afterlife is really only better for the philosopher if her soul has been prepared for it. Until that time, suicide under ordinary conditions is not only vicious, it is also ineffective. So the gods are not being cruel when they prohibit suicide. They are only keeping the philosopher from dying before she is ready for release. The philosopher is better off if she continues to live, and continues to purify herself and make herself ready for death. If she kills herself preemptively, before purifying herself as much as possible, then she dies not only impiously, but also before she is truly ready for the hereafter’s benefits. That would only hinder her *eudaimonia*. As such, a general prohibition against suicide is compatible with Plato’s aims.

It may be objected that total purification is impossible and, as a result, no one will ever be ready to be benefitted by death. After all, human beings must eat and drink in order to survive. Since eating and drinking are bodily concerns, total purification of the soul from bodily concerns cannot be achieved as long as the physical body remains alive. So how could anyone purify herself enough?

Plato protects himself well from this objection. He never has Socrates say that a person must purify herself “completely” before death. That would be impossible. Instead, he has Socrates state repeatedly that a person need only purify herself “as much as possible” while she is alive (καθ’ ὅσον δύναται, *Phd.* 64e5, 65c5-9, 67c5). This answer is vague about what level of purification counts. But it allows that a person need not be totally pure when she dies. It is sufficient that she been working towards such purification.

---

39 Ahrensdorf (46-57) raises this objection.
We will recall that the *Laws*’ first permissible suicide only allows suicide if the person recognizes that all her attempts to purify herself of vicious desires have utterly failed (IX.854b-c). Thus, this person would only kill herself if she remains impure, despite her best efforts. But she still has worked at purification as much as possible, given her nature and incurable, vicious desires.

The stipulation may suggest that suicide is only an option for people who seek purification. Indeed, it may be that they are the only persons who are able to recognize a divine sign of necessity to die. Vicious people who do not recognize their vice must stay alive. This response is fitting, for it is likely that vicious people will lack Plato’s insight to see how they are better off dead than pursuing a vicious life. They should not commit suicide for two reasons. First, performing yet another vicious action will not help them achieve *eudaimonia*. But, second, as long as they are alive, some slim hope remains that they may give up their errant ways and seek virtue.

### 2.5 How Socrates’ Suicide Was Wise

But how could Socrates’ suicide have been wise? Plato himself appears concerned about this question. In both the *Phaedo* and the *Crito*, he has Socrates’ interlocutors argue that Socrates’ choice to die is foolish and wrong. In the *Phaedo*, Cebes suggests that Socrates is irrational. When Socrates asserts that the gods are good masters who care for their human possessions (62b6-c7), Cebes counters that, if the gods truly care for humans and are the best rulers, it would be unwise for any human to desire to leave their care. Instead, a wise person should resent dying

---

40 Other philosophers have recognized a question here. Ahrensdford writes that the evidence of Socrates’ own case should make us question whether the human being “who devotes his life to the pursuit of wisdom through reason alone is, in truth, an unwise, unjust and impious human being” (3; 25). Eckstein agrees, claiming that Socrates exhibits “fuzziness” in his thinking on his final day (46). If these assessments are correct, then Socrates’ act of self-killing may have been a mistake, since it wrongly and foolishly ended his life.

41 “It is unreasonable that the wisest of men should not resent leaving this service in which the gods, who are the best of masters, are guarding them.” τὸ γὰρ μὴ ἀγανακτεῖν τοὺς φρονιμωτάτους ἐκ ταύτης τῆς θεραπείας ἀπιόντας, ἐν ἐκ ἐπιστατοῦσιν αὐτῶν οἰκερ ἄριστοι εἰσιν τῶν ὀντῶν ἐπιστάται, θεοί, οὐκ ἔχει λόγον (*Phd.* 62d).
and should seek to remain alive with these divine rulers as long as possible. Only a fool, Cebes says, would rejoice at death (62d-e).

Simmias picks up on Cebes’ challenge, and increases the stakes:

“If now, Socrates, it seems to me as well that Cebes is right. For why should truly wise men wish to flee from masters who are better than they, and be rid of them easily? And I think Cebes is aiming his argument at you, because you are bearing leaving us so lightly and our good rulers who are, as you yourself say, gods” (63a).42

While Cebes has only said that Socrates acts irrationally, Simmias implies that Socrates is vicious. If Socrates wrongfully leaves the gods, he acts impiously;43 and if he wrongfully leaves his friends (63a), he acts unjustly.44 Simmias’ challenge is concerning because, if he is right, Socrates’ committing suicide will work against his eudaimonia. Because eudaimonia just is virtuous activity, unjust acts cannot promote eudaimonia.

Crito expresses similar concerns in the Crito:

“If Socrates, it does not seem to me that the thing you are doing is just, to give up your life when you can save it, and to hasten your fate as your enemies would hasten it . . . Moreover, I think you are betraying your sons by going away and leaving them, when you could raise them and educate them. . . . But you seem to me to choose the laziest way, when you ought to choose as a good and courageous human being would choose, you who have been saying throughout your whole life that you care about virtue” (45c-d).45

42 καὶ ὁ Σιμμίας, ἀλλὰ μὴν, ἔφη, ὁ Σώκρατες, νῦν γέ μοι δοκεῖ τι καὶ αὐτῷ λέγειν Κέβης: τί γὰρ ἂν βουλόμενοι ἄνδρες σοφοὶ ὡς ἄληθὸς δεσπότας ἀμείνους αὐτῶν φεύγουν καὶ ραδίως ἀπαλλάττοιντο αὐτῶν; καί μοι δοκεῖ Κέβης εἰς σὲ τείνειν τὸν λόγον, ὅτι σῶτο ῥαδίως φέρει καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀπολείπων καὶ ἀρχοντας ἁγαθοὺς, ὡς αὐτῶς ὁμολογεῖς, θεοὺς.

43 On this, I agree with Stern (1993: 24). The accusation is all the more worrisome because Socrates was imprisoned and convicted of impiety (Ap. 24b). If Socrates wrongfully leaves his gods, he acts impiously when he kills himself.

44 I agree with Ahrensdorf (32).

45 ἔτι δὲ, ὁ Σώκρατες, οὐδὲ δίκαιον μοι δοκεῖς ἐπιχειρεῖν πράγμα, σαυτὸν προδοῦναι, ἐξὸν σωθῆναι, καὶ τοιαῦτα σπεύδας περὶ σαυτὸν γενέσθαι ἀπερ ἂν καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες σαυτὸν νεκροῦσιν . . . πρὸς δὲ τούτοις καὶ τοὺς υἱὸς τοὺς σαυτὸν ἐμονευ αὐτών δοκεῖς προδοῦναι, οὕς σοι ἐξὸν καὶ ἐκφυγεῖ, καὶ ἐκπαιδεύσεσαι οἰκήσῃ καταληψεων . . . σὺ δὲ μοι δοκεῖς τὰ ραθυμοῦτα αἱρέσθαι, χρὴ δὲ, ἀπερ ἂν ἁγαθὸς καὶ ἄνδρειος ἔλοιπο, ταῦτα αἱρεῖσθαι, φάσκοντα γε δὴ ἁρετῆς διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου ἐπιμελεῖσθαι:
Crito objects that Socrates is wrong to kill himself when he has claimed throughout his life to care about virtue. If Socrates really cared about virtue, he would instead choose to continue living. Crito’s complaint suggests that Socrates’ suicide will undermine his *eudaimonia* by subverting his virtue, and unjustly discounting his sons and his friends.

Interestingly, none of Socrates’ interlocutors has objected that death is inherently bad. Their objections suggest only that death is bad *for Socrates* because Socrates kills himself wrongly and foolishly, thus subverting his *eudaimonia*. If Socrates’ interlocutors had argued that death is inherently bad, then Socrates, as Plato has presented him, would have had a ready answer. Socrates thinks death has – at worst – a neutral value. We see this best in the *Apology*, when Socrates claims that death is either non-existence, a neutral value, or an eternity spent philosophizing with good gods and good human beings, a positive value (40c-41d). If death is the former, it is neither good nor bad, since nothing can be good or bad about a thing that does not exist. If the latter, death is undeniably a good thing. Thus, any objections Socrates’ interlocutors provide must suggest that, even if death itself has neutral or positive value, it may still have a negative value for Socrates.

So this is exactly what Cebe, Simmias, and Crito argue. From their vantage point, we can see many reasons for Socrates not to kill himself. These reasons all involve virtue: specifically, piety and justice, and obligations to friends and family. Their arguments invite us to wonder about Socrates’ wisdom in choosing to kill himself, for Socrates’ *eudaimonia* will be poorly served if he dies viciously.

---

46 To say “Unicorns are beautiful” only makes sense if “unicorns” exist. Similar arguments about death’s neutrality are offered by the Epicureans. See Epicurus (*Ep. Men.* 125, *KD* 2); and Lucretius (*DRN* III.862-864).
2.5.1 The *Phaedo*’s Response

Plato has Socrates offer two very different responses to this concern. In the *Phaedo*, the response is simply that Socrates can reasonably kill himself because death will allow him to achieve his goals in the afterlife. Socrates says:

“For . . . if I did not believe that I should go first to other wise and good gods, and also to human beings who have died and are better than those humans here, I would be wrong not to resent death. But now know well that I hope to go to good human beings – and this last thing I would not always rely on – but know well that if I would always rely on anything at all of these matters, it is that I will come to gods who are altogether good masters. And therefore, because of these things I am not resentful, but I have good hope that there is something for the dead and, as has been said of old, it is much better for the good than for the wicked” (63b7-c9).

Socrates claims that he is not being irrational or vicious when he chooses to commit suicide, because dying will be better for himself than a continued life would be. By dying, he will obtain a better existence and wisdom, as well as the ability to philosophize alongside better gods and human beings than those whose company he has enjoyed while alive. Thus, Socrates denies that his suicide can hinder his *eudaimonia*. As he sees it, his suicide will instead achieve it.

The argument accepts the tacit assumption that it is rational to abandon something good in order to acquire something better. In the same way that a person might reasonably choose to give

---

47 One might reasonably question why the responses in the *Phaedo* and the *Crito* differ. Probably, the texts’ intended audiences have something to do with it. The *Phaedo* may have been written for strictly philosophical audiences. These people are interested in getting knowledge and wisdom, however that is achieved. If what the *Phaedo* says is right, they will seek knowledge even by dying. The *Crito*, however, seems to have the everyday person (like Crito) in mind. These people are more practically minded. An argument about the soul’s immortality will not interest them nearly as much as concerns about how to live here and now. This difference will dictate the kind of answer we get about suicide’s permissibility.

48 ἐγὼ γὰρ, ἔφη, ὦ Σμιμία τε καὶ Κέβῆς, εἰ μὲν μὴ ὄμην ἥξειν πρῶτον μὲν παρὰ θεοὺς ἄλλους σοφοὺς τε καὶ ἀγαθούς, ἐπεὶ καὶ παρ’ ἀνθρώποις τετελευτηκότας ὁμοίως τοὺς ἐνθάδε, ἦδίκουν δὲν ὅτι ἀγανακτόν τῷ θανάτῳ: νῦν δὲ εἰ ἵστε ὅτι παρὰ ἄνδρας τε ἐλπίζεσθαί ἄγαθον—καὶ τοῦτο μὲν οὐκ ἂν πάνω δισχυρισάμην—ὅτι μὲντοι παρὰ θεοὺς δεσπότατα πάνῳ ἀρκεῖος ἥξειν, εἰ ἵστε ὅτι εἰπερ τι ἄλλω τῶν τοιούτων δισχυρισάμην ἂν καὶ τοῦτο. ὡστε διὰ τᾶτα οὐχ ὄμην ἀγανακτέον, ἀλλ’ ἐπείπτεις εἰμὶ εἰναὶ τοῖς τετελευτηκόσι καὶ, ὅσπερ γε καὶ πάλαι λέγεται, πολὺ ἄμεινον τοῖς ἁγαθοῖς ἡ τοῖς κακοῖς.

49 “[There] is good hope that on arriving where I am going, if anywhere, I shall acquire what has been our chief preoccupation in our past life” (67b-c).
up eating a piece of chocolate cake to achieve better health, Socrates might rationally choose to
die if what he will obtain by dying is better than what continued life has to offer him. Better
friends, better gods, and better knowledge would go a long way to make his afterlife superior to
anything he could expect if he stayed alive.

However, we have two reasons to worry about the Phaedo’s argument. First, we might be
concerned that the Phaedo’s response is merely “a declaration of faith”\(^50\) based on Socrates’ mere
“hope” that better gods and knowledge await him in the afterlife. Plato has had Socrates express
doubt that death will provide such positive benefits. In the Phaedo itself, Socrates admits the
possibility that knowledge might not be attainable even in death (66d-67a). In the Apology, too,
Socrates expresses uncertainty about whether death involves fellowship with good gods and
humans, or whether death involves eternal non-existence (40c-41d). If it is indeed questionable
whether better gods, better people, and wisdom await Socrates in the afterlife, then Socrates’
response will appear unstable. It would seem wiser to stay alive, rather than to risk all on some
hoped-for but uncertain benefits in the afterlife.

But perhaps the response is not as troubling as it first seems. If Socrates is right, then either
he cannot get knowledge at all, or he can get it only in the afterlife (Phd. 66d-67a). He might then
justify his decision to die by saying he is certain not to get knowledge if he stays alive, but he has
a chance to get it if he dies. This answer does not require certainty or even a high chance of
success. It would be enough that Socrates knows that his only possibility to get knowledge is by
dying. In judging possible benefits, Socrates would be better off dying, given that the alternative
assures him of not getting what he desires.\(^51\)

\(^{50}\) Hackforth (41); Ahrensdorf (35).
\(^{51}\) I thank Jason Gardner for suggesting this response to me.
However, the second worry is more concerning. The *Phaedo*’s response does not answer Simmias’ objection: that Socrates acts viciously by dying now. Socrates claims that he will obtain better friends and different gods when he dies. But, although saying “I go to better friends and gods” may go a long way to explain why death is attractive, it will not address the concern that Socrates subverts his *eudaimonia* by dying viciously. If the afterlife’s friends and gods are “better” than those friends and gods Socrates has here, then it follows that they cannot be the same entities. Suppose that I were to move away from my closest friends, never to see them again, and attempted to console them by saying this: “It’s okay. I hope to be with better people than you in my new home!” Not only would this sentiment not appease my friends, I would likely hurt my friends and cause resentment. Since this sentiment appears to be exactly what Socrates is claiming here, we may worry that Socrates’ earthly friends and gods would be similarly affronted. So Simmias’ and Crito’s accusations that Socrates has acted viciously still stands. For Socrates’ response says nothing about how he has treated his friends and gods in *this* life.

It is possible that Socrates thinks he has already addressed Simmias’ charge when he stated that he dies with divine necessity (*Phd.* 62c). Perhaps he thinks his act cannot be wrong if a god allows it. But, if that is his intended response, he does not make it explicit or defend that claim. We have to look elsewhere for a better response.

2.5.2 The *Crito*’s Response

The *Crito* provides us another response. After Crito’s accusation, Socrates responds:

“But for us, since the argument thus compels us, the only thing we should consider is . . . whether we would be acting justly [if I escape] . . . or, in truth, unjustly . . . And if it should become evident that this action is unjust, then we ought not to
consider the fact that by staying here I would die or suffer anything else whatever when the alternative is to act unjustly” (48c6-d5).

Socrates sets up the issue as being between competing goods. On the one hand, he recognizes non-ethical goods, such as health, life, wealth, friends, and honor (cf. Crit. 48c1-5; Euthyd. 279a-b). But over all these he sets ethical goods: virtue and acting justly. In the Crito, he accepts the following principle: whenever we must decide between goods that we consider just or unjust or, more generally, virtuous or vicious, our recognition of them as “just” or “unjust” should decide our choice. Further deliberation is pointless. It is better to give up any number of non-ethical goods in preference to giving up ethical good, because none of the former goods could possibly make up for the latter’s loss.

Socrates goes on to say that he can only act virtuously if he kills himself in accordance with Athenian law and the god’s leading, and that failing to do so would make him act viciously (52b-53b). So he is not being foolish when he gives up life, friends, and family. Rather, he recognizes that no number of these non-ethical goods can possibly compensate him for the loss of his ethical good, which requires him to act justly. If he lives, he thinks it will be only because he has acted unjustly. Since acting unjustly is worse than anything else, including death (cf. Prt.

52 ήμιν δ’, ἐπειδὴ ὁ λόγος οὗτος αἰρεῖ, μὴ οὐδὲν ἄλλο σκεπτέον ἦ ὥσπερ νυνθῇ ἔλεγομεν, πότερον δίκαια πράξομεν καὶ χρήματα τελοῦντες τούτοις τοῖς ἐμὲ ἐνθένδε ἐξάζοισιν καὶ χάριτας, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐξαχοντες τε καὶ ἐξαγόμενοι, ἢ τῇ ἀλήθειᾳ ἀδικήσομεν πάντα ταύτα ποιούντες: κἂν φαινόμεθα ἄδικα αὐτὰ ἐργαζόμενοι, μὴ οὐ δεὴ ὑπολογίζεσθαι οὔτ’ εἰ ἀποθνήσκειν δὲ παραμένοντας καὶ ἰσχίζαι ἄγοντας, οὔτε ἄλλο ὁποιὸν πάσχειν πρὸ τοῦ ἀδικεῖν.

53 Cf. also Ap. 28b-d. Virtue should be, as Vlastos puts it, “the sovereign good” in our domain of value (115).

54 We might compare this to what is said in the Gorgias, when Socrates argues that to suffer wrong oneself is always better than to do wrong oneself (469b, 472e, 509e).

55 There is a question here about whether it would indeed be unjust for Socrates not to obey the Athenians’ verdict. Some evidence suggests that Socrates was unjustly convicted. Consider, for example, his insistence in the Apology that he would have been released if the Athenians had tried his case over multiple days instead of during one day (37a7-b2); cf. Brickhouse & Smith (1989: 42, n. 147 & 75-76); Shaw (2011: 195, n. 29). I argued in Chapter 1 that the justice of Socrates’ action is solely due to Athenian law, but rather Socrates’ commitment to do as the god leads.

56 See Chapter 1.6 for a discussion of how Socrates’ staying alive would be unjust.
345e, 358e; *Grg.* 469b, 472e, 509e; *Rep.* IX.591a), he is better off dying – even if that involves committing suicide.

Socrates’ response suggests that committing suicide will be good for him, first, because he thinks it is the right thing for him to do. But it also suggests that death will benefit him because a continued life – given his current conditions – could not allow him to live justly or be *eudaimōn*. So his suicide will benefit him precisely because he cannot promote his *eudaimonia* by staying alive. Through his suicide, he will avoid living in conditions he considers intolerable, namely, conditions in which he has undermined all that he has done throughout his life and failed to be *eudaimōn*. Killing himself now, in accordance with his city’s laws and a god’s sign of necessity (46d; *Phd.* 62c) allows him to avoid that awful fate. So his death suits his goal to be *eudaimōn*.

The response fails to convince Crito, who remains preoccupied with the prudential aspect of Socrates’ decision. The ethical argument is beyond him.\(^{57}\) For that reason, Socrates adds how continuing to live would also be prudentially unwise both for himself and for his loved ones.\(^{58}\) He claims that escaping death would require him to be an exile in another city (53b). As a non-citizen, he would be unable to participate in civic life, which would automatically exclude him from many benefits which promote a good life and enable some virtuous activities. Additionally, he could not continue philosophizing, since he would be unable to speak convincingly about virtue if he had disobeyed Athens’ laws.\(^{59}\) His friends would be exiled or disenfranchised for helping him

\(^{57}\) Consider Weiss’ argument (1998: 80) about how dense Crito seems to be.

\(^{58}\) The argument that follows is unnecessary to defend Socrates’ main case, which has already been stated. But it exists to silence Crito’s more practical considerations.

\(^{59}\) The personified laws prompt this suggestion: “If you do [go into exile], will your life be worth living? Will you have social intercourse with [your fellow city-dwellers] and not be ashamed to talk to them? And what will you say? The same as you did here, that virtue and justice are man’s most precious possession, along with lawful behavior and the laws? Would you not be laughable?” (53c-d).
escape. Moreover, if Socrates is correct that he could not convincingly philosophize in exile, he would no longer be a reliable teacher. He could not help his friends and children become virtuous persons, because he would be less virtuous himself (cf. Crit. 53c-d). Thus, Socrates’ continued life could not benefit and may in fact harm his friends and family. His death is thus better all around, both for himself and for his loved ones.

Socrates’ answer in the Crito thus provides a good answer for how Socrates’ death could be compatible with Plato’s eudaimonism. Death would benefit Socrates because his continued life would not be worth living. A continued life would betray everything he had advocated throughout his life, and would undermine his eudaimonia, causing him to give up his ethical good for the sake of a mere non-ethical good, longer life. Since he views death as having a neutral value at worst (Ap. 40c-41d), it will be better for him to die than for him to continue living in conditions where his eudaimonia is impossible. Such a life would confer negative value, and would only hinder his eudaimonia. Committing suicide is better for him than a continued life which would surely have a negative value. Moreover, because his suicide is the right thing to do, it will also contribute a final virtuous action to his eudaimonia. He dies justly, and so he dies as he has lived: seeking always to perform the just and best action (Crit. 46b).

2.6 Final Thoughts

In the Gorgias, Plato writes,

“For one who is truly a man should stop considering how long he will live and should not love life. But having committed those things to the god and believing

60 “For consider what good you will do yourself or your friends by breaking our agreements and committing such a wrong. It is pretty obvious that your friends will themselves be in danger of exile, disfranchisement, and loss of property” (53a-b).

61 Socrates must either take his children with him into exile, or he must leave them behind without him in Athens. Presumably, if he does the latter, his children will be raised by his friends, which is no different than what would happen when he dies (54a). So Socrates’ continued life would have no positive effect on his children.
the women who say that no one can escape fate, he should therefore consider how he might live the part of his life remaining to him as well as possible” (512d-e).

Plato is committed to the idea that it is not merely living, but instead living well, that is important (cf. Crit. 48b). If the part of a person’s life ahead of her can be lived well, that is good. She can continue living, for being eudaimōn is still within her grasp.

However, a point may exist beyond which the virtuous life is no longer possible. At this point, those who wish to be eudaimōn may well want to cast life aside. Plato permits this, as his own presentation of Socrates’ actions shows. Socrates chooses to die when a continued life would undermine his virtue and would therefore not be worth living (cf. Crit. 53e). A person is ready to be benefitted by death if she faces a situation in which a eudaimōn life can no longer be achieved or maintained. When those circumstances are such that they threaten to make a continued life incapable of achieving or maintaining eudaimonia, Plato allows that the individual might do better not to extend her life. Those circumstances will show themselves to the agent as a sign that living eudaimōn is no longer possible (Phd. 62c). When a continued life does not allow the agent to live well, the agent is better off dead.

---

62 μὴ γὰρ τούτο μὲν, τὸ ζῆν ὑποσονδὴ χρόνον, τὸν γε ώς ἄληθῶς ἄνδρα ἑατέον ἐστίν καὶ οὐ φιλοψυχητέον, ἀλλὰ ἐπιτρέψαντα περὶ τούτου τὸ θέο καὶ πιστεύσαντα τὰς γναίξιν ὅτι τὴν εἰμαρμένην οὐδὲν ἐξ έκφυγοι, τὸ ἐπὶ τούτω σκεπτέον τιν’ ἂν τρόπον τούτον ὅν μέλλοι χρόνον βιώναι ὡς ἄριστα βιοί.
Chapter 3

The Suicidal Philosopher: Plato’s Socrates

3.1. Introduction

I maintain that Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide. This claim will no doubt surprise many readers.¹ After all, Plato has Socrates declare that suicide is not permissible (θεμιτόν, Phd. 61c10),² and present two reasons why suicide is impious and unjust.³ It would be strange if Socrates should perform an action that he regards as wrong. However, the prohibition against suicide is not absolute, and Plato writes that Socrates regards his own case as an exception. Having offered his reasons against suicide, Socrates claims, “Then perhaps because of this it is not unreasonable to say that a person must not kill himself until a god sends some necessity upon him, such as the one that has now come before us” (Phd. 62c6-9).⁴

However, the thesis that Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide is puzzling because Plato also portrays Socrates as suffering a punishment mandated by Athens (Phd. 116c; cf. Ap. 38c). Athens sentenced Socrates to die by drinking hemlock. So it would seem that the city compels Socrates to drink the poison. If so, isn’t the city, not Socrates, responsible? What account of

---

¹ Not all, though. See Cholbi (2011: 36); Eckstein (1981: 8-9); Frey (1978: 106-108); Gallop (1975: 85); and Hackforth (1955: 36 n.4). Rowe (1993) accepts a limited sense in which Socrates committed suicide – because he takes the poison from the warder and drinks it (130) – but otherwise refers to Socrates as “executed” (7, 125). Most scholars maintain that Socrates did not commit suicide. See Ahrensdorf (1995: 10, 17, 19); Archer-Hind (1973: 9); Bluck (1955: 1); Bostock (1986: 20); Burger (1984: 9, 21, 33); Burnet (1911: 149); Brickhouse & Smith (1989: passim); Doherty (1923: 19); Geddes (1885: 224); Stern (1993: 31); van Hooff (2000: 52); White (1989: 27, 30); and Woozley (1979: 9).
² Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine, using Burnet’s Greek text.
³ The first is that the body is a prison or guard-post from which it is forbidden to flee (Phd. 62b2-6). The second is that we humans are the gods’ possessions and ought not leave life unless the gods grant us their permission (62b7-c9).
⁴ Emphasis added: Ἐὰν θεός τοῖς ταύτης οὐκ ἀλογον, μη πρότερον αὐτὸν ἀποκτεινόναι δεῖν, πρὶν ἐν ἀνάγκῃ τινὰ θεός ἐπιπέμψῃ, ὥσπερ καὶ τὴν νῦν ἡμῖν παροῦσαι.
responsibility would allow Plato to present Socrates as responsible for his own death? Moreover, even if Socrates is somehow responsible, it remains unclear how Plato can think that Socrates intends to kill himself. Doesn’t Socrates, as Plato presents him, intend to do what justice requires? If so, doesn’t he fail to kill himself intentionally, that is, to commit suicide?

These questions about how Plato can characterize Socrates’ death as suicide are no mere semantic quibbles.\(^5\) They address Plato’s account of responsible and intentional action. In this essay, I show how Plato can hold the city and Socrates jointly responsible for Socrates’ death (Section 3.2), and I show how Plato can think Socrates’ intention is not only to do what justice requires, but also to kill himself (Section 3.3).

I must clarify a couple points before I continue. First, when I argue that Plato thinks Socrates is responsible for his death, I do not mean to say that Socrates is responsible for intentionally bringing about all the circumstances leading to his trial and death. Such a strong thesis is not necessary for my project. Indeed, most suicides do not occur in response to circumstances over which an agent has specifically engineered or brought to pass. But suicide does frequently occur in response to circumstances over which an agent has little or no control.

Second, in this essay, I try to construct possible Platonic views and see how they fit together. Because the views are expressed through the mouths of characters in dialogues, we do not know for certain that they are Plato’s views.\(^6\) However, because they are present in the

\(^5\) As for the semantics of the characterization, ancient Greek does not have a single exclusive word that means “suicide” (cf. Cooper [1999: 515]; see van Hooff, 243-246, for a list of expressions ancient Greek used for self-killing). Plato uses several expressions, including phrases interpreted “to kill oneself” (“δον . . . κτεί” in \textit{Laws} IX.873c3-4; “ατον ἀποκτεινάναι” in \textit{Phd}. 62c7, cf. c2-3, 61e6), and a few that obliquely refer to “leaving, setting oneself free from” or “running from” life (“ἀπολάττων τοῦ βίου” in \textit{Laws} IX.854c5-6; “ἐπον ἐκ ταύτης λύειν οὐδ’ ἀποδιδράσκειν” in \textit{Phd}. 62b5). Plato also refers to doing violence against oneself (βιάσεται αὐτον, \textit{Phd}. 61c10), a phrase which may refer to any instance of self-harm, and not only killing. I have translated the texts literally to make clear where this occurs.

\(^6\) Consider Strauss, who argues, “In none of his dialogues does Plato ever say anything. Hence we cannot know from them what Plato thought” (1964: 50).
dialogues, we do know that they are views that Plato took seriously, and it is at least possible that Plato endorsed them. The thesis that the principal character in a dialogue best represents Plato’s views dates back to Antiquity. I will accept that thesis for the purposes of this essay.

3.2 The Question of Responsibility

To argue that Plato can hold the city and Socrates jointly responsible for Socrates’ death, we must first establish what Plato’s account of responsibility is. In particular, we must establish what Plato assumes about responsibility in the *Phaedo*. Thus, I begin with the *Phaedo*, and look to the *Gorgias* to elucidate the account. The account rejects two beliefs that many people think are core components of responsibility: 1) that responsibility and voluntariness are coextensive, and 2) that responsibility and culpability are coextensive.

We know that “responsibility” denotes a certain relationship between agents and their actions. In the *Phaedo*, we have one vital clue about Plato’s view of what defines that relationship. Plato has Socrates say that the true causes of things are intelligence or mind (νοῦς, 98b-c). Socrates

---

7 Aristotle suggests Plato’s views were positions taken by Socrates and the other leading speakers in the dialogues. These passages are discussed in Cherniss (1944). Diogenes Laërtius wrote that Plato’s views are expounded by four persons – Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian Stranger, and the Eleatic Stranger. He writes: “Even when Socrates and Timaeus are the speakers, it is Plato’s doctrines that are laid down” (III.52). For recent discussions including supports and criticisms of this thesis, see Press, ed. (2000).

8 Some scholars will question the move from the *Phaedo* to the *Gorgias*, believing that each Platonic dialogue must be observed independently of the others, or that some inherent risk of anachronism exists if we seek to elucidate one dialogue by referencing another. But the view that the dialogues may be taken together has proponents as well. See, Kraut (1992: 26), who argues that although the dialogues exhibit development, variation, and “even reversals,” enough continuity exists that we may take the dialogues together; they all exhibit the work of one individual who develops his ideas over time. For arguments that the *Gorgias* itself is not so far removed from the *Phaedo*, see Dodds (1959: 18-24), and Irwin (1979: 5-8). I refer to the *Gorgias* because its account of responsibility aligns well with the *Phaedo*’s single tantalizing passage on the subject. In addition, the account in the *Gorgias* reappears with minimal changes in the *Laws* (IX.860d ff.). If we accept the usual assumption that the *Laws* is one of Plato’s latest works, it is not unreasonable to think that the account’s reappearance in the *Laws* suggests Plato stands by it for an extended period of his career.

is speaking generally about the causes (αἴτιας) responsible for things in the universe.\(^\text{10}\) Mind is what brought everything to be, and it is what orders the cosmos. But his statement also applies to human actions, as we see when he applies this assessment to his own activities (98c-99a). He claims that he sits because he has *decided* to remain seated: “But to say that [bones and sinews] are the cause of my doing what I do, and that I do these things with my mind, but not from the choice of what is best, would be a most careless way of talking” (99a10-b3).\(^\text{11}\) The statement indicates that the causes responsible for at least some human actions are their agents’ own choices to do what seems “best.”\(^\text{12}\) An agent is responsible for those actions, insofar as they are attributable to her choices. However, it is necessary to look outside the *Phaedo* to understand the finer points of this view.

The *Gorgias* presents a more detailed presentation of this criterion for responsibility. Like the *Phaedo*, the *Gorgias* focuses our attentions on what “seems best” to an agent. A tyrant will do whatever he thinks is good for himself (466d). He will, for instance, kill a political rival, believing that that action will benefit him, perhaps by securing his own position (468b). However, the tyrant’s true goal when he acts is to benefit himself (468c). If he is wrong about how to achieve that goal – if killing the rival really does not help him – then he does not achieve what he really wants. Socrates says, “[If] a tyrant or an orator kills someone or exiles him or confiscates his stuff because he thinks that doing thusly is better for himself when really it is worse, this person,

\[^\text{10}\] I agree with Sedley (1998: 116). The adjective αἴτιος followed by a genitive indicates “responsible for.” To give the cause (αἴτιον) of x is to point to the thing responsible (τὸ αἴτιον) for x, and to assign responsibility to that thing for x. In this passage, Plato does not seem to distinguish different senses of responsibility, such as causal or ethical responsibility, as is evidenced by the fact that he uses the same term to apply to both physical causes and human action.

\[^\text{11}\] ως μέντοι διὰ ταῦτα ποιῶ ἃ ποιῶ καὶ ταῦτα νῦ πράττω, ἄλλ᾿ οὖ τῷ τῶν βελτίστων αἱρέσει, πολλῇ καὶ μακρᾷ ῥᾳθομίᾳ ἂν εἴπῃ τοῦ λόγου.

\[^\text{12}\] Incidentally, the view rejects a mechanistic view according to which bodily or mental functions are responsible for human activity. For discussion of the difference between a purely mechanistic view and the view that Plato has Socrates expound, see Bostock (142-146).
perhaps, is doing what he sees fit, isn’t he?” (Grg. 468d). But, even though the tyrant does what seems good to him, he might be wrong.

This conversation marks a shocking departure from ordinary conceptions of responsibility. We often think that a principal feature marking an agent’s responsibility for performing a certain action, X, is that the agent performed X voluntarily, that is, freely and by her own choice. Conversely, we think that an agent is not responsible for performing actions if she did them involuntarily or non-voluntarily, that is, unwillingly or accidentally. On this view, whether I am responsible for going bungee-jumping very much depends on whether I wanted and chose to do that activity or whether my so-called “friends” strapped me in against my will. It makes sense to assume that voluntary actions are coextensive with actions for which an agent is responsible, because we think voluntary actions reflect an agent’s subjective desires, while involuntary actions do not.

But Plato has a different understanding of voluntary (ἐκόν) and involuntary (ἀκόν) activity, one that allows him to hold agents responsible when they act involuntarily, as well as when they act voluntarily. Plato believes that voluntary activity aims only at what an agent really wants, rather than what she merely thinks she wants. For him, this is the agent’s own self-interested good, objectively considered (Grg. 468b5-9; cf. Laws I.628c; Meno 77c-78b; Prt. 352b-358e; Rep. VI.505e). What is objectively good for an agent does not depend on any subjective ideas of goodness. So voluntary action, for Plato, includes only those actions an agent chooses to do that actually promote her good.

13 εἰ τις ἀποκτείνει τινὰ ἢ ἐκβάλλει ἐκ πόλεως ἢ ἀφαιρεῖται χρήματα, εἴτε τῶρανος ὄν εἴτε ῥήτωρ, οἴομενος ἄμεινον εἶναι αὐτῷ, τυγχάνει δὲ ὁν κάκιον, οὗτος δήπου ποιεῖ ἢ δοκεῖ αὐτῷ: ἢ γὰρ;
14 On this, see Brickhouse and Smith (2010: 44); Santas (1979: 183-194).
But Plato knows that an agent can also choose actions in the mistaken belief that those actions promote her good. Consider the statement that tyrants who do what they (merely) think is best do not always get what they really want ( Plato. 468d ). A tyrant may misjudge what he really wants, or he may misjudge how to achieve it. For instance, he may think that exiling his political rivals is the smart thing to do, because doing so will secure his power. But that choice will not work out as planned if those exiled rivals have vengeful relatives who decide to stab the tyrant in retribution while he sleeps. Consequently, what the tyrant really wants does not necessarily coincide with what he does. Indeed, by acting on mistaken beliefs about what will really benefit him, the tyrant may actually fail to promote his good! Plato claims that such actions are “involuntary” because they do not promote the agent’s true desires ( 467a; Plato. 357e; Laws IX.860d ff.). They are not the actions the tyrant would have chosen if he had properly understood what was good for him and what he should do to obtain it.

From this discussion, it is clear that Plato believes voluntary and involuntary actions share one source. They both arise from an agent’s choice to do them, believing that they “seem good” to do ( Plato. 466d, 467b, 468b; Phd. 99a-b). Because they are attributable to the same source, Plato holds agents responsible both for performing actions voluntarily and for performing actions involuntarily. The difference is simply that the agent who does X voluntarily recognizes that X is good, while the agent who does X involuntarily merely thinks X is good.

But Plato is not yet done disrupting ordinary views of responsibility. We often think that responsibility is coextensive with culpability. “Culpability” denotes the relationship between responsible agents and others’ reactions, and a culpable agent is one who is properly subject to

15 To say nothing of the fact that Plato has Socrates suggest that the tyrant’s desires are also misplaced if he wants political power by any means rather than virtue.  
16 Strawson (1962: 10); Doris (2009: 59).
those reactive attitudes. So we think that an agent who is “responsible” is appropriately subject to
others’ reactive attitudes, for example, anger, praise, or blame. For instance, if a murderer is
responsible for killing, it is also appropriate to blame her for that action.

Plato also denies this claim. As we have seen, Plato thinks that someone can be responsible
for an action simply because she chose to perform that action (Grg. 466c-e; Laws IX.860d ff.).
But although the agent is responsible, Plato does not think the agent is necessarily blameworthy,
that is, culpable for performing that action.

We can best appreciate Plato’s position if we consider his views on punishment. As Plato
sees it, no criminal or unjust activity can possibly promote an agent’s true good; it can only hinder
it (Grg. 469b, 472c, 509e; Prt. 345e, 358e; Rep. IX.591a). So all criminal and unjust activity must
be involuntary, inasmuch as it does not get the agent what she really wants (Grg. 468d; Laws
V.731c, IX.860 ff.). Even so, Plato holds criminals liable to punishment or correction. The
Phaedo itself details punishments in the afterlife for those who have performed vicious deeds
(113d-114b). However, Plato does not limit this sentiment to the Phaedo or to his myths. The
Gorgias (472e) and the Laws (esp. IX.862e, 873a) both mention punishments that criminals should
receive on this earth. The Laws does so even after it is pointed out just how strange it is that people

---

17 To be sure, this is an odd-sounding claim. After all, it appears that criminals achieve what they want when
they commit crimes. Consider: a thief wants money, so she steals money. But we must contemplate the claim in
question from Plato’s perspective. Plato does not distinguish between an ethical good (what an agent ought to do) and
a prudential good (what is in an agent’s non-ethical best interest). If his taxonomy is accurate, then those who do
wrong really will not promote their best interest. Engaging in vicious activities will necessarily be bad for them.

18 The Phaedo’s ideas of judgment and punishment in the afterlife are also implied in the Apology, when
Socrates talks about what might happen to him when he arrives in Hades (41a), and the Crito, when the personified
laws testify that Socrates will receive harsh treatment from the laws in Hades if he damages Athenian law (54c6-8).
Other myths of punishment in the afterlife occur in the Laws (IX.870d-e), the Phaedrus (249a), and the Republic
(X.614 ff.). Exactly what value these myths have for explaining Plato’s philosophy may be disputed, since Socrates
himself claims that “no sensible person” would insist that these things are as he described them (Phd. 114d; see
Brown).
who act unjustly do so involuntarily (860d-e). Evidently, Plato does not think an agent’s performing actions involuntarily exempts her from being held responsible and punishable.

This account seems paradoxical. If Plato is right, criminals do what they would rather not do because they are ignorant of their true good. But in an even more bizarre twist, Plato specifically claims that they are not blameworthy or reproachable for their errors. A cursory inspection of the texts shows why. It is because he thinks blame (ὄνειδος, Tim. 86d) and anger (θυμός, Laws V.731d) are inappropriate responses. “You may pity the unjust . . . but restrain and abate your anger (θυμός),” he has the Athenian say in the Laws (V.731d).\(^{19}\) And in the Timaeus, he has Timaeus add, “It is not right to blame (ὀνειδίζεται) people for doing bad things, for no one is willfully bad. The bad become bad, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of the body and an uneducated upbringing. No one who incurs these bad conditions would will to have them” (86d-e).\(^{20}\)

Plato thinks that the erring agent has chosen her actions involuntarily (Grg. 468d), and that the error is not her fault. Such errors result from disease or bad upbringing, neither of which are up to the agent. No one would willingly choose to have a disease or to be raised poorly (Tim. 86d-e, 87b). But we might also think it is ridiculous to blame someone who acts knowing no better than to do as she does. After all, we do not blame the one-year-old child who thumps her sister on the head, because she does not yet know any better.\(^{21}\) Similarly, Plato thinks it is absurd to blame

\(^{19}\) ἀλλὰ ἐλεεινὸς μὲν πάντος ὃ γε ἄδικος [. . .] καὶ ἀνείργοντα τὸν θυμόν πραύνειν καὶ μὴ ἄκρασολοῦντα γινακεῖσι πικρανύμενον διατελέν.

\(^{20}\) οὐκ ὅρθος ὀνειδίζεται: κακὸς μὲν γὰρ ἐκών σούδεις, διὰ δὲ πονηρὰν ἐξὶν τινὰ τοῦ σώματος καὶ ἀπαίδευτον τροφῆν ὁ κακὸς γίγνεται κακός, παντὶ δὲ τοῦτα ἐξήρᾳ καὶ ᾳκοντει προστίγνεται. Cf.: “All who become bad do so because of these two involuntary causes. It is the begetters more than the begotten and the nurturers far more than the nurtured, that should be blamed” (ταύτῃ κακοὶ πάντες οἱ κακοὶ διὰ δοῦ ἀκοσμώτατα γηγνύμεθα: ἃν αἰτιατέον μὲν τοὺς φυτεύοντας ἅπε τῶν φυτευομένων μᾶλλον καὶ τοὺς τρέφοντας τῶν τρεφομένων, 87b).

\(^{21}\) However, we will subsequently take pains to try to teach the child not to do such action in the future. Similar thoughts are probably what ground Plato’s penology, based as it is on educating the criminal. See Saunders (1991).
the involuntary agent who does wrong, because she knows no better.\textsuperscript{22} The only response Plato advocates is pity (\textit{Grg.} 469a-b; \textit{Laws} V.731d). The agent is pitiable precisely because she does not get what she really wants (\textit{Grg.} 468e-469b, 472e). Yet, even though she is not an appropriate subject of blame or anger, she is still responsible for her involuntarily-chosen misdeeds.

This account has the peculiar consequence that only those agents who do nothing worthy of blame are eligible to be blameworthy. Indeed, on this view, the only agents who can be properly called “culpable” and be subject to reactive attitudes are those who do no wrong. For Plato, this makes sense, since he thinks that only those agents who do no wrong can act voluntarily, knowing what they really want (\textit{Grg.} 468b-c). As a result, he thinks that they are the only agents who can be truly and sensibly held accountable for their choices. They are culpable because they are subject to reactive attitudes. But because they do no wrong, they also are not worthy of any negatively-valenced attitudes we often associate with culpability, such as blameworthiness. At the same time, those who do wrong and whom we would normally consider blameworthy are not properly subject to reactive attitudes; they are not blameworthy because they act involuntarily, choosing their deeds in error.

This discussion suggests that agents can be related to their actions in three ways (cf. \textit{Laws} 860d ff.; see Table 1 below).\textsuperscript{23} First, are actions for which agents are responsible but not culpable. Agents choose these actions as “best” for themselves, but they choose wrongly. Because they have chosen to perform these actions, they are responsible for them (\textit{Grg.} 466c-e). But because they have acted involuntarily, they are not culpable.

\textsuperscript{22} Plato’s psychology mandates that no one will do otherwise than as they think best. For, if they think some other path is open to them that would be better for them, they would take that path instead (cf. \textit{Prt.} 358c).

\textsuperscript{23} Mackenzie (1981: 133-157), has a similar understanding.
Second, are actions for which agents are both responsible and culpable. Agents choose these actions as best for themselves, and they really are best. Because agents have chosen these actions believing them to be good, they are responsible for them. Because the actions really are good, the agents are culpable and subject to reactive attitudes for them as well. We might also infer that only these actions exhibit responsibility in the highest possible sense, since they are the only actions an agent can commit voluntarily.

Finally, the fact that agents choose both voluntary and involuntary actions suggests that these actions are distinguishable from actions which agents do not choose. Those actions are “non-voluntary.” Good examples include “slipping on ice” or “tumbling down the stairs.” On Plato’s account, they are the only human actions for which an agent cannot be responsible. Such actions are not even “the agent’s” at all. Although these actions happen to an agent’s body, she neither chooses them, nor selects them as “best.” They merely happen to her. And, of course, she cannot appropriately be praised or blamed for something that merely happens to her (cf. *Tim.* 86d-e, 87b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responsible?</th>
<th>Culpable?</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Theft, Murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Acts Promoting the Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Voluntary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Slips on Ice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2.1 The Argument for the City’s Responsibility

We are now in a position to consider whether Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide in Platonic terms. Philosophers who claim Socrates did not commit suicide usually assume that Plato
presents the city alone as responsible for Socrates’ death. That thesis actually comprises two claims: Plato thinks the city is responsible and no one else, especially Socrates, is responsible.24

On Plato’s view of responsibility, to say that the city is responsible for Socrates’ death would mean that the city chooses to condemn Socrates in the belief that that action promotes its good (Grg. 468b5-9; Laws I.628c; Meno 77c-78b; Prt. 352b-358e; Rep. VI.505e). Indeed, it seems that cities, through the actions of their civic representatives, do try to seek their good. Consider the following conversation from the Gorgias:

Socrates: “And so we put someone to death, if we do put him to death, and throw him out and take away his stuff, because these things seem better to us than not doing them?” Polus: “Certainly.” Socrates: “It is for the sake of the good that the doers of all these things do them.” Polus: “I say so.” (Grg. 468b5-9). 25

If the city is to perform its work in anything like a Platonically responsible fashion, it must maintain its laws and enforce its punishments because it deems these actions as being better for the city (Grg. 468b-d).26 Accordingly, if the city is to be responsible for Socrates’ death, we should think the city convicted Socrates because it viewed killing Socrates as promoting its good. In the Phaedo, Plato has Socrates relate that this is exactly what happened: the Athenians “decided” it

---

24 See Ahrensorf (10, 17, 19); Archer-Hind (9); Bluck (1); Bostock (20); Burger (9, 21, 33); Burnet (149); Brickhouse & Smith (1989: passim); Doherty (19); Geddes (224); Stern (31); van Hooff (52); White (27, 30); and Woozley (9).


26 The passage in the Gorgias I have referenced might prompt some speculation about whether the city can be responsible, or whether rulers acting on the city’s behalf are responsible. The passage speaks about the rulers benefitting themselves with their policies rather than the city, so it may appear improper to say “the city” seeks to benefit itself. However, insofar as the rulers are the city’s representatives, who make decisions on the city’s behalf, I assume little distinction between them in this case. Other Platonic evidence suggests that the city’s good has paramount importance and that the rulers should act on the city’s good before their own. We see this especially evident in the Republic (IV.420b) and Laws (I.628c). So the inference that Plato thinks cities and rulers should seek their cities’ good seems well founded.
was better to condemn Socrates than to let him live (98e2-5). Thus, Plato can think that the city sees its good and acts to promote it in convicting Socrates. Plato can hold the city responsible.

However, although Plato can hold the city responsible, he may not hold the city culpable and subject to reactive attitudes for Socrates’ death. To find out, we must consider whether the city actually promoted its good when it convicted Socrates. For, whether the city is culpable depends on whether it acted voluntarily, and whether it acted voluntarily depends on whether it actually promoted its true good (Grg. 468e-469b).

But Plato provides strong evidence that the city fails to promote its good when it condemns Socrates. We will recall that Plato thinks all unjust activity is involuntary by definition (Grg. 469b, 472c, 509e; Prt. 345e, 358e; Rep. IX.591a). Thus, if the city unjustly convicts Socrates (for instance, if Socrates is innocent of the charges, or if Socrates’ trial was unjustly conducted), then the city would have acted involuntarily. And, indeed, Plato’s dialogues do provide sizeable hints that Socrates was wrongly convicted. Socrates is portrayed as just (Phd. 118a), and Socrates protests that he has knowingly done nothing worthy of punishment (Ap. 36b-d). If these hints echo Plato’s view of Socrates’ conviction, then Plato cannot think the city achieved its true good when it chose to convict Socrates.

Moreover, Plato has Socrates indicate that the city cannot even be better off in a subjective sense for choosing to convict Socrates (38c; 39c-d; cf. Phd. 98e). Socrates says that those who condemned him thought it would keep them from giving an account of their lives. But another person, more tenacious than he, will make them give an account anyway. So, if giving an account

27 Cp. in the Apology, Plato has Socrates admonish those on the jury to judge as “is best” for him and for them (ἐμοὶ τε ἄριστα εἶναι καὶ ὑμῖν, 35d9-10). As the city’s representatives, the jury makes the decision on the city’s behalf.

28 This is not the only evidence. See the following passages suggesting that Socrates is innocent of the charges: Ap. 28a, Crito 54b-c, Grg. 486a together with 521d-522a, and Phd. 116c-d. Some scholars have also suggested that Plato thinks the Athenian trial of capital cases is unjust because the trials must be completed within one day (Ap. 37a7-b2; Brickhouse & Smith [1989: 42, n.147 and 75-75]; Shaw [2011: 195, n.29]).
to Socrates was supposedly “bad” for the city, it would surely be worse to give an account to somebody more tenacious than Socrates. Apparently, condemning Socrates does not even give the city what it thinks is good for itself. Much less would the city get its true good.

Thus, Plato shows us that the city has acted involuntarily. When the city acts on the false belief that its good is served by condemning Socrates, it really acts contrary to its best interest. Thus, Plato cannot think the city is culpable. It is only pitiable, not blameworthy. Even so, because the city chose the action that seemed good to it, the city is responsible (Grg. 466c-e; Ap. 35d9-10). It follows that Plato can hold the city responsible, but not culpable, for Socrates’ death.

3.2.2 Previous Arguments for Socrates’ Responsibility

A few scholars have discounted the evidence that Plato can hold the city responsible for Socrates’ death.29 They suggest instead that Plato presents Socrates alone as responsible. That thesis comprises two claims: Plato thinks Socrates is responsible and no one else, especially the city, is responsible for his death. To make their case, scholars usually appeal to an account of responsibility whereby Socrates is responsible because Plato shows him choosing to die in the presence of other options.30 Two passages in the Platonic corpus may support this view. In the first, Socrates refuses the opportunity to propose an acceptable alternate penalty besides death, claiming that he is not accustomed to think that he deserves anything bad.31 In the second, Socrates

---

29 See esp. Frey; also Cholbi (36); Eckstein (8-9); Gallop (85); and Hackforth (36, n.4), favor this view.
30 We often think a necessary condition for responsible action is that the agent must perform actions freely. One way to ensure that a person has acted freely is if she had other options available. See Frankfurt (1971).
31 καί ἐγὼ ἦμα οὐκ ἐθερμα τύχαν ἄξιον κακοῦ οὐδενός. (38b2-3; cf. Xenophon, Mem. IV.iv.4). In Athenian law, the condemned had the chance to propose an alternate penalty. Socrates could have stayed alive if he had proposed exile or imprisonment; that he chose not to provide these alternatives may be proof that he chose death freely.
rejects Crito’s offer to help him escape prison (Crito 54e). Crito complains that Socrates is responsible for his death because he chooses to remain and die rather than flee (45c-d).\footnote{Crito claims: “But yet, Socrates, it seems to me the thing you are trying to do is not even just, to betray yourself, when you might save yourself; and you are eager to bring upon yourself exactly the things that your enemies would wish and exactly what those were eager for who wished to destroy you . . . And you seem to me to be choosing the laziest way” (᾿Ετι δὲ, ὦ Σώκρατες, οὐδὲ δίκαιον μοι δοκεῖς ἐπιχειρεῖν πράγμα, σαυτὸν προδοῦναι, ἐξὸν σοφήσαι· καὶ τοιαῦτα σπεύδεις περὶ σαυτὸν γενέσθαι, ἄπερ ἄν καὶ οἱ ἐχθροὶ σου σπευσάμενε τε καὶ ἔτειος σου διαφθείρα τι σεβλόμενοι . . . σοί δὲ μοι δοκεῖς τὰ ῥυθμιότατα αἴρεσθαι, Crito 45c5-9, d7-8).}

That is the usual explanation. However, even if this argument had adequately considered Plato’s view of responsibility (which it does not), its textual evidence is suspect. First, the premise that Plato portrays Socrates as having alternatives is disputable. I take it that something is not a viable alternative if it is so unattractive that a person could never reasonably choose it.\footnote{This idea is similar to Brickhouse and Smith’s (1989) argument against Socrates having committed suicide. According to Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates is so devoted to justice, that he has no choice but to do as he believes justice commands. There really is no alternative open to Socrates as a result (passim, but see esp. 62).} The first passage shows only that Socrates, as Plato presents him, thinks he does not deserve anything bad.\footnote{Note that Plato has Socrates claim that exile or imprisonment would certainly be bad for him (37c-e), while “great hope” exists that death is good for him (Ap. 40c-41b).} If he were to offer and receive an alternate penalty such as exile or imprisonment, he would suffer something he does not believe he deserves. So he cannot in good conscience propose an alternate penalty. Thus, we might think that he really does not have a genuine alternative to death. The second passage invites a similar objection. Socrates responds that he would indeed flee if justice allowed it (Crito 48b-c). When he determines justice will not allow it (54e), he does not flee. Socrates’ concern to act as justice requires weighs heavily against fleeing, suggesting it is unlikely that Socrates – or at least Socrates as Plato presents him – has a viable alternative.

However, even if we suppose that Socrates has viable alternatives, the argument that Plato thinks Socrates can be responsible as Crito says is suspect in another way. To grant this claim, scholars must assume that Crito serves as Plato’s mouthpiece. However, Plato rarely has Crito appear philosophically astute, so it is unlikely that he thinks Crito’s views are worth...
endorsement.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, in no text does Plato have Socrates agree he is responsible purely because of alternatives available to him. But Plato does have Socrates claim another position: that he does whatever “seems best” to him (\textit{Crit.} 46b7; cf. \textit{Phd}. 98e-99b).\textsuperscript{36} Socrates claims only that he makes deliberate choices. But such an assertion does not mention whether or how alternative possibilities factor into Socrates’ choices, and it certainly does not entail that Plato thinks Socrates is responsible for his death purely because other options were available. Thus, the usual argument that Plato presents Socrates as responsible for his death fails.

### 3.2.3 The Platonic Argument for Socrates’ Responsibility

A better argument that Plato thinks Socrates is responsible would take into account Plato’s own views of responsibility. On Plato’s account, the only thing that would make Socrates not responsible is if his death was non-voluntary. It would have to be like a slip on ice, an action not resulting from Socrates’ conscious choice to do what he thinks is good.

But as Plato presents the case, death does not merely “happen” to Socrates, as if he were to misstep and fall to his death. Socrates takes an active role in the trial leading to his conviction and death (\textit{Ap.}, passim, but see especially where Socrates knows he runs the risk of death: 28a-d). He takes the poison and drinks it without needing restraint or force (\textit{Phd.} 117c). More importantly, Plato presents Socrates doing these actions with repeated assertions that he does what seems best to him. While imprisoned, Socrates declares that he has spent his life following the reasoning that

\textsuperscript{35} Consider a response typical of Plato’s presentation of Crito: “I am unable to answer your question, Socrates; for I do not understand it” (Οὐκ ἔχω, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἀποκρίνασθαι πρὸς ὃ ἐρωτάς· οὐ γὰρ ἔννοι· \textit{Crit.} 50a5-6). Crito’s arguments that Socrates should stay alive are in terms of earthly interests (e.g., what others will think of Crito if Socrates dies), rather than philosophy. We may notice that, even at the \textit{Phaedo}’s conclusion, Crito tells Socrates he can wait to drink the hemlock and stay alive longer (116e5-7). Socrates has none of it, since staying alive longer is not his goal (116e7-117a4). For discussion of Crito’s unphilosophical tendencies in Plato’s presentation, see Weiss (1998: 80), and Harte (1999: 131).

\textsuperscript{36} I discuss these passages below.
“seems best” (*Crito* 46b7). Assuming that he continues the habit he claims to have established throughout his life, he will remain in prison, take the poison, and drink it if that seems best to him as well. In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates go a step further. Rather than say that he merely does what “seems best” to him, he claims to act as is best. He acts “from choice of the best” by remaining in jail, drinking the poison, and dying (98e-99b).

This evidence is sufficient to establish that Plato can hold Socrates responsible for his own death. Socrates’ claims to choose what is best for him indicate his responsibility. He is responsible because his actions result from choices attributable to him (*Grg* 466c-e). These choices are what he believes to be best – at least as Plato presents his case.

Two objections will arise here. I have said that Plato presents Socrates as acting as he thinks is best by drinking the poison and dying. But it may be objected that he does not choose drinking the poison or dying in themselves. He is committed to being just, and “being just” entails drinking poison. Socrates does not choose to die; he chooses to act justly, and death just happens to result. Since this objection concerns Socrates’ intentions, I reserve it for discussion below (Section 3.3).

The second objection is that Socrates’ choice to drink the poison was coerced by his circumstances, and that such coercion should undermine his responsibility. Presumably, the argument goes, a coerced action is more like the non-voluntary action of accidentally falling down the stairs than it is like freely choosing an action as good for oneself. If Socrates is forced to make his choice by the city, by his devotion to justice, or by his lack of viable alternatives, it may be doubtful whether he has really made a “choice” at all.

Consider a case many people would consider parallel to Socrates’. Suppose you hold a gun to my head and tell me that I must rob a store, or you will kill me. Presumably, your threat
will strongly influence whatever “choice” I make. At what point does such coercive influence undermine my responsibility for my choice on Plato’s view? It would seem that if I rob the store, I have done so because of your threat. But here is where it gets tricky. Even in that situation, Plato can point out that my giving in to your coercion (or not) could very well involve a choice on my part. I may choose yielding to your threat as what seems good for me. After all, that choice is what will keep me alive! But I can also choose not to rob the store as what seems good to me. Insofar as the situation requires my choosing what seems best to me, I will be responsible, on Plato’s view. Only if I act without giving consideration to what benefits me, will I fail to be responsible.

This example indicates that, for Plato, whether we are responsible or not may well depend on how we describe the case. We can be responsible for actions we perform under compulsion if we still choose those actions as good for ourselves. Likewise, we can be responsible for actions we perform in the absence of alternatives. A glass of water may still be good and choiceworthy, even when we lack other options such as wine, martinis, or coffee. As long as we choose the single option as good for ourselves, it does not matter that we lack other options.

Analogously, provided that Socrates chooses the one option he has as good for him, Plato can hold him responsible for that choice. What would be problematic is if Socrates had died with no perceivable acknowledgement that his actions were good for him. In theory, Socrates could have decided that death was “not good” for him. If so, he might have avoided death through various means (fleeing with Crito or offering an alternate penalty at his trial, for instance), or he might have at least died with other words on his lips in place of “I do what seems best to me.” (Sentiments like “I am innocent!” or “I drank what?” spring to mind.) That Plato has Socrates say he chooses what is best suggests that Socrates is responsible, at least by Plato’s lights. Even if
Socrates makes his decision in light of coercion from the city or justice, he still chooses his action as good for himself.

So Plato can hold Socrates responsible for killing himself, at least according to Plato’s model of responsibility. However, it is another question whether Plato can hold Socrates culpable, and thus liable to praise or blame for his actions. Whether Socrates is culpable depends on whether Socrates acted voluntarily, and whether Socrates acted voluntarily depends on whether he chose what “is” best, not merely what “seemed” best. Some texts suggest that the only way to obtain what is best is to know what is best. But Plato often has Socrates claim ignorance – especially of the good. As a result, we may worry that Socrates, lacking the requisite knowledge of the good, cannot choose what is really good. If so, he might not have acted voluntarily, and he cannot be culpable.

This question is challenging, because it rides on issues of Socrates’ knowledge. Here I will sketch out a possible response that may provide a way to address the question. I assume, as many scholars do, that Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge are sincere. But I do not think his lack of knowledge entails that Socrates is unable to choose what is good for him. Granted, having knowledge of the good would be sufficient for Socrates to determine his good (Prt. 352c). But having such knowledge may not be necessary. In the Gorgias, Socrates claims that one may secure a power or a craft to ensure that one never acts unjustly (509e-510a). The suggestion is that, at times, it is enough to have some other ability to choose the right course of action. If Socrates

---

37 See, for instance, Prt. 352c. The Gorgias touches on the same idea when it is says that the person who acts without intelligence will fail to achieve her desires (467a).

38 See Euthyphro 15e-16a; Ap. 29b-c; Meno 71a-b; Rep. I.354b. The Phaedo itself contains a denial of knowledge. Socrates claims that he cannot acquire knowledge while embodied (66e-67a).

possesses some power or craft by which he can determine how to act, then he may be off the hook. He could still choose correctly, even if he lacks definite knowledge of his good.\footnote{Shaw argues for this view, esp. 197 ff. Cf. textual support: Grg. 509e1, 510a4; Hp. Mi. 375d8–376a4; Rep. VI.493a. The \textit{Meno}'s account of true belief may also support this thesis. Socrates claims that true beliefs may be no less useful than knowledge (97c-98a), and that true belief can correctly guide a person, like knowledge (99a).}

Plato gives us some indication that Socrates did have some “other power” in the form of a divine dispensation. In particular, Socrates reportedly had a divine “sign,” the \textit{daimonion} (a lesser divine spirit), which sometimes appeared to provide direction.\footnote{Regarding its intervention, see Ap. 31d, 40b-c; \textit{Theat}. 150d, 151a; \textit{Phdr}. 242b-c; & Rep. I.496c.} The \textit{daimonion}'s nature was mercurial. It would only appear to stop Socrates from performing some action he had considered doing, and it would stop him because the contemplated action would have been incorrect in some way (Ap. 31d). This aspect of the \textit{daimonion} makes it very like the power mentioned in the \textit{Gorgias} that ensures one never acts unjustly. If Socrates paid attention to the \textit{daimonion}'s appearances, he could have a way to determine the correct course of action, even when he lacked knowledge of the correct course.\footnote{Since Socrates' \textit{daimonion} only stops him from doing wrong action, we may wonder how Socrates can use that to arrive at the right action. See Weiss, 16-23, and Brickhouse & Smith (2000) for discussion of the difficulties here. But it seems to me that even negative directions (“Don't go this way!” or “Don't do that thing!”) could end up prodding a person to the correct action, much as a shepherdess guides her flock to go the right way by using barriers and directing her dogs to block the flock from incorrect paths.}

But how can this help answer the question of whether Socrates is culpable for his death? One passage provides relevant evidence. Socrates notes that the \textit{daimonion} did not oppose him during his trial, even when receiving the death sentence was likely (40b-c). So he interprets his \textit{daimonion}'s absence as a sign that his actions must have been right and in accordance with divine will. Whatever he did in his trial meets divine favor. The god must also approve his death, since death is the anticipated result of Socrates’ actions there.

Assuming that Socrates’ \textit{daimonion} can provide Socrates the power to distinguish the right action, then Socrates will be able to act correctly if he follows its guidance. Thus, when he chooses...
to follow the *daimonion*’s sign and drinks the poison (*Ap*. 40b-c; *Phd*. 117c), he may still choose what is good for him, even absent knowledge of the good. In such fashion, Plato can show Socrates as acting voluntarily and being culpable, as well as being responsible for his death.

### 3.2.4 The Argument for Joint Responsibility

We have seen good reasons to think that Plato portrays the city as responsible for Socrates’ death and that Plato portrays Socrates as responsible. It is difficult, then, to maintain that Plato thinks only one of these agents is independently responsible. Is it possible to maintain that Plato thinks both are jointly responsible? I think the textual evidence indicates that it is not only possible, but also that we must maintain this position.

The *Phaedo* presents the key evidence that Plato thinks the city and Socrates share responsibility for Socrates’ death. Plato has Socrates say that the real causes (αἰτίας) of his remaining imprisoned are these: “that the Athenians decided that it was better to condemn me, and therefore I have decided that it was better for me to sit here and that it is just for me remaining to suffer whatever judgment they order” (*Phd*. 98e2-5).43

Socrates attributes his action to two intelligent choices, both of which are required for him to remain and die. First is the Athenian jury’s decision to convict him. Their choice is what they think is “better” (βέλτιον, 98e2). Presumably, they think killing him is better for the city than the alternative, allowing him to go free. But that alone would be insufficient for Socrates to die, were it not for the second choice, namely, his own decision to comply. He could have chosen to escape and avoid death. Indeed, he says later that he could have been elsewhere, had he not decided to

---

43 ἐπειδή Ἄθηναιοι ἐδοξε βέλτιον εἶναι ἐμοὶ καταψηφίσασθαι, διὰ ταῦτα δὴ καὶ ἐμοὶ βέλτιον αὗ δέδοκται ἐνθάδε καθῆσθαι, καὶ δικαίωτερον παραμένοντα υπέχειν τὴν δίκην ἢν ἄν κελεύσωσιν.
abide by the Athenians’ sentence (99a1-3). He claims to act “from choice of what is best” (τοῦ βελτίστου αἱρέσει, 99b1-2) by staying to die.44

According to this passage, the city acts in light of what seems better to it. It is responsible for the actions it performs in accordance with that choice. Among other actions, it is responsible for convicting Socrates and standing by to enforce that conviction. At the same time, Socrates acts on his choice of what is best, and is responsible for the actions he performs in accordance with that choice. He drinks the poison himself, knowing his death will result (Phd. 117c). If Socrates really chooses “what is best” when he performs this final suicidal act, then he acts voluntarily, making him culpable for his death as well as responsible. But even if he merely chooses what “seems best” to him (as he suggests at Crito 46b7), he is still responsible for his death. His actions are attributable to him, because he chooses them believing that they are best for himself (Grg. 466c-e; Phd. 99b1-2). Thus, by Plato’s lights, Socrates is at least as responsible for his death as the city is, and he commits suicide.

What may seem unconventional about my thesis is that I am committed to the following claim: although Socrates commits suicide, his action relies upon another agent’s actions. I do not think this claim is as odd as it first appears. We often recognize cases of shared responsibility.45 Consider a symphony orchestra. Each musician chooses a different action as seeming good to herself. For a violinist, the action is drawing a bow across strings; for a flutist, the action is blowing air across the embouchure plate; for a timpanist, the action is drumming beaters against the striking point. However, even though it may look like every musician performs a wildly different task

44 This is vitally different from the claim Crito makes (see above, sec. II.2). Crito says Socrates is responsible purely because he chooses to die in the presence of other options (Crit. 45c-d). Socrates is claiming responsibility only because he chooses death as best for himself. The presence of other options does not determine which choice is best.

from the next, each works toward the same goal: making music.\textsuperscript{46} But that goal relies upon every other musician’s actions, and each symphony member contributes individual parts to a shared, collective whole. If even one musician breaks off to do her own thing, the music will become discordant. The individual musicians thus share responsibility for the same task.

I believe the city and Socrates share responsibility much as the symphony members do. Just as the orchestra’s individual members have different roles to play in producing their shared goal, Plato shows that Socrates and the city have individual roles to play in producing Socrates’ death. The city chooses to condemn, and Socrates chooses to kill himself. Both choices are necessary components of the same outcome, and both agents share the same task: to kill Socrates. Their shared responsibility is such that both agents’ commitments are required – and they are required \textit{together} – to produce Socrates’ death.

\subsection*{3.2.5 Objection: The Jailer}

One passage in the \textit{Phaedo} might appear to counter the thesis that Plato thinks Socrates and the city share responsibility for Socrates’ death. Near the dialogue’s conclusion, Socrates’ jailer says:

\textit{“Socrates, I shall not reproach you as I do the others. For they are angry with me and curse me when I tell them to drink the poison, obeying the orders of the rulers. During the time you have been here I have come to know you in every way as the noblest, gentlest and best man who has ever come here. And now I know you will not be angry at me, for you know who is responsible (\textit{αἰτίους}), and you will be angry at them. So now – for you know what message I bring – farewell, and try to bear what you must as easily as possible” (P\textit{hd}. 116c-d).}\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} To describe the symphony members in a Platonic way: each musician does as seems good to her, which will involve (among other actions) following the notations on her music and her conductor’s directions.

\textsuperscript{47} Ὅ Σωκρατες, ἔρχη, οὐκ ἑταγνώσθομαι ὑμῖν ἐπί οὐκ ἄλλου καταγιγνώσκω, ὅτι μοι χαλεπαίνουσι καὶ καταρῶνται ἐπειδῆ ἀυτοῖς παραγείλω πίνειν τὸ φάρμακον ἀναγκαζόντων τὸν ἀρχόντων. σὲ δὲ ἐγὼ καὶ ἄλλος ἐγνόκα ἐν τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ γενναίότατον καὶ πραῦτατον καὶ ἀριστότατον ἀνδρὰ ὑμῖν ἐπί τὸν πόσοτο δεύτερον ἀρκομένους, καὶ δὴ καὶ νῦν εὖ οἶδ’ ὅτι οὐκ ἔμοι χαλεπαίνεις, γηγνώσκεις γὰρ τοὺς αἰτίους, ἄλλα ἔκεινος. νῦν οὖν, ὅσθα γὰρ ἡ ἥλθον ἀγγέλλων, χαῖρε τε καὶ πεἰρῶ ὡς ράστα φέρειν τὰ ἀναγκαῖα.
The jailer claims that he is merely following orders, so he is not responsible for Socrates’ death. But his sentiment implies that he does not believe Socrates is responsible either. Only those who ordered the jailer to deliver the poison are responsible, and Socrates should direct his anger against them. Someone may argue that Plato endorses the jailer’s sentiments. If so, Plato would not think Socrates is responsible.

However, the jailer’s statement indicates that the jailer believes responsibility and the appropriateness of certain reactive attitudes are coextensive. We will recall that this is not Plato’s view. Plato thinks responsibility and the appropriateness of certain reactive attitudes may sometimes diverge, particularly when the agent has acted involuntarily (Grg. 468d-469b; Tim. 86d; Laws V.731d). If I am correct that the city has acted involuntarily when it condemned Socrates, then Plato cannot hold the city or its rulers culpable, even if he does hold them responsible. Presumably, then, Plato would not accept that the city is a fitting object for Socrates’ anger. Thus, when the jailer says Socrates will direct his anger against those responsible, the jailer displays a non-Platonic view of responsibility. We should not look to the jailer’s sentiments to provide Plato’s view on this matter.

So why else would Plato have recounted the jailer’s comments, if not to endorse the jailer’s view of responsibility? The passage serves a threefold purpose. First, it allows Plato to praise his philosophical mentor through another person’s mouth. The jailer says Socrates is “noblest, gentlest, and best.” Such praise will mean more to the reader coming from the jailer than they would if they came directly from Plato. This praise may also add to the reader’s general impression that the city wrongfully convicts Socrates. For, if Socrates is really “good,” he is less likely to be guilty. Finally, the passage sets up the dialogue’s final scene, where Plato has Socrates follow the jailer’s advice to die “as easily as possible.” Since the hallmark of a philosopher is not resenting
death (Phd. 68c), it is important that Plato display Socrates’ equanimity about dying. Plato uses the jailer’s sentiments to aid the image that Socrates maintains a philosophical disposition to the end. Thus, despite the jailer’s confused view of responsibility, his comments contribute to the text.

### 3.3 The Question of Intention

Thus far, I have argued that Plato represents Socrates as sharing responsibility for his death with the city. But this argument is not enough to prove that Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide. Even if I am right that Socrates is responsible, his responsibility alone does not determine his intention. Whether an agent commits suicide is sensitive to her intention when she acts. For instance, an electrician may think it seems good to touch a certain wire, and so on Plato’s theory of action she is responsible for touching the wire. But now suppose that she doesn’t know the wire is live, and so when she touches it, she electrocutes herself and dies. It does not follow that the electrician has committed suicide, that is, intentionally chosen death as good for her. The electrician would be responsible only for choosing to touch the wire, but not for choosing her death. Similarly, it may be objected that Socrates chooses an action leading to his death as seeming good to him (as he clearly does), and yet does not intentionally choose death as good for him.

This point requires asking another question. Does Plato think Socrates actually intends to kill himself, in the sense that he intentionally chooses death as good for him? In the very passage where Plato has Socrates claim to do as is best, he indicates that the choice is based on Socrates’ determination of what is “just” to do (Phd. 98e2-5). It could be objected that Plato presents Socrates as intending only to do as justice requires, but that does not require him to intend to die.\(^{48}\) The objection challenges my conclusions thus far in this essay. If Plato does not think Socrates

\(^{48}\) Brickhouse & Smith (1989: passim), argue this.
intends to kill himself, then he cannot think Socrates shares the goal of “killing Socrates” with the city. Furthermore, since suicide requires an intent to kill oneself, the objection would undermine the thesis that Socrates committed suicide.

The objection requires considering Plato’s view of intentional action. We know that on Plato’s view, an agent is considered responsible whenever she does what she thinks will promote her good (Grg. 468b-d; Laws 864a; Meno 77c-78b; Prt. 352b-358e; Rep. 443e). Whatever the agent considers “good,” will thus be the intended end of her activity. For Socrates to intend to die – and only to die – he must locate his good in dying, and choose to die only because death seems good to him. Crucially, he must intend to die apart from any consideration of justice. At least one ancient author suggests that this understanding is how we should interpret Socrates’ intentions. In the Apology, Xenophon has Socrates claim:

“If I perceive my decay and start criticizing myself, how,” [Socrates] said, “could I any longer live pleasantly? Perhaps,” he added, “the god in his kindness is taking my part and securing me the opportunity of ending my life not only at the right place but also in the easiest way. For if I am condemned now, it will clearly be open to me to suffer a death judged by those who have overseen this matter to be the easiest and least troublesome to one’s friends” (Xen. Ap. 6-7).

Xenophon has Socrates covet death even before he goes to trial because he thinks his intellectual powers are beginning to fade. The city’s sentence will be a timely opportunity to kill himself. He sees death itself as good for himself because it will free him from old age, senility, and the associated loss of philosophical ability. He says nothing about intending to die for justice’s sake.

---

49 See Cooper (516). I take it that suicide necessarily involves an intent to die, otherwise many accidental deaths could count as “suicide” as well.

50 ἢν δὲ αἰσθάνομαι γείρον γιγνόμενος καὶ καταμέμφωμαι ἐμαυτόν, πῶς ἂν, εἰπεῖν, ἐγὼ ἢτι ἂν ἡδέως μιστεύσῃ ἵππος ἵππος τοῖς, φάναι αὐτόν, καὶ ὁ θεός ἐι διεμέναι προξενεῖ μοι οὐ μόνον τὸ ἐν καιρῷ τῆς ἡλικίας καταλῦσαι τὸν βίον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ἢ ρήσαμα. ἢν γὰρ νῦν κατακριθή μοι, δήλον ὅτι ἐξέσται μοι τῇ τελευτῇ χρήσθαι ἢ ρήσῃ μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν τούτων ἐπιμεληθήντων κέκριται, ἀπρογιομονετάτη δὲ τοῖς φίλοις.
Could Plato’s view of Socrates’ intentions possibly accord with Xenophon’s presentation?

One passage might appear to illustrate this view. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates states, “I see clearly that it was better for me to die now and be freed from trouble” (41d4-5). The cryptic remark might well suggest that death seems better to Socrates than continued life.\(^{51}\)

However, further consideration of the passage suggests otherwise. Plato has Socrates recognize death as “better” for himself only *after* Socrates has been condemned.\(^{52}\) The timing suggests that he recognizes death’s goodness as conditional on his conviction, and choiceworthy only because of his commitment to justice. If so, Plato cannot think Socrates sees his death as good independent of justice’s dictates, and death cannot be the sole end of Socrates’ intentional activity.

Indeed, the strongest Platonic evidence suggests that Socrates’ intentions must accord with justice’s demands. Consider the following passage:

> “[We] agree that the thing we must examine is whether it is just for me to try to leave here when the Athenians have not acquitted me. If it appears to be just, we will try to do it; but if it is not, we will let it be” (*Crit*. 48b-c).\(^{53}\)

Plato has Socrates present the question of his death as a matter of justice. He will flee with Crito if he can be convinced that justice permits his flight. Otherwise, he will die as justice dictates. This passage should prompt serious doubt that Plato thinks Socrates intends only to die. It suggests, instead, that Socrates intends to act as justice requires. If this thesis is correct, Socrates

---

\(^{51}\) Note, however, that the death sentence is “better” for a different reason than for Xenophon’s Socrates. Plato’s Socrates has just related how difficult it is to outrun injustice (*Ap*. 39a), suggesting the “trouble” he hopes to escape is injustice rather than (as Xenophon’s Socrates touts) old age.

\(^{52}\) In contrast, Xenophon has Socrates recognize death as “better” for him even before he goes to trial (*Ap*. 4). This suggests that, on Xenophon’s interpretation, it does not matter whether the city condemns Socrates; Socrates’ desire for death occurs first, and is independent of justice and the city’s ruling. Brickhouse and Smith (1989) make a convincing case that Xenophon’s Socrates and Plato’s Socrates differ profoundly with respect to their motivations (60-62).

\(^{53}\) Οὐκοῦν ἐκ τῶν ὀμολογουμένων τούτω σκέπτετον, πότερον δίκαιον ἐμὲ ἐνθένδε πειρᾶσθαι ἐξεῖναι μὴ ἄφιέντων Ἀθηναίων ἢ οὐ δίκαιον· καὶ ἐὰν μὲν φαίνηται δίκαιον, πειρώμεθα, εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἐξόμεν.
locates his good only in acting as justice requires, and he does not identify death as his good. Socrates would die only because justice requires it, and he would not intend his death.\footnote{Brickhouse and Smith favor this view (1989: 41 ff.).}

However, we should not be too quick to accept this thesis. For the \textit{Crito} passage is also compatible with another option: that Socrates intends two ends when he acted, both to die and to comply with justice. The passage does not exclude the possibility that Socrates had other reasons for doing as he did besides or in addition to acting in accordance with justice. This suggests a way forward for the view that Plato thinks Socrates committed suicide.

In the \textit{Gorgias}, Plato recognizes two ways an agent can act to promote her good. Tyrants may act because (and only because) their good requires it. In this way, they kill or exile someone only because they think that doing so will best promote their good (468b). But tyrants may also kill or exile because they want to do the killing or exiling, \textit{and} because their killing or exiling promotes their good (466d). The first case illustrates that an agent may φ because she wants to φ for no other reason than that her good requires it. This is how you might follow a doctor’s orders, for example (cf. \textit{Grg. 467c}; \textit{Rep. II.357c}). You take prescribed medicine only because it is required. You have no positive desire to take the medicine, other than that it is required for you to obtain your goal (viz., being healthy). But the second case illustrates that an agent may φ because she wants to φ, and because φ-ing also promotes her good. Suppose that you want to take the medicine your doctor prescribes, perhaps because you like the taste of medicine.\footnote{One may be tempted to think that this is not possible. But here is an example. My young nephew once got sick and was prescribed some sweet pink concoction for his cough. Ever after, he would pretend to get sick in the same way, just so he could be prescribed some of the same medication. The doctor wasn’t fooled. But when the kid did eventually get sick and need that medication, he got what he wanted \textit{and} he got what was conducive to his overall health.} In this case, when the doctor prescribes you some medicine, you want to take the medicine anyway. Although taking the medicine also happens to promote your good (being healthy), you do not take it purely
because it promotes your good. Notice, however, that recognizing the medicine’s healthful benefits will provide further reason to take it.

The worry is that Socrates intentionally chooses death in a manner more like the first example. It might seem that Socrates has no desire to die, and that his only desire is to do as justice requires. However, we have good reason to think that this is not the case, and that Socrates actually desires death.

The evidence for this claim is particularly strong in the *Phaedo*. Plato has Socrates surmise that death is good – and especially good for philosophers. Philosophers will practice for death throughout their lives and will always be eager to die (*Phd. 61d, 64a, 65d*). Indeed, philosophers should *want* to die, because death is nothing other than a separation of soul from the body. Once the soul is free of the body, it can pursue true wisdom (the philosophers’ goal) unhindered (65a ff.). Since Socrates claims that he strives to be numbered among the true philosophers (69d), he must recognize death as a benefit. Only death will enable his soul to separate from his body to pursue wisdom. Clearly, Socrates’ having a desire for death is not ruled out by his attitudes towards death. Death, in fact, seems good to him, because it is something that every true philosopher should want. Moreover, it is something Socrates wants, insofar as he styles himself a philosopher.\(^56\)

We see a similar thought expressed in the *Apology*:

“Let us consider in another way also how much hope there is that [death] is a good thing. For death is one of two things. Either it is nothing such that the dead have no consciousness of anything, or it is, as people say, some change and relocation of the soul from here to another place. And if it is insentience, like sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream, death would be a marvelous gain. . . . But if death is a change of place from here to another place, and the things people say are true, that all the dead are there, what greater good could there be, oh judges? . . . I want

\(^{56}\) Compare to Socrates’ claim that the sophist, Evenus, will want to die, if Evenus is truly a philosopher (*Phd. 61b-c*). This has the odd result that all true philosophers should desire to die.
to die many times, if these things are true; for I would find life there marvelous” (40c-41b).(57)

In this passage, Plato has Socrates construct a dilemma. Death is one of two things. Either it is nothing and the dead are annihilated, or it is some relocation of the soul to another place. Either way, death is a benefit. Moreover, Socrates thinks it benefits himself.

Some may object that this dilemma does not cover all the possibilities of what death is. Death could involve eternal punishment, which would certainly not be advantageous.(58) However, under a more charitable reading, the argument does not fall prey to this worry. Loosely interpreted, the option that death is a “relocation of the soul” could involve any relocation of the soul, whether it be to blissful paradise, to another living body, to eternal damnation, or elsewhere. The real worry is in Socrates’ assumption that his soul must necessarily relocate to a “good” place. Socrates feels secure in this assumption because he believes that the gods are good and will reward his philosophic life.(59) Whether his assumption is correct is not at issue here, since we are now considering only how Plato portrays Socrates’ attitudes toward his death. If we take Socrates at his word, he thinks death itself will be good for him regardless of whether it involves his annihilation or relocation. He claims that, especially if the latter is the case, he wants (θέλω) to die many times.(60)

---

57 Ἐννοήσωμεν δὲ καὶ τῆς, ὡς πολλὴ ἐλπὶς ἐστιν ἀγαθόν αὐτῷ ἐνα· δεινὸν ἄρα θάτερόν ἐστιν τεθνάναι· ἢ γὰρ οἶνον μηδὲν εἰναι μηδὲ αἰσθησιν μηδὲν ἄ λλα ἐστιν τὸν τεθνεῖται· ἢ κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα μεταβολή τις τυγχάνει οὕσα καὶ μετοίκησις τῇ ψυχῇ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἐνθένδε εἰς ἄλλον τόπον. καὶ ἐπεὶ μηδὲν ἀλλὰ ἐστιν· ἀλλ` ἦν ὁ ἄνδρες δικασταί; . . . ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ πολλάκις θέλω τεθνάναι, εἰ ταῦτα ἐστιν ἀλληθῆ· ἐπεὶ ἐμοίς καὶ αὐτῷ θαυμαστῇ ἄν.

58 Roochnik (1985: 213), argues that Socrates’ two options are not exhaustive. The afterlife might involve pushing rocks up a hill for eternity, for example.

59 Cf. Grg. 526c. Since he denies that he has done anything worthy of punishment (Ap. 36b-d), and since he believes the gods are good, he assumes he will have a punishment-free afterlife. On this claim, I agree with Jones (10) and Austin (2010: 47).

60 The claim may indicate Socrates is less enthralled with the first possibility. Yet, he still claims death as annihilation would be a “marvelous gain.” But how can death as nothingness be a benefit? For annihilation to be a
I suggest from this evidence that Socrates, as Plato presents him, encapsulates the *Gorgias’* second way to promote his good. He acts as justice requires, killing himself because that is what he thinks justice requires. In that sense, it is true that he intends to act in accordance with justice. But Plato also presents Socrates as doing what he wants to do, killing himself also because he wants to die. Socrates believes that death will itself be good for him, either because it will free his soul to pursue wisdom in the company of good people (*Phd.* 63c; *Ap.* 41c-d), or at least because good gods will ensure he comes to a good state when he dies. So we cannot say that Socrates kills himself only because he desires to act in accordance with justice. For, when he kills himself, he not only recognizes that acting as justice requires is good for him, but he also recognizes that death itself is good for him.  

His choice to kill himself thus results both from his own desire for death and from his desire to act as justice dictates. Thus, Plato has Socrates commit suicide.

What may yet remain puzzling is why Plato presents Socrates’ acting on his desire for death as so closely entwined with justice’s demands. After all, Socrates’ desire for death is fulfilled only by following justice’s ruling (*Crito* 48b-c; 54e). The fact that even Socrates’ positive sentiments about death are only expressed after his conviction may suggest that his desire for death comes secondary to justice’s demands. Some may also wonder why Socrates does not end his life earlier if death is so desirable for him, instead of waiting until such time as justice also requires his death.

The reason is that Plato makes it quite clear that death will not be good for Socrates unless Socrates dies justly. Plato has had Socrates recognize that committing suicide under certain

---

61 See Frankfurt (2008: 1-10), for an argument that it makes a difference if an agent is compelled to do something that she wants to do.

62 Seneca, for instance, notes that Socrates could have committed suicide from fasting rather than comply with the law to drink the poison (*Ep.* LXX.9).
conditions might be vicious. This interpretation is borne out when Socrates invites the sophist, Evenus, to follow him in death. Socrates claims that Evenus will want to die if he is truly a philosopher. But, Socrates adds, “perhaps” Evenus will not commit suicide, because suicide is not permissible under ordinary circumstances (Phd. 61c10). Given the prohibition against suicide, Socrates must wait until such time as his suicide is ethically permitted. He cannot act on any desire for death unless and until he has the circumstances granting him leeway to satisfy that desire justly. That he believes something about his current circumstances grants him that leeway is clear. He has all the permission he needs in the city’s command that he die (cf. Laws IX.873c). But, even though Socrates intentionally acts in accordance with justice, he also intends his death.

Socrates declares that suicide is only allowable when the god and justice permit it (Phd. 62c). Socrates can only permissibly kill himself because god sends him some necessity (cf. πρὶν ἄν ἄνάγκην πιὰν θεῦς, Phd. 62c6-9). Thus, he can only obtain any benefit from dying when his death is in accordance with virtue and divine command.
Works Cited

Primary Texts:


Secondary Literature:


—––. *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.


