On rational suicide: The Stoics and the 'open door' argument

Deliberately putting an end to one's own life is probably the most controversial as well as the most unintelligible decision one may take during one's lifetime. To some the decision that results in suicide is the ultimate vindication of Søren Kierkegaard's famous aphorism that "the instant of decision is a moment of madness."[265] Others, even among those who feel sympathetic towards suicide for various reasons, are still reluctant to condone it: in the eyes of most ethicists the decision to kill one's own self is incomprehensible, inconsistent, just an irrational response that lacks any coherent meaning or rationale. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, suicide can only be *a clumsy experiment*:

> "[…] an experiment – a question which man puts to Nature, trying to force her to an answer. The question is this: What change will death produce in a man's existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make; for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer."[266]

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[265] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28-29.

[266] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Suicide," in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. II, trans. Eric F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 311.

By and large, intuition and common sense also favor this view; in a sense, to assume that one's decision to commit suicide may ever be rational, sounds like a paradox or an oxymoron; rational suicide may only be a typical, textbook case of a *contradictio in terminis*. Not everybody would agree with this view, though.

I. Introduction

Although it has been widely practiced during the classical era and the roman times,[267] even then suicide was a highly controversial issue that fueled a long and heated debate. The Pythagoreans, whose key ontological and metaphysical views I already discussed in the first chapter, rejected suicide on the grounds that deliberately taking one's own life would presumably disturb the transmigration of the souls' circle,[268] since the suicide wouldn't have as many chances to repent for his sins as he normally would in case he decided to keep on with his life.[269] Plato, probably under the influence of the Pythagorean tradition, sounds critical against suicide despite the fact that "some times and for some persons it is better to die than to live;"[270] even those, however, "for whom it is better to die, can-

[267] Ludwig Edelstein, "The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation and Interpretation," in *Ancient Medicine, Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, ed. Owsei Temkin and Lilian C. Temkin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 62.

[268] Kalman J. Kaplan, and Matthew B. Schwartz, *A Psychology of Hope: A Biblical Response to Tragedy and Suicide* (Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 18.

[269] Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* (*The Deipnosophists*): The Loeb Classical Library, trans. Douglas Olson (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.216.

[270] Plato, *Phaedo*, 62a, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. Harold North Fowler, with an Introduction by W. R. M. Lamb, vol. 1 (London: William Heine-

not without impiety do good to themselves, but must wait for some other benefactor."[271] This 'impiety' Socrates mentions while discussing with Cebes is indicative of his view that suicide is disrespect towards the gods and an abrupt violation of the divine plan. As far as the thread of one's life is concerned, one can only entrust one's self to the gods:

> "Now the doctrine that is taught in secret about this matter, that we men are in a kind of prison and must not set ourselves free or run away, seems to me to be weighty and not easy to understand. But this at least, Cebes, I do believe is sound, that the gods are our guardians and that we men are one of the chattels of the gods. Do you not believe this?"[272]

Poor Cebes agrees, of course; Plato, on the other hand, in his later works doesn't sound that adamant on this: under specific circumstances "he that slays the person who is, as men say, nearest and dearest of all,"[273] while not justified to do so "merely inflicting upon himself this iniquitous penalty owing to sloth and unmanly cowardice,"[274] may have good reasons to decide to put an end to his own life "when he is […] compelled to it by the occurrence of some intolerable and inevitable misfortune, [or] by falling into some disgrace that is beyond remedy or endurance."[275] In the *Republic*, although

mann, 1966).

[271] Ibid.

[272] Ibid., 62b.

[273] Plato, *Laws*, 9.873c, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. R. G. Bury, vol. 9 (London: William Heinemann, 1966).

[274] Ibid.

[275] Ibid.

he makes no explicit reference to suicide, Plato seems to imply that there are forms of life not worth living; he mentions Herodicus to make his point that "lingering out one's death" and "struggling against death" may only make one worthy of the "prize of a doting old age."[276]

To Aristotle, on the other hand, suicide can never be justifiable under any circumstances, since the decision that results in it could never be in accord with the *golden mean*; on the contrary, the act of suicide is indicative of cowardice that is an *extreme in deficiency*, and nothing is more despised by Aristotle than extremes:

> "But to seek death in order to escape from poverty, or the pangs of love, or from pain or sorrow, is not the act of a courageous man, but rather of a coward; for it is weakness to fly from troubles, and the suicide does not endure death because it is noble to do so, but to escape evil."[277]

At a later point Aristotle discusses suicide as an injustice not against one's self, of course, since *volenti not fit iniuria*, but against the state. This according to Aristotle is the reason why the law either doesn't sanction suicide, or explicitly forbids and punishes it "by certain marks of dishonor":

> "For instance, the law does not sanction suicide (and what it does not expressly sanction, it forbids). Further, when a man voluntarily (which

[276] Plato, *Republic*, 3.406b, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. Paul Shorey, vol. 5 (London: William Heinemann, 1969).

[277] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1116a.13, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 19, trans. H. Rackham, vol. 19 (London: William Heinemann, 1934).

> means with knowledge of the person affected and the instrument employed) does an injury (not in retaliation) that is against the law, he commits injustice. But he who kills himself in a fit of passion, voluntarily does an injury (against the right principle) which the law does not allow. Therefore the suicide commits injustice; but against whom? It seems to be against the state rather than against himself; for he suffers voluntarily, and nobody suffers injustice voluntarily. This is why the state exacts a penalty; suicide is punished by certain marks of dishonor, as being an offense against the state."[278]

While Aristotle took a critical stand against suicide, the Epicureans adopted a rather lukewarm attitude towards it, although, as I already insinuated in the previous chapter, to them it was definitely not an option of great appeal. As a matter of fact – and taking into account the depreciative way in which they considered the pains of the body as well as those of the soul – to them suicide must have been rather unintelligible as a moral choice. After all, the disposition of the wise man cannot be affected by the capriciousness of fate, since the wise is capable of maintaining a state of blissfulness 'even on the rack,' and "[…] even when he has lost his sight, he will not withdraw himself from life,"[279] according to Diogenes Laertius. Three centuries after Epicurus, Lucretius makes a scornful and bitter comment against those who choose to put an end to their own life just because they fear death:

[278] Ibid., 1138a.

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

"Whilst they in filth and darkness roll around;
some perish away for statues and a name,
and oft to that degree, from fright of death,
will hate of living and beholding light
take hold on humankind that they inflict
their own destruction with a gloomy heart."[280]

In what is probably a veiled – though fierce – attack directed to the Stoics, Epicurus bitterly argues that:

> "[…] he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirableness of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass with all speed through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It were easy for him to do so, if once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in mockery, his words are foolishness, for those who hear believe him not."[281]

The Epicureans reportedly were willing to consider suicide as an option only for those who sense that their intellectual powers are gradually deteriorating and are about to leave them; this has allegedly been the case of Democritus of Abdera, who reportedly in the fairly advanced for the time age of

[280] Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. William Ellery Leonard (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 3:79-83.
[281] Diogenes Laertius, 10.126-127.

ninety, asked his sister to leave him with no food or water to hasten his death, because he sensed that his mental powers – his memory, in particular – were rapidly declining and, being bed-ridden, he knew that he would be unable to maintain a state of blissfulness in case he lost the ability to recall pleasant moments, exactly as Epicurus suggests one should do when experiencing any intolerable state of being.[282]

Despite the fact that the classical as well as the Hellenistic period abound with striking examples of notorious suicides, suicide was met either with rejection or, at best, with skepticism by the major philosophical schools of the time. As a matter of fact, only the Stoics supported the view that suicide can be rational – and hence morally permissible – under specific circumstances.

II. Epictetus and the open door

Among the last in a long line of great philosophers, Epictetus offers a clear and comprehensive view of the Stoic teaching concerning suicide, and there is unrivalled simplicity and sincerity in the account he provides, as it has been taken down by his pupil, Arrian. To illustrate the human condition Epictetus uses the quite telling metaphor of a chamber that from time to time is filled with smoke:

> "[…] only do nothing in a depressed mood, nor as one afflicted, nor as thinking that you are in misery, for no man compels you to that. Has it smoked in the chamber? If the smoke is moderate, I will stay; if it is excessive, I go out: for you

[282] Reported in James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 207ff.

> must always remember this and hold it fast, that the door is open […] and I depart to the place where no man will hinder me from living, for that dwelling place is open to all; and as to the last garment, that is the poor body, no one has any power over me beyond this."[283]

Epictetus is never weary of stressing that there is always a certain way out – that is, suicide – of even the direst condition; the recurring metaphor of human life as a room whose door constantly remains open is obviously extremely appealing to him:

> "In sum remember this: the door is open; be not more timid than little children, but as they say, when the thing does not please them, "I will play no longer," so do you, when things seem to you of such a kind, say I will no longer play, and be gone: but if you stay, do not complain."[284]

The calm, impassionate voice of Epictetus echoes six centuries of fervent advocacy of suicide as the only rational response to certain insuperable challenges posed by the extreme situations one may face in the course of one's life, as well as an emergency exit from a life of protracted misery.

The Stoic ethical theory, it is true, is as clear-cut as the Epicurean one, if not even more; it has also been equally controversial. According to the Stoics only *virtue* and *vice* are val-

[283] Epictetus, *The Discourses*, in *The Discourses of Epictetus, with the Encheridion and Fragments*, trans. George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), I.25.18.
[284] Ibid., I.24.20.

ue-laden, and therefore deserving to be pursued or avoided respectively. Anything else to them counts just as *indifferent*. Of course the Stoics distinguished between three classes of indifferents, that is, the *preferred*, the *dispreferred*, and the *absolute indifferents*, which means that they still classified indifferent objects, situations or states of being into those that might be pursued, and those that might be avoided; nonetheless, all these after all are *still indifferents*, and this classification applies only as long as they don't get in the way of a virtuous life.

> "[…] some [things] are said to be absolutely indifferent, such as having an odd or even number of hairs on one's head, or extending one's finger this way or that way, or to picking off some annoying object, such as a twig or a leaf. In the [other] sense one must say that [...] what is between virtue and vice is indifferent, but not [indifferent] with respect to selection and rejection; and that is why some have selective value, and some have rejective disvalue, but make no contribution at all to the happy life."[285]

Among the preferred indifferents, the ones that are more appealing to the human nature and therefore more likely to promote virtue, the Stoics enumerated life, health, wealth, and anything in general that is pleasant to humans; among the dispreferred ones the Stoics included unappealing states of being that are more likely to become an obstacle to a virtuous life, such as death, sickness, poverty, ill reputation, etc. Let us

[285] *Ioannis Stobaei Anthologium*, II, 7:7, quoted in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 213.

take life, for example: to any rational human being, one that lives in accordance with nature, normally life is a means to achieve virtue; the same also applies to wealth, health and the like. There might be times, however, that life may become an obstacle in one's struggle to maintain one's virtue; the only reasonable thing to do in such a case is to deliberately abandon life in order to preserve one's virtue. According to Cicero, the Stoics held that:

> "When a man has a preponderance of the things in accordance with nature, it is his proper function (*officium*) to remain alive; when he has or foresees a preponderance of their opposites, it is his proper function (*officium*) to depart from life."[286]

The bad thing is that it rests with fate to determine whether one will have a preponderance of things in accordance with nature or not; the good thing is that, in the face of the capriciousness of fate, one is still capable of preserving one's virtue. Epictetus already from the first lines of his *Manual*, in his usual disengaged and rather relaxed style, makes a sharp distinction between things that may be *under our control*, and things that lay *beyond our powers*:

> "Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion, movement towards a thing, desire, aversion; and in a word, whatever are our own acts: not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magiste-

[286] Cicero, *De finibus*, 3.60, in A. A. Long, and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

> rial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts. And the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint nor hindrance: but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the power of others."[287]

It is definitely beyond our powers to determine what fate will bring; it is entirely up to us, though, to decide how we will eventually deal with whatever the future brings along. In the eyes of Epictetus suicide is the ultimate guarantee of human freedom; when it has become utterly impossible to keep on with a virtuous life in accordance with nature, to wit with reason, deliberately abandoning life is the only rational option available to those who consider meaningless a life devoid of virtue. Seneca, almost a contemporary of Epictetus, a few decades earlier had made exactly the same point:

> "It is wrong to live under constraint; but no man is constrained to live under constraint […] On all sides lie many short and simple paths to freedom, and let us thank God that no man can be kept in life against his will."[288]

In this respect, suicide may be a rational choice for every person faced with overwhelming situations such as "if he suffer intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease,"[289]

[287] Epictetus, *The Encheridion*, in *The Discourses of Epictetus, with the Encheridion and Fragments*, trans. George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 1.1.

[288] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral Epistles*: The Loeb Classical Library, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1917), Epistle XII:10.

[289] Diogenes Laertius, 7.130.

and wouldn't want to keep on living under the constraints imposed upon him by the dire circumstances he experiences, because they would have made it impossible for him to live in accordance with nature and maintain his virtue. According to Chrysippus, a forefather of Stoicism, life is like a feast, and may come to its end for the same five reasons any feast may: because of an unanticipated and pressing issue that turns up all of a sudden, or when uninvited drunkards intrude, or if the food is spoiled, or when the provisions are over, or, finally, when the guests are already lying around in a stupor.[290] In the occurrence of any of the above, leaving the feast seems like a quite – if not the only – reasonable decision for the wise man. Next to escaping personal disasters that diminish or annihilate one's ability to live virtuously, "a Stoic wise man [would] commit suicide [when] he is called upon to give his life because of his obligations to others, such as his country or friends,"[291] or out of duty owed to one's self to maintain one's own character and act consistently to one's *personae*,[292] that is, one's individual nature, social status and occupation; according to Cicero this has been the case of Cato,[293] whose decision to commit suicide was consistent with his beliefs, or the case of the sen-

[290] Hans Friedrich August von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964), 3.768.

[291] Walter Englert, "Seneca and the Stoic View of Suicide," *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy* 184 (1990), Newsletter. See also Diogenes Laertius, 1.130.

[292] See Cicero, *De officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 1.107-121.

[293] Ibid., 1.112: "[…] such diversity of character carries with it so great significance that suicide may be for one man a duty, for another [under the same circumstances] a crime […] Cato had been endowed by nature with an austerity beyond belief, and he himself had strengthened it by unswerving consistency and had remained ever true to his purpose and fixed resolve; and it was for him to die rather than to look upon the face of a tyrant."

ator Priscus Helvidius mentioned by Epictetus,[294] who at the cost of his own life defied the order of Emperor Vespasian either not to attend the senate or, if he did, to remain silent, because he considered obeying the Emperor's command to be inappropriate to his office and status.

Epictetus recapitulates the teaching of the Stoics on well-reasoned, rational suicide; by and large, to him as well as to the long line of philosophers that precede him, suicide may be justified under various circumstances, as long as these circumstances make it impossible for one to continue living a naturally flourishing, virtuous life in accordance with nature.

III. Rational suicide revisited

At the time of Epictetus defending the rationality of suicide has been a rather solitary occupation, as I have already shown. The situation remained more or less unchanged in the centuries that followed. This was partly due to the complete prevalence of Christianity in the later Roman Empire and the significant – in many respects, *decisive* – influence Christianity had on the development of the philosophical thought in the western world, and partly because of the gradual ascendancy of reason, a process that culminated in an ultimate triumph with the Enlightenment – or so it seemed at the time; inspir-

[294] Epictetus, *The Discourses*, 1.2.25: "[…] when Vespasian sent and commanded him not to go into the senate, he replied, 'It is in your power not to allow me to be a member of the senate, but so long as I am, I must go in.' Well, go in then, says the emperor, but say nothing. Do not ask my opinion, and I will be silent. But I must ask your opinion. And I must say what I think right. But if you do, I shall put you to death. When then did I tell you that I am immortal? You will do your part, and I will do mine: it is your part to kill; it is mine to die, but not in fear: yours to banish me; mine to depart without sorrow."

ing and thought-provoking as they may be, the arguments of the Stoics in favor of rational suicide still sound counter-intuitive, while their appeal seems to be limited to those who are already inclined towards heroism or martyrdom. Maybe due to this, or just because the teaching of the Stoics gradually faded into oblivion after Marcus Aurelius and regained attention only as late as during the previous century, the Stoic arguments in favor of rational suicide hardly had any impact on the debate: to the exception of a only a few philosophers, most notably David Hume and Arthur Schopenhauer, suicide has drawn astonishingly sharp criticism as being irrational; Kant's downright rejection stands as the most striking example.

This would change only with the emergence of libertarianism, that introduced the concept of an individual realm or sphere, with which nobody other than the individual concerned was either entitled or justified to interfere; in the core of this sphere, of course, lays the freedom to decide upon the time or the circumstances of one's death, if one wishes to, and nobody is justified to have any claim whatsoever to one's continuous existence. Soon the debate on rationally justifiable suicide was revived, only now it was nuanced with a huge variety of subtle arguments, ranging from profoundly phenomenological to squarely utilitarian ones.

In what follows I will discuss only two among the various arguments in support of rational suicide – that is, the view that suicide may under specific conditions be rationally justified; the reason I chose these two arguments in particular is that there are certain aspects of theirs that bring them closer to the Stoic tradition – but also because they are overwhelmingly challenging and bring a breath of fresh air to the debate.

Being intuitively intelligible wouldn't suffice on its own to consider any decision as rationally justifiable, the same as

the opposite wouldn't suffice to assume that any choice is rationally unjustifiable; intuition, however, has its own merits: it may be serviceable to moral discussions as an indication that something is worth of further examination. In Jacques Choron's view, one's decision to commit suicide may be seen as meeting – prima facie, at least – the criteria of a rational choice in the case its rationale, motivation and purpose make sense to others and strike them as *intuitively intelligible* and comprehensible.[295] This, according to Choron, is necessary in order to rule out cases of mental disorder on the one hand, and on the other to discuss one's decision to put an end to one's life not *in abstracto*, but in light of one's individual existence in a given cultural and social environment. To Choron any discussion on suicide that is based upon the *detached observer perspective*[296] is by definition incapable of taking into account the individual character of the decision, as well as the particular conditions that determine it,[297] not to mention that the concept of an impartial spectator who would be "omniscient with regard to non-ethical facts, omnipercepient, disinterested, dispassioned, consistent and normal"[298] at the same time seems implausible and highly problematic.[299] Discussing

[295] Jacques Choron, *Suicide* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 96-97.

[296] Also referred to as *impartial* or *ideal observer* or *spectator*.

[297] Carlos G. Prado and Sandra J. Taylor, *Assisted Suicide: Theory and Practice in Elective Death* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 34-35.

[298] Vernon J. Bourke, "The Ethical Role of the Impartial Observer," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1978): 279-292, 280. Bourke quotes Firth's definition; see Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12, no. 3 (1952): 317-345. For more on this issue see also Richard Brandt, "The Definition of the Ideal Observer Theory in Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 15, no. 3 (1955): 407-413.

[299] See among others Henry Aiken, "The Concept of Moral Objectivity," in

the rationality of suicide *in general*, as if suicide were a decision detached from real life circumstances, would necessarily lead to partial and biased explanations, since it would necessarily leave out of scope *peccatoris circumstantiae atque peccati*.[300] This is the reason why, even to those who reject suicide as an utterly irrational choice, not all cases of suicide strike as equally nonsensical, and some among these cases might even be contemplated with moral awe; even Immanuel Kant sounds rather confused when he discusses the suicides of Marcus Curtius and Seneca the Younger, as well as the alleged readiness of King Frederick the Great to kill himself if the situation called for this.[301] The passage that is the most telling of Kant's ambiguity, however, is the following:

> "A man who had been bitten by a mad dog already felt hydrophobia coming on. He explained, in a letter he left, that, since as far as he knew the disease was incurable, he was taking his life lest he harm others as well in his madness (the onset of which he already felt). Did he do wrong?"[302]

Kant's ambivalence concerning cases as the above, probably proves Choron right in his view that discussing the ratio-

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Morality and the Language of Conduct, ed. H. Castaneda and G. Nakhnikian, 87-94 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963); also Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[300] "The circumstances of the sinner as well as those of the sin," that Aquinas reportedly advised confessors to take into account when judging sins. Reported in Stephen Toulmin. "How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 25, no. 4 (1982): 736-750.

[301] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6:423.

[302] Ibid., 6:424.

nality of suicide as an abstract, unqualified, theoretical puzzle, leaves significant aspects of the issue unattended. On the other hand, any blanket rejection of suicide doesn't explain why, while one may empathize with Demosthenes or Brutus who decided to commit suicide so as to have a dignified death, it is much harder to do the same in the case of Jacques Vaché, a dandy surrealist artist who killed himself in the age of twenty four out of a sense of futility,[303] or in that of Jacques Rigaut, the Dadaist who killed himself in the age of twenty nine using a ruler to make sure that the bullet passes exactly through his heart, and without providing any reason at all, except that he had announced his suicide a few years before.[304] Though none of these four cases may indeed meet the criteria of a rational decision, Demosthenes' and Brutus' decisions are intuitively intelligible, while on the contrary Vaché's and Rigaut's decisions are utterly incomprehensible. The upshot according to Choron is that, as long as we can intuitively comprehend its rationale, motivation and purpose, the decision to commit suicide should not be rejected out of hand as falling short of meeting the demands of rationality.

In my view Choron's argument actually says nothing about whether suicide may indeed be rational; it only implies that some cases of suicide are *more intuitively intelligible* than others, and some are not at all. The distance between intelligibility and rational justification is still great, though; in this respect it is possible that even the most intuitively plausible case of suicide will prove to be utterly irrational if put under thorough examination, and this despite that its rationale,

[303] David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15

[304] Roger L. Conover (ed.), *4 Dada Suicides: Selected Texts of Arthur Cravan, Jacques Rigaut, Julien Torma & Jacques Vaché* (London: Atlas, 2005), 91.

motivation and purpose may be perfectly intelligible. One may always cry out after Terence: "I am human; nothing human is alien to me"[305] in the face of many human decisions, and still consider these decisions inconsistent; all the more so, one may also respect or even admire decisions that strike one as absolutely inconsistent and alien to reason. For example, the decision of Marcus Curtius, the young noble Roman who according to the legend astride his horse and in full armor leaped into a deep pit in the Forum Romanum to propitiate the gods, definitely strikes many people as an indication of admirable courage, a token of dedication to one's people and country, etc.; at the same time, the belief that jumping into a chasm on one's horse will make the gods so happy as to spare one's people, strikes most of us as perfectly irrational.

Margaret Battin provides her own criteria for rational suicide; she classifies these criteria into two groups, the 'nonimpairment' group, and the 'satisfaction of interests' group respectively. The first group, that of nonimpairment, according to Battin includes three key elements, to wit [a] the ability to reason, [b] the ability to have a realistic world view as well as [c] sufficient information concerning one's condition; the satisfaction of interests group includes on the one hand [a] the 'avoidance of harm' criterion, and on the other [b] 'the accordance with fundamental interests' one.[306] Battin recapitulates her view by suggesting that "[…] we typically speak of a decision as 'rational' […] if it is made in an unimpaired way; we also speak of a decision as 'rational' if

[305] "Homo sum; nihil humani alienum a me puto." Poblius Terentius Afer, *The Self-tormentor* (*Heauton timoroumenos*), in *The Comedies*, trans. and ed. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 2004), 77.

[306] Margaret Battin, *Ethical Issues in Suicide* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982), 291.

it satisfies the agent's interests."[307] While there is no reason to discuss at length the first and the third criterion in the 'non-impairment' group, to wit the ones that concern one's ability to reason and having adequate information regarding one's condition respectively, the 'realistic world view' criterion is in need of clarification. Prado and Taylor provide a quite telling example concerning what it is – better, what *it is not* – to have a realistic world view:

> "Regardless of how firm the underlying beliefs, there are some things we won't accept as reasons for suicide. A good example of a 'confused' reason for suicide was the Heaven's Gate group's belief that the appearance of the Hale-Bobb's comet in March 1997 was a sign that members of the group had to kill themselves to be rid of their physical bodies in order to be taken to heaven in the comet."[308]

As far as the 'satisfactory of interests' group is concerned, Battin has to defend her criterion towards what is probably the 'flagship' argument against the rationality of suicide, to wit that suicide *can never be in accordance to one's own interests*, since it brings about death, that is, the ultimate harm to any living being on the one hand, and the *annihilation of all interests* as well as of one's capability of having any interests at all on the other. Against this Battin suggests a subjective notion of interest: in her view interests are determined by one's own value system, by what one thinks as value-laden, and by the kind of value one assigns to things in one's life.

[307] Ibid., 289.

[308] Prado and Taylor, 45, n. 31.

Therefore, she argues that in assessing whether killing one's self is in accordance with one's interests, we need to take into account "[…] the amount of other experience permitted […] and whether this other experience is of intrinsic value."[309] Her point is that what is in one's interests, is what one actually values; from this it follows also that what is to one's harm or detriment, is what one disvalues. Now, the things that moral agents value and disvalue differ greatly, and this means that there can be no objective values and, therefore, no objective interests at the same time. In this respect the continuation of one's life may be against one's interests – and therefore, harmful to one – in the case one would be justified to anticipate from remaining alive only things and experiences one disvalues, like, for example, extreme pain, without any "[…] important experience during the pain-free intervals."[310] In that sense, Battin's 'avoidance of harm' criterion seems to be fully met: a life devoid of value-laden experiences, and burdened instead with experiences that the person disvalues would be harmful, therefore self-inflicted death would be a means – in that case, *the only means* – of avoiding further harm. The same applies to Battin's 'accordance with fundamental interests' criterion; there might be cases that suicide can be rationally justified on the basis that those who decide to terminate their life "[…] value something else more that their own survival."[311] In general,

> "People can value survival for reasons other than that it is survival. This shows that survival can be the object of evaluative assessment and delibera-

[309] Battin, 312.

[310] Ibid.

[311] Prado and Taylor, 36.

> tion, and therefore that it can sometimes be subordinate to other values […]. In fact, the ability to value something more than personal survival partly defines what it is to be rational."[312]

What seems to be controversial with this line of reasoning is that in its light almost every decision to commit suicide may qualify as rational, the ones made by Vaché and Rigaut included. If judged by Battin's criteria, Vaché's and Rigaut's decisions have been no less rational than Demosthenes' and Brutus': both Vaché and Rigaut had the ability to reason, a realistic world view, and adequate information concerning their condition, which means that their decision was by no means an impaired one; next to these, the decision to bring about their own death also meets Battin's satisfaction of interests criterion, since Vaché and Rigaut obviously valued something else more than their own survival: the continuation of their lives would be harmful to them, since it wasn't likely to 'permit other experience of intrinsic value.' This view, however, apart from being counter-intuitive, at the end of the day makes forming any judgment in general absolutely impossible; if all our values and interests are of only personal or subjective character, and if any decision of ours is considered rational in the case it accords with our personal interests, then every decision is a priori rational, apart from those that would be contrary to our subjective interests, if there could be any such decisions anyway. In general, there would be no room for judgement or moral evaluation – and this, of course, is the key objection to relativism in general, and moral relativism in particular.

[312] Ibid.

IV. A postscript

The most controversial issue in the debate on suicide remains whether the decision that results to it could be seen as rational, at least under specific circumstances.[313] What makes rational suicide a seemingly impossible oxymoron is that it brings about death, and death is considered to be not *just an evil*, but the *ultimate evil*, a *summum malum*.[314] In that sense death should be counted as *the* unqualified evil, a *malum ad se* that allows for no exceptions, and under no circumstances should be preferable to anything else. In light of the above one's decision to commit suicide can never be rational. On the other hand, there is also much controversy on whether the view that death is an evil anyway – let alone the ultimate evil – is grounded on reason, or it is just a 'gut feeling,' an instinctive, affective aversion towards something, death, that may have no effect on us whatsoever, as Epicurus argues; the – broadly accepted, and definitely appealing to intuition – claim that "the most terrible thing of all is death"[315] stands in need of further proof, as well.

In Thomas Nagel's view, death – that is, "permanent death, unsupplemented by any form of conscious surviv-

[313] Prado and Taylor, 32.

[314] "Hence it is not lawful for man to take his own life that he may pass to a happier life, nor that he may escape any unhappiness whatsoever of the present life, because the ultimate and most fearsome evil of this life is death." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981), SS, Q. 64, art. 5.

[315] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.6.6: "Now the most terrible thing of all is death; for it is the end, and when a man is dead, nothing, we think, either good or evil can befall him anymore."

al,"[316] cannot be considered an evil as such; death is not an evil as a state, the state of being dead, but only because it deprives us of life. To Nagel it couldn't be otherwise, since we indeed know nothing about what it is like to be dead; we may only know what we will be deprived of when our life will comes to its end. In this respect death may indeed be dreadful not because of what it may bring along, but due to what it will deprive us of:

> "First, the value of life and its contents does not attach to mere organic survival: almost everyone would be indifferent (other things equal) between immediate death and immediate coma followed by death twenty years later without reawakening. And second, like most goods, this can be multiplied by time: more is better than less."[317]

If death is seen as Nagel suggests, that is, just as a state of non-existence, a *blank* unfollowed by any kind of experience, the only thing that may be bad about death is that it robs us of a desirable state of being, but never the state of not existing itself; if it wasn't like this, we should consider the state of not yet being born as equally bad or dreadful with the state of being dead, as Lucretius argues,[318] but this would sound rather absurd. In light of the above, death cannot be the *ultimate evil* as

[316] Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *Applied Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer, 9-18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

[317] Nagel, 10.

[318] "[…] the same estate as if never born before, when death immortal hath taken the mortal life." Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. William Ellery Leonard (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 3.974-5; cf. Stephen Hetherington, "Lucretian Death: Asymmetries and Agency," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2005): 211-219, 211.

such, but only because it deprives us of what we desire or hold dear: things, experiences, prospects, and states of being.

It could also be argued that death is the ultimate evil because it deprives us of the ultimate good, that is, life. Not everybody would agree with the view that life is the supreme good, though; by this I don't mean only the Stoics: the parents of an infantile Tay-Sachs newborn would find no relief in that their offspring is at least alive. The same applies to those who decide to give their life up for any cause whatsoever; it seems that being alive is not an unconditional good as such, but that there are some *further facts* of subjective character that make life worth living. May it be preserving one's virtue, as it is with the Stoics, or staying true to one's religion, as it is with martyrs, or defending one's people, family and country, as it has been with Marcus Curtius, or anything else humans may value more than mere survival, these further facts seem to provide support for the view that one's decision to commit suicide may under certain circumstances be rational.