

THE MATTER OF SUICIDE IN PLATO'S *PHAEDO*:
AN EXPLANATION OF THE CONDITIONS FROM 62a–62c

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Abstract. This paper proposes to discuss, rather extensively, the matter of suicide as it appears in Plato's *Phaedo*. The matter is encountered in the first part of the dialogue, particularly at 62a-c, in the so-called *paradox of Cebes*. In this paper, the reader will often encounter mentions of Manuela Tecușan's commentaries to her Romanian translation of the dialogue. However, we will use these mentions only as a starting point to emphasise the problematic nature of the theme of suicide in Plato's *Phaedo*. Using some of the inadvertencies and problems of the Romanian translations, most pointed out by the translator herself, we will try to make a couple of points regarding the matter of suicide in Plato's *Phaedo*.

Keywords: suicide; Plato; *Phaedo*; paradox of Cebes.

This paper proposes to discuss, rather extensively, the matter of suicide as it appears in Plato's *Phaedo*. The matter is encountered in the first part of the dialogue, particularly at 62a-c, in the so-called *paradox of Cebes*. In this paper, the reader will often encounter mentions of Manuela Tecușan's commentaries to her Romanian translation of the dialogue. However, we will use these mentions only as a starting point to emphasise the problematic nature of the theme of suicide in Plato's *Phaedo*. Using some of the inadvertencies and problems of the Romanian translations, most pointed out by the translator herself, we will try to make a couple of points regarding the matter of suicide in Plato's *Phaedo*. First, we will argue that the so-called *paradox of Cebes* is not a paradox in the logical sense of the term. Second, we will argue that the characters of Plato are speaking about suicide and not any other related theme or metaphor (like *μελέτη θανάτου*). Finally, we will discuss, by making use of formal logic, Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon and Plato's *Laws*, the (apparent contradictory) necessary conditions for someone to commit suicide, mentioned by the character of Socrates at 62a-62c. Our conclusion, we hope, will convince the reader about our proposed relationship between the conditions, the intervention of some benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) and the occurrence of some divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*). Thus we

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will try to show that Plato's Socrates was not careless with his words and there is no contradiction between the aforementioned conditions.

The theme of suicide appears to be, in the first part of the dialogue, related to the theme of the continuous preparation for death (*μελέτη θανάτου*). Cebes introduces these themes by questioning Socrates about the reason for his poems writing in his last days. It is known that Socrates never wrote, therefore for Plato to mention such a thing had to have a purpose. We should ask ourselves why was this detail important for Plato. Just to record a fact, or to use this fact in order to point out something? To correctly answer is, eventually, impossible, but for us to wonder why is reasonable, especially if we remember that this is a dialogue from Plato's maturity and the characters' speeches are Plato's own thoughts. It may be to mock poets, or it may be to open the topic of suicide as we will try to show and interpret in what follows. Socrates answers Cebes's question by saying that he dreamed that he "must cultivate the Muses". Not being sure if this means practising philosophy, what he already did, or music and poems, he tried the second as well. Socrates explains at 61a-61b: "For I thought it was safer not to go hence before making sure that I had done what I ought, by obeying the dream and composing verses."¹ The ancient Greek word *ἀφοσιώσασθαι* is the verb that constitutes the meaning of this sentence.² Socrates finishes his answer to Cebes's question with a piece of advice which Simmias interpret as one to commit suicide:

‘So tell Evenus that, Cebes, and bid him farewell, and tell him, if he is wise, to come after me as quickly as he can, I, it seems, am going today; for that is the order of the Athenians.’ And Simmias said, ‘What a message that is, Socrates, for Evenus! I have met him often, and from what I have seen of him, I should say that he will not take your advice in the least if he can help it.’ ‘Why so?’ said he. ‘Is not Evenus a philosopher?’ ‘I think so,’ said Simmias. ‘Then Evenus will take my advice, and so will every man who has any worthy interest in philosophy. Perhaps, however, he will not take his own life, for they say that is not permitted.’ And as he spoke he put his feet down on the ground and remained sitting in this way through the rest of the conversation. Then Cebes asked him: ‘What do you mean by this, Socrates, that it is not permitted to take one's life, but that the philosopher would desire to follow after the dying?’³

From this part, we can observe that the condition of the philosopher influences the attitude towards suicide. For Socrates, philosophy is a way of life, an activity that is done

¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 61a-61b.

² The ancient Greek word *ἀφοσιώσασθαι* is the verb that constitutes the meaning of this sentence because it has many meanings and many possibilities of translation exist. According to Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon its base form is the verb *ἀφοσιόω* and the main meaning is "purify from guilt or pollution" but it can also mean: "dedicate", "devote", "establish", "consecrate", "satisfy one's conscience", "make atonement or expiation", "acquit oneself of an obligation", "avert a curse or the consequence of crime", "eschew on religious grounds". We propose to use the meaning of "purify from guilt or pollution" and to alternatively translate the sentence like this: "For I thought it was safer not to go hence before making sure that I purified myself, by obeying the dream and composing verses". We do not consider the original translation as being wrong but the general direction of this paper and its conclusions are entailing that this alternative would be more appropriate.

³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 61b-61d.

for the soul and differs from other activities like composing poems and music, an activity which should be the main preoccupation for the entire life and which has the purpose of preparing oneself for death (*μελέτη θανάτου*). We can observe a slight ambiguity that provokes Cebes to ask the question which became known for many scholars as *the paradox of Cebes*. Manuela Tecușan writes in an endnote of the dialogue:

Cebes is enunciating a paradox of which terms are: A) the interdiction to die – for which the authority of various doctrines will be invoked – and B) the desire to die, which subscribes to the Socratic understanding of philosophy as *μελέτη θανάτου*.⁴

We consider that we are facing a mistake because the first part of the paradox, namely A) the interdiction to die, cannot be an interdiction to the natural event of death – it would be absurd. It must refer to the interdiction of committing suicide, to kill oneself. If the problem is presented like this, we cannot speak with such certainty about a paradox because, for example, someone could have the desire to die (in this case, the second part, B) “the desire to die” will remain unaltered) and does not commit suicide, regardless if it is forbidden or not. Furthermore, forbidding suicide does not imply forbidding death – which, again, would be absurd. This point of view is also sustained by Murray Milles, which in his article says that:

From this it is reasonably clear that the ‘contradiction,’ if there is one, does not involve logical contradictories in the strict sense of two statements whose meaning requires that exactly one be true and one false.⁵

The same problem is also observed in a later endnote, noting that Cebes’s mistake is regarding the verb “to die” and requires a new intervention from Socrates. The problem is described as follows:

we are facing a false equivalation of the same verb, *τεθνάναι*, wherein the first case it means “to commit suicide” – because of a context too permissive, and in the second case “to die” – but with an indetermination imposed by the restrictive context.⁶

Socrates asks Cebes and Simmias about the topic and they admit that Philolaos told them that suicide is not allowed, but they did not receive any serious teaching from him. To be noted that Plato’s choosing of characters is not aleatory. Plato is very well aware of Pythagorean philosophy and Philolaos is a renowned Pythagorean. They, in turn, are asking Socrates for what he knows on the topic of suicide:

But perhaps it will seem strange to you that this alone of all laws is without exception, and it never happens to mankind, as in other matters, that only at some times and for some persons it is better to die than to live; and it will perhaps seem strange to you that these human beings for whom it is better to die cannot without impiety do good to themselves, but must wait for some other benefactor.⁷

⁴ Manuela Tecușan, “Endnotes”, in Plato, *Opere*, vol. 4, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1983, p. 161.

⁵ Murray Milles, “Plato on Suicide (*Phaedo* 60C-63C)”, *Phoenix*, vol. 55, nr. 3/4, 2001, pp. 244-258.

⁶ Manuela Tecușan, “Endnotes”, in Plato, *Opere*, vol. 4, p. 164.

⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, 62a.

Plato's attitude towards suicide is evident – attitude enounced through the character of Socrates: there is no case in which someone should commit suicide, but there are people with a desire to commit suicide. For now, regardless if the reader is interpreting the fragment as speaking about suicide or death, we can reasonably agree that some people desire it. We need to determine who these people are (only philosophers or/and others) and what exactly they desire (suicide or death). Manuela Tecuşan considers that these people are only the philosophers because the desire to die is strongly related to philosophy's characterisation as *μελέτη θανάτου*.⁸ We do not consider that only the philosophers should be included in this category. It is true that, by preparing for death, a philosopher will not be afraid of death and will be eager (as Socrates is portrayed in the dialogue *Crito*) to die if this means choosing a greater good. However, anyone, not just philosophers, can, reasonably or not, be eager to die or commit suicide (we will determine their desire in what follows). Invoking Socrates's words, that it is better for some, one might still consider that only the philosophers desire to die or commit suicide; and that only the philosophers are capable of correctly identifying a situation when this is better. We agree with this objection: this is a reasonable explanation, but, again, there can exist cases of people that are not reasonable and did not think about suicide in a correct, logical manner.

Concerning the matter of what is Socrates referring to, committing suicide or dying, we can find the answer in interpreting his words: “these human beings [...] cannot without impiety do good to themselves.” If what these people desire to do can be done by themselves to themselves, we must agree that this paragraph is about suicide and not about the natural, passive event of dying, since if someone “does death” to oneself by oneself means suicide. Socrates continues his answer: “these human beings [...] cannot without impiety do good to themselves, but must wait for some other benefactor.” From this, we can confidently affirm that Plato does speak about suicide because he is differentiating between forms of suicide: plain suicide and “assisted suicide”⁹. Again, this is not a differentiation that could be applied to the natural, passive event of dying. The reason someone must wait for some other benefactor is that of being impious if one does not.

Therefore, Plato's attitude towards suicide in the dialogue *Phaedo*, until now, can be summarised: There is no case in which someone should commit suicide, but there are people who desire to die. In order to fulfil their desire to die, they cannot commit suicide by themselves, but must wait for some other benefactor. With the intervention of that other benefactor, they can commit suicide (we named this assisted suicide). If they do not wait for some other benefactor and commit suicide by themselves, they are doing something impious.

Until now, we observed the conditions and context that circumscribe Plato's attitude towards suicide in this dialogue. For a complete understanding of the matter in

⁸ Manuela Tecuşan, “Endnotes”, in Plato, *Opere*, vol. 4, p. 161.

⁹ We use the term “assisted suicide” to define the suicidal act with the intervention of some other benefactor.

the dialogue *Phaedo*, we must see what it is suggested by “some other benefactor” (*εὐεργέτην*). Maybe knowing that this is difficult to comprehend, Plato, is making his character, Cebes, complain that he does not understand, asking, thus, for a detailed explication from Socrates which he gave:

‘It would seem unreasonable, if put in this way,’ said Socrates, ‘but perhaps there is some reason in it. 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?’ ‘Yes,’ said Cebes, ‘I do.’ ‘Well then,’ said he, ‘if one of your chattels should kill itself when you had not indicated that you wished it to die, would you be angry with it and punish it if you could?’ ‘Certainly,’ he replied. ‘Then perhaps from this point of view it is not unreasonable to say that a man must not kill himself until god sends some necessity upon him, such as has now come upon me.’¹⁰

Socrates explains why this would be an impiety by appealing to the doctrine taught in secret, which we can only guess is Orphic or Pythagorean. It does not matter what the nexus is; it matters that Plato shows he was well aware of this doctrine and we can be confident that invoking Philolaus and choosing Cebes and Simmias, disciples of the former, as characters, was not arbitrary. In Socrates's last reply, we observe that the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) is not mentioned. Instead, he speaks about a necessity sent by gods (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*).

Now, we encounter three possibilities: 1) that the term benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) is used as a metaphor for a God or some category of Gods, 2) that the Gods are sending a divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*) through a benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*). Thus, the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) becomes the bearer and the mean of the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*), or 3) the term benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) has nothing to do with the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*). Thus, in this case, Plato suggests a double causality considering that is necessary to have both a human benefactor and divine necessity. For cases 2) and 3) the term benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) is not a metaphor for a God or some category of Gods.

This question, raised by the use of these two explanations, is essential in establishing the grounds for Plato's attitude towards suicide, not just in the dialogue *Phaedo*, but possibly, for his entire work as well. These two conditions, changed from one answer to the next, are raising this paper's central question: Does Plato, through the character Socrates, say that the two expressions are synonyms? In other words: Is the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) the same thing with divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*)? In what follows, we will develop a short argument by which we will try to show, by analysing the term through the filter of some basic formal logic, that the divine necessity cannot be applied for each individual case. We will argue that the divine

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 62b-62c .

necessity does not occur for every particular case, and it is not the cause for someone's suicide. By this, we do not contradict any other writing of Plato. Our final argument will aim to show that the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην* [...] *θεός*) is applied to the laws in themselves and only to them; thus the law is becoming the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*). The argument will approach us to the conclusions regarding Plato's attitude towards suicide in the dialogue *Phaedo*.

This divine necessity that Plato's Socrates uses as an argument for permitted suicide in *Phaedo* might be interpreted, by some, as a divine cause. In what follows, we will argue that the Gods cannot be the cause of the actions that drove that person to commit suicide. If the divine necessity is interpreted as a cause, as something that determined that person to commit suicide, we can argue that the entire history of that person is a cause for his suicide. Any previous aspect of a person who committed suicide can be invoked as an aspect that led that person to commit suicide, or even all the moments previous to suicide can be invoked to have led that person to commit suicide. Also, if the divine necessity is interpreted as a cause, then every time someone suffers a trial, or an extreme shame, or a misfortune, then they must, with logical necessity, commit suicide.¹¹ However, this is false. Someone can be judged, condemned to drink hemlock and evade, for example. Also, someone can suffer from an extreme shame and chooses not to commit suicide, although Plato permits suicide in such a case.¹² Thus, if the matter of divine necessity is analysed from a logical point of view, it cannot be interpreted as a cause. In the case of the causal (ontological) implication, if the divine necessity is considered the cause (P) of the effect (Q), then every time P happens → Q happens. However, someone might have an extreme shame (P) and not commit suicide (Q) although it is permitted. Or, someone can be ordered by the judge to drink hemlock (P) and chooses to evade, thus not committing suicide (Q). Therefore, the extreme shame cannot be the divine necessity. Also, the divine necessity cannot be the cause of the shame or the cause of the trial since it would be a regress to infinity. It is impossible to tell if the divine necessity is the cause of the shame or the cause of the cause of the shame, etc. In the case of material implication, Q cannot be true without P being true. Thus every time we have (it is true that exists) a case of permitted suicide (Q), we have (is it true that exists) a divine necessity (P). In this case, of the material implication, no problem arises. Concluding this short overlook in formal logic, we affirm that the relationship between cases of permitted suicide and the divine constraint can only be one of material implication. Thus, this explication accounts for how every case of permitted suicide is an instance of divine necessity. Also, the divine necessity is something different from the reason for suicide. The reason why someone committed suicide is not the divine necessity since a causal (ontological) relationship is impossible. Plato's *Laws* also sustain this interpretation. At 853d-854e, before speaking about laws against suicide and permitted cases of suicide, Plato starts with this preamble:

¹¹ Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 873c.

¹² *Ibidem*.

Chiefly, then, on their account, and also as a precaution against the general infirmity of human nature, I will state the law about temple-robbing, and all other crimes of a like kind which are hard, if not impossible, to cure. [...] My good man, the evil force that now moves you and prompts you to go temple-robbing is neither of human origin nor of divine [...] ¹³

Moving on to the term “benefactor” (*εὐεργέτην*): in assessing the meaning of the term in Plato's *Phaedo*, we need to corroborate the pieces of information from the dialogue with Plato's *Laws*. This corroboration is the next step in discovering a complete image of Plato's attitude towards suicide in the dialogue *Phaedo*. According to Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon, *εὐεργέτης*, besides the usual translation as “benefactor”, it was used as an honorary title, sometimes conferred to kings and emperors and sometimes it was used as a mode of addressing a superior. Manuela Tecuşan, in total coherence with the translation offered by Liddell-Scott-Jones, writes an endnote regarding the usage of the term in Plato's *Phaedo* where she explains:

in contrast with *λειτουργία*, which are ways of munificence practised by citizens, *εὐεργεσία* represents any public good deed done by a stranger [...] *εὐεργέτης* is not used here as a metaphor for a particular God or for a category of Gods. ¹⁴

Also, as an example to what Manuela Tecuşan skillfully explained, we may add that, for supplying the Athenians with wood, Archelaus I of Macedon received the honorific titles of *πρόξενος* and *εὐεργέτης*, after the Athenian defeat at Syracuse from 413 B.C. ¹⁵

We can conclude this part by sustaining that the term benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) used by Socrates in the dialogue *Phaedo*, at 62a-62c, is not a metaphor for a God or category of Gods. However, then, why does Socrates changes the explanation given to Cebes so easily? Why does Socrates, when speaking about suicide, says that a man must wait for some other benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) and in the very next reply says that a man must not kill himself until God sends some necessity (*ἀνάγκην* [...] *θεός*) upon him? In this point, we only have two possibilities, namely 2) and 3). For the possibility number 2) the Gods are sending a divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην* [...] *θεός*) through a benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*). Thus, the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) becomes the bearer (and the mean) of the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην* [...] *θεός*). For the possibility number 3) the term “benefactor” (*εὐεργέτην*) has nothing to do with the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην* [...] *θεός*). Thus, in this last case, Plato suggests a double causality considering that is necessary to have both a human benefactor and a divine necessity. However, another question arises: If there is a double causality, why wouldn't Socrates simply enumerate all the necessary conditions? Our proposed answer is because there is no double causality and we put forward a simple argument. Let us remember that the change of the term occurred when Cebes requested additional explanations. Thus, for Socrates, changing the term meant giving more details – “divine necessity” is a detailed

¹³ Plato, *Laws*, 853d-854e.

¹⁴ Manuela Tecuşan, “Endnotes”, in Plato, *Opere*, vol. 4, p. 164.

¹⁵ Inscription IG I³.1.117, Acropolis of Athens, in D. M. Lewis, L. H. Jeffery, E. Erxleben, K. Hallof (eds.), *Inscriptiones Graecae. Vol. I Inscriptiones Atticae Euclidis anno anteriores. Editio tertia*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1981-1998.

explanation of “benefactor”. Thus, if this is the case, the explanation 2), according to which the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) becomes the bearer (and the mean) of the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*), is the only one that still stands. This interpretation is also sustained by the *Laws*, in the fragment in which the Athenian describes how the laws and lawmakers originate:

There existed in the time of Cronos, it is said, a most prosperous government and settlement, on which the best of the States now existing is modelled. [...] Cronos was aware of the fact that no human being (as we have explained) is capable of having irresponsible control of all human affairs without becoming filled with pride and injustice; so, pondering this fact, he then appointed as kings and rulers for our cities, not men, but beings of a race that was nobler and more divine, namely, daemons.¹⁶

This fragment confirms our hypothesis that for Plato the (best) laws and cities are following the divine model, from the time of Cronos. He emphasises, at 853c, in his characteristic method, appealing to stories and myths, that the lawgivers were (at least – if they are not still) of divine descent: “But we are not now legislating, like the ancient lawgivers, for heroes and sons of gods,—when, as the story goes, both the lawgivers themselves and their subjects were men of divine descent [...]”¹⁷

With this last piece of Platonic text, we reached our incursion into the dialogue *Phaedo*. This paper discussed the matter of suicide in Plato’s *Phaedo* and, in doing so, used as a pretext and example some of the difficulties that appeared in translating the dialogue into Romanian. Also, this paper used a few examples from Plato’s *Laws* in order to comprehensively and coherently explain the matter of suicide as it appears for Plato in the dialogue *Phaedo*. The first conclusion that we reached is that there is no paradox in the first part of the dialogue, when the discussion is about the interdiction to commit suicide, since there is no logical contradiction between the desire to die and the interdiction to commit suicide. Our second conclusion strengthens the first one by showing that the characters from *Phaedo* are speaking about suicide in the literary sense of it and not metaphorically. Our third conclusion regards the relationship between the conditions for committing suicide enounced by Socrates at 62a-62c. By firstly saying that one must wait for a benefactor and secondly that one must wait for a divine necessity, Socrates is not implying a double causality, neither is he stating that the God (or Gods, or category of Gods) is the benefactor. We can conclude that, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, the benefactor (*εὐεργέτην*) is the mean and bearer of the divine necessity (*ἀνάγκην [...] θεός*). Our conclusions agree with the translation of the Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon, are coherent with the rest of Platonic opera and, put together, are a solution for a coherent interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedo*. Of course, maybe the most important conclusion is that Plato has an elaborate position regarding suicide in the dialogue *Phaedo*, which, hopefully, this paper brought to the surface.

¹⁶ Plato, *Laws*, 713b-713d.

¹⁷ Plato, *Laws*, 853c.