

Stoic Suicide: Death Before Dishonor

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“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” – Albert Camus (1955, p. 3)

“Above all, remember that the door stands open. Be not more fearful than children; but as they, when they weary of the game, cry, ‘I will play no more,’ even so, when thou art in the like case, cry, ‘I will play no more’ and depart. But if thou stayest, make no lamentation.”
— Epictetus, *The Golden Sayings of Epictetus*

“I suppose that ye also have decided to detain in life by force a man as old as I am, and to sit by him in silence and keep watch of him: or are ye come with the plea that it is neither shameful nor dreadful for Cato, when he has no other way of salvation, to await salvation at the hands of his enemy?” – Cato the Younger

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Abstract: Applying the Roman Stoic criteria for a defensible suicide, this paper argues that suicide in certain circumstances may not merely be permissible, but even morally preferable to the available alternatives, including survival until natural death or some other involuntary end.

Suicide is regarded, generally, as tragic – perhaps understandable in some circumstances, perhaps defensible on the odd occasion, and perhaps even morally justifiable on the rare occasion. Faced with conditions *in extremis*, the standard presumptions may not apply, and intentionally taking one’s own life may be the lesser of the available evils. The presumption, however, remains that suicide is *prima facie* impermissible, and is, at best, a tragedy. In this paper, I hope to challenge that

presumption, and explain the Roman Stoic criteria for a defensible, perhaps even noble, suicide. I shall argue that suicide is, given the correct circumstances, not merely permissible, but that it is morally preferable, on multiple fronts, to the available alternatives, including survival until natural death or some involuntary end to the rational agent's life. Indeed, the expression "natural" death may serve to prejudice moral evaluations of alternatives such as suicide, as they are likely to be deemed *unnatural* by comparison, and "unnatural" carries connotations of perversity or impropriety (as in "unnatural" sexual acts). Perhaps natural death, or continued life until involuntary death, may reasonably be regarded as unpalatable, if continued existence is ignominious, continuous dissolution, or if it necessitates degradation by one's own lights. Might it not be true that maintaining one's decency could literally require "death before dishonor," as the ancient Roman slogan, and contemporary U.S. Marine motto, suggests? Suicide, the voluntary determination of (ideally) the time, place, and manner of one's death, has had its name dragged through the rhetorical mud for too long and with insufficient dispassionate reflection. So, I hereby rise in defense of the supposed anathema of suicide, and I hope to contribute somewhat to the rehabilitation of "death before dishonor" as a noble Stoic injunction. A pointless persistence unto decrepitude may well constitute the type of dishonor that is unpalatable to Stoic sensibilities.

Stoicism and Justifiable Suicide

The Roman Stoics seem to have agreed that there are many fates worse than death and, more to our current point, a number of fates that warrant suicide in lieu of continued existence in a condition of degeneracy or dishonor (though there appears to have been

some disagreement concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions for legitimately taking one's own life). If a virtuous life in accordance with reason and decency is no longer possible, or if continued survival necessitates disgrace, or obeisance to indefensible persons or values, then most of the Stoics seem to have agreed that death is, in such instances, a lesser evil than an unproductive or otherwise shameful life. Epictetus tells us that:

Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death that it is terrible. (Enchiridion, 5 – emphasis added)

Socrates, a hero and moral exemplar for Epictetus and the other Stoics (not to mention devotees of other Hellenistic schools), regarded death as a lesser evil than cowardice, criminality, impiety, or other forms of vice and degradation. It is crucial to note that Socrates chose death even though the option of survival in exile was, by all accounts, available to him. Life as a cowardly, impious criminal “on the run” was, in Socrates’ estimation, a life not worth living, and a greater evil than death by drinking hemlock—as Socrates explained during his trial (*Apology* 29-30). Although Socrates’ death is correctly described as an execution, rather than a suicide, that distinction is not crucial to the question of whether persisting in degradation is sufficient cause to choose death (by execution, suicide, or some other means) rather than a life continued at the expense of one’s dignity, or at the cost of abandoning one’s moral rectitude. If the price of continued life is ignominy, vice, or moral lassitude, the price is too high, and it is time to take to Epictetus’ “open door” without complaint or regret. We must take full responsibility for our choice to “leave or remain,” and embrace the conditions attendant upon that choice. If

the option is death or dishonor, death or degradation, death or self-abasement, then the Stoic and Socratic advice is to choose death with a clear conscience.

What, however, if the option is death or disrepair, death or debilitation, death or decrepitude—a literal “sickness unto death” with no viable hope of recovery or improvement? Illness or injury *can* impose constraints upon agency, and diminished capacities, that are incompatible with a life of reason and virtue. Is there a rational justification for persisting in a life of decay and decline, or a life that is devoid of any plausible purpose or goal beyond *persistence itself*? The Stoic lives for the pursuit of wisdom and virtue. Once these pursuits become impossible, life’s purpose is lost. Life without the capacity for active reasoning and striving toward self-improvement may be fit for dogs or pigs, but a Stoic should have none of it. When reason fails irrecoverably, or the body becomes permanently incapable of translating reason into action, “opting out” need not be regarded as tragic or cowardly. Indeed, it may be the only dignified act left to a reasoning, virtuous agent.

Non-Injurious Death: Lives Not Worth Living

Anyone unwilling to contemplate the possibility that a human life might cease to be worth living, irrespective of surrounding circumstances, will be inclined to dismiss my thesis as intuitively implausible, and will likely find my arguments less than compelling. The inalienable and/or incorrigible value of all human life, irrespective of circumstance is, however, a fairly difficult position, upon analysis, to defend. Some lives are so filled with persistent suffering, or so devoid of purpose, significance, or hope, that any attempt to insist that persons are obligated to persist in their irremediably unenviable condition, seems inhumane to the point of cruelty. For some, the condition of persistent

purposelessness, real or perceived, constitutes an emotional, spiritual, or moral condition rendering life devoid of meaning or value. Such a life may be regarded as degrading, unworthy of living, and even inherently dishonorable. Declining to indulge in dishonor is no vice. In the context of discussing the morality of euthanasia, Richard Brandt offers the following scenario as an example of *non-injurious* killing:

What might be a noninjurious killing? If I come upon a cat that has been mangled but not quite killed by several dogs and is writhing in pain, and if I pull myself together and put it out of its misery, I have killed the cat but surely not *injured* it. I do not injure something by relieving its pain. If someone is being tortured and roasted to death and I know he wishes nothing more than a merciful termination of life, I have not injured him if I shoot him; I have done him a favor. In general, it seems I have not injured a person if I treat him in a way in which he would want me to treat him if he were fully rational, or in a way to which he would be indifferent if he were fully rational. (1975, p. 153)

Much as one does the mangled cat no injury by euthanizing it quickly and (relatively) painlessly, one does oneself no injury by departing a situation in which noble, decent conduct is no longer a viable option. Thus, the non-injurious suicide is conceivable. The Stoic disdains stagnation and decline. One section of Epictetus' *Discourses*, entitled, "How One May Be True To One's Character In Everything," begins with an exhortation to consider suicide when "it is rational," and death has become more "attractive" than continued life in unacceptable circumstances:

To the rational creature that which is against reason is alone past bearing; the rational he can always bear. Blows are not by nature intolerable.

'What do you mean?'

Let me explain; the Lacedaemonians bear flogging, because they have learnt that it is in accord with reason.

'But is it not intolerable to hang oneself?'

At any rate, when a man comes to feel that it is *rational*, he goes and hangs himself at once. (Chapter II – emphasis added)

If the concept of a life not worth living, or well worth *ending*, is coherent, then the option of suicide is, at the very least, a potentially defensible proposition. Even opponents of euthanasia will admit that some lives can become a disvalue to those living them. Such lives may be regarded as exceptional cases upon which it is ill advised to construct general maxims about the value of life. Those lives are, nonetheless, difficult to regard as chimerical or fictitious. Indeed, they may not be so rare as some assume.

Suppose that an individual deems his probable future experiences to be, on the whole, not worth living. If there is compelling evidence that one's life is entirely (if the euphemism may be forgiven) "downhill from here," then there is a *prima facie* case for evading one's painful, humiliating, or otherwise unenviable future via the most expedient available course of action. In short, if one's future is not worth having, then it may be entirely rational to choose not to experience it. We may, at least, insist that the burden of proof is to be borne by those who would argue that one bears an obligation to persist in living a life for which all available evidence indicates a sustained downward hedonic gradient, and a declining utility in all other respects with which one might plausibly be concerned (e.g. intellectual dissolution, diminishing utility to one's family, society, etc.). Why should we continue to anathematize a rational choice to desist in a life that is, on the whole, burdensome to all concerned (or, at least, to all those with whom one is most intimately and centrally concerned)? Perhaps there is such a thing as a noble and non-injurious exit from a life that is no longer worth living. Perhaps a case can be made that one dishonors oneself by persisting as a decrepit burden or a malignancy with which others must contend.

Cato's Suicide

N.S. Gill begins "The Suicide of Cato the Younger" with this description of Cato's character and his death:

A defender of the Roman Republic, he forcefully opposed Julius Caesar and was known as the highly moral, incorruptible, inflexible supporter of the Optimates. When it became clear at the Battle of Thapsus...that Julius Caesar would be the political leader of Rome, Cato chose the philosophically accepted way out, suicide. (2017)

If Cato was, in fact "highly moral" and "incorruptible," does his suicide make him any less so? He chose not to accede to Caesar's alleged authority to issue him a pardon, and, thereby, avoid acquiescence to tyranny. Cato chose death before dishonor. Should we regard Cato's final act as an ignominious departure from a life of moral rectitude? A good case can be made that we should not. Life as a submissive vassal prostrating himself before the power of Julius Caesar, a life entailing cowardice, treason, and an irreversible abdication of his role as defender of the Roman Republic, did not satisfy Cato. A morally dissolute persistence in a condition of servility was not a life worthy of the great man's continued participation. Indeed, such a life would have been antithetical to his most central and most prized values. To exist as a useless adjunct to an empire ruled by a tyrant, and to do so in an attitude of malignancy and disgust would have been treasonous, intolerable, and contemptible in Cato's estimation. A vile existence, a life that turns the stomach of the agent living it, is not worthy of that agent's continued participation. The only noble, admirable choice remaining is departure. The departure cannot be only geographical or merely a matter of retreat into hermitage. Voluntarily leaving the empire would not have assuaged Cato's experience of his own failure, his own acquiescence to tyranny and abandonment of the remaining Roman citizens, or his own assessment that it

would be treasonous and cowardly to remain alive while Rome falls under the thumb of a despot. When life itself is the problem, when continuing in an intolerable and irredeemable existence *is* the dishonor one is morally compelled to avoid, then death is the only available cure for this malady of the conscience. When the cure is readily available, it is irrational and ignoble to persist in a life to which one's conscience cannot be reconciled. One need not be a Cato standing athwart a Julius Caesar's tyrannical plans in order that one's persistence in a life not worth living might constitute sufficient cause to *end* it. One may face a future of physical decline, intellectual deterioration, burdensomeness, and moral malignancy in one's own estimation. If those to whom one owes one's greatest fealty are precisely those for whom one's persistence will be the most onerous, then a case can be made for choosing death as the only remaining salvation.

Dissolution and Dishonor

Most of us believe that we do our pets no injury by having them humanely "put to sleep" (a euphemism for *put to death*) when they have incontrovertibly crossed a certain threshold relative to future enjoyments (or the lack thereof), and face hedonic, physical, and other forms of decline until a natural death will finally end their valueless, persistent suffering. We bring our pets to the veterinarian for euthanasia because we love them and hope to spare them a slow, lingering death following an extended and painful disintegration. What reason, then, can be proffered for refusing to provide our human loved ones the same option of escape from a hideous and degrading future? Without a moral, or otherwise compelling obligation to persist in an undesirable existence to the "bitter end" (a telling expression), we are owed an argument for abridging or anathematizing the exercise of individual and bodily autonomy expressed through the act

of suicide. A rational agent who finds neither purpose nor value in living any longer does not perpetrate any obvious evil by voluntarily ceasing to do so. We do not (generally) accept any moral obligation to marry, procreate, accept religious dogma, or undertake any other activity to which one does not consent. Why should we hold a different attitude toward the various activities that constitute the enterprise of living a life from which one has withdrawn consent? Much as each of us remains morally free to withdraw from marriage, citizenship, membership in a religious community or political party, and even to renounce parental rights (given proper justification), each of us, similarly, retains the right to withdraw from existence in this “vale of tears” (another interesting euphemism). If Cato’s preference for suicide, rather than subservience to a tyrant, is defensible, or plausibly regarded as an admirable final act of autonomy and rebellion against authoritarianism, then a case can be made for opting out of the “tyranny” of disease, dissolution, and irreversible decline. Might any of us not ask, as did Cato:

When and where, without my knowledge, have I been adjudged a madman...but I am prevented from using my own judgement...that Caesar may find me unable to defend myself when he comes? (Gill, 2017)

If it is not Caesar, but rather dissolution or decrepitude that “comes for me,” should I not “use my own judgement” in facing my adversary?

If reason and experience inform me that I am “better off dead,” then a compelling argument (and not mere presumption or dogmatic insistence) is needed to demonstrate the falsity of that proposition (i.e. that I am *not*, in fact, better off dead), or that I am obligated to continue living even though I *am*, in fact, better off dead. Demonstrating either proposition is, at least in many instances, bound to be a fairly tall order. Assuming that I am “in my right mind,” who is in a better position than myself to render judgment

as to the probable overall value of my continued existence? Assuming that I bear no overriding special duty to persist for the sake of particular others (e.g. my underage children), why, and to whom, would I owe an obligation to keep living, even if the cessation of my existence is preferable by my own lights? If I retain the autonomy to do what I want with my body and my life, provided that my actions do not impinge upon the rights or liberties of others, then it is very difficult to justify the claim that the act of suicide should fall outside the scope of that autonomy. My death is, in the first instance, *my* business and, in many cases, my final opportunity to make a crucial decision about what to do with my life—which includes the decision to *end* it. A life that can no longer conform to my values and my conception of a worthy endeavor is a life unworthy of my continued participation. Life may, indeed, go on—but I am aware of no compelling argument that I am morally obligated to “go on” with it. Socrates departed voluntarily—as did Cato. They are not villains for having done so. They maintained their integrity. They chose death before dishonor. Would that more of us could exhibit similar fortitude. Let us not dishonor ourselves if we can help it.

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