



Title *Phaedo* 62b 1-2: The First Prohibition Against Suicide

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At the beginning of the *Phaedo* (61c 1), Socrates, facing death in a few hours, casually asks Cebes to bid the poet Evenus “to come after me as quickly as he can.” Not surprisingly, Simmias expresses his doubts that Evenus would willingly end his life; whereupon Socrates remarks that a true philosopher should enthusiastically embrace death. Almost immediately in the text, Socrates qualified his original statement by claiming that, although the philosopher should desire death, he is at the same time forbidden to do harm to himself—i.e., commit suicide.

Two related but distinct arguments are given in the text for this prohibition against suicide. The first is that we have been placed in a “*phroua*” from which we shouldn’t try to escape (62b2-6). The second is that we are the chattel of the gods, and it is up to them to determine when our lives should end (62b6-8). Focusing on the first prohibition, the question arises as to what precisely is meant by *phroua* in the context of the question of suicide. The term has alternatively been translated as “prison” and as “garrison.” Although at first glance this distinction may not seem all that important, the way the term is interpreted dramatically affects our understanding of the Platonic injunction against suicide found in the text.

The interpretation of *phroua* as “prison” has been supported by such notable scholars as Burnet, Strachan, Hackforth, Taylor, Bostock, and Dorter, among others. Each of these authors points to the presence of Orphic teachings in Plato’s writings, and particularly to the Orphic myth of the imprisonment of the soul in the body, in their efforts to shed light on the prohibition against suicide. One of the earliest attempts to show a relationship between Orphic mythology and the Socratic idea of life as a “sort of *phroua*” is found in Olympiodorus’ commentary on the *Phaedo*. Olympiodorus, a sixth century Greek philosopher, retells the tale of the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans and their subsequent destruction from the thunderbolts of Zeus. From the remains of the Titans spring the human race, who as their successors, are imprisoned in bodies until they can be released by Dionysus. Suicide is prohibited in this view, according to L.G. Westerlink, “not because the text appears to say we wear the body as a kind of shackle... but... because our bodies belong to Dionysus; we are in fact part of him, being made of the soot of the Titans who ate his flesh” (Westerlink 42).

Such an esoteric reading of the text finds support in a number of other Platonic dialogues, most notably, the *Cratylus*. In that dialogue Socrates inquires as to why “soul” and “body” are called by those names. After examining “tomb” and “sign” as the etymological origins of body, he then turns to the above Orphic myth, where *phroua* is clearly being used for “prison”:

...I think that it is most likely that the Orphic poets gave us this name with the idea that the soul is undergoing punishment for something; they think it has the body as an enclosure to keep it safe, like a prison (*phroua*), and this is, as the name itself denotes, the safe of the soul until the penalty is paid (Fowler 63).

Likewise, in the *Gorgias* 525a7, Socrates uses Orphic language to talk about the soul “full of disproportion” being sent to a prison in the other world to undergo punishment. In this context,

however, *phroua* neither refers to the body as a prison of the soul, nor this life as a prison for those who inhabit it, but rather to the imprisonment of the soul after death.

A strong case for the above interpretation can also be made by examining the places in the text of the *Phaedo* where the image of the soul's imprisonment in the body is clearly pointed to. In 81e, Socrates introduces the Pythagorean notion of reincarnation in animals to satirically make the point that the reincarnated soul will enter its new life in the body that has been fitted for it in this life. Ignoring the question of whether such a view was actually held by either Plato or Socrates,¹ it's clear that in this passage we are again presented with the idea of the bodily imprisonment of the soul as a kind of penalty. Later in 82e Socrates refers to the body as a prison from which the soul has to view reality; the task of philosophy is nothing less than to discern "the cunning of the prison."

Burnet suggests that a connection should be made between the image of life as a kind of prison in which we have been placed by the gods and the body as a kind of prison for the soul (93). Although the former image is not found elsewhere in the text or in other Platonic literature, it is a natural derivation from the latter concept, which we have seen is used repeatedly in this text as well as other dialogues. Suicide in this case would be seen as an act of disobedience against the gods who placed us in the prison of life and who alone should release us from it; this of course is a specifically religious prohibition and not a legal one, as Gallop points out (84).²

There are, however, several good arguments for adopting the alternative translation of *phroua* as "garrison," even though many contemporary commentators have rejected this interpretation.³ The immediate advantage of using "garrison" instead of "prison" is that the Platonic view of human existence becomes considerably more positive: rather than viewing life as a kind of punishment that man must endure until he has paid some undefined penalty, life, in this interpretation, becomes a responsibility for human beings, entrusted to them by the gods. If humans are like soldiers on duty guarding a post, the gods in this context become the equivalent of concerned generals, who have a compassionate interest in the "garrison of life" and in the soldiers who care for it.

It is interesting to note that Plato uses a similar metaphor during Socrates' defense in the *Apology* 28b. Here Socrates makes the claim that just as he would not have deserted a military post that was entrusted to him, despite the dangers he may have faced, so too could he not desert his present "post," even though he is confronted with the threat of death. Although in the *Apology* Socrates is referring to the specific case of a philosopher being entrusted by the gods to care for the "post" of the philosophical life, it would not be inconceivable that such a view could be broadened to fit the case of human existence in general; nor would such a view be at odds with the attitude of Socrates and Cebes in the *Phaedo* when dealing with the relationship of the gods to mankind.

In 62b6-8, for example, immediately after expressing the belief that life is a "sort of *phroua*," Socrates claims that human beings are the chattel (*ktematōn*) of the gods who care for us. Although from a modern perspective being someone's chattel doesn't seem like such an admirable state of affairs, here it is used in the context of a caring relationship—i.e., a relationship more like that between a general and his troops than between a warden and prisoners. Such an interpretation is supported by an even stronger use of the term in *Laws* 906a6, where the gods are compared to the commanders of armies, who are fighting on the side of human beings, their chattel. Similarly, in *Phaedo* 62d-e, the gods are referred to by Cebes as "the best directors there are" and as good masters from whom escape would be irrational. Given the fact that this unabashed praise for the caring gods comes immediately after the passage in question and that Socrates does not refute Cebes' image of the gods, it seems that the tone of the text supports the translation "garrison" far better than it does "prison." Certainly, one could make the claim that it wouldn't always be wrong to escape from a prison—even if Socrates voluntarily chooses to remain in his in the *Crito*—but it would certainly be wrong to desert a guard post that one has been entrusted with by caring superiors.

From this perspective, the prohibition against suicide makes much more sense in the text of the *Phaedo* than if *phroua* was translated as "prison"—the Orphic mythology used throughout

the text notwithstanding. Suicide in this interpretation is viewed as an act of desertion of a military post or more generally as an act of cowardice—a position held by Plato in *Laws* 873c7 and later by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138a9. It also is far more consistent with what Plato expresses in *Phaedo* 62c1-3, where Socrates claims that the gods would rightly be angered by someone who tried to commit suicide and would want to punish that person in the next life. The punishment from caring and just gods seems far more reasonable in the context of dereliction of duty than for trying to escape from what in the first interpretation must already be viewed as a form of punishment—life itself.

NOTES

- ¹ Hackforth, for one, believes that the view was held by Plato during the period that he wrote the *Phaedo*. See Hackforth 91.
- ² The parallel text is on the *Crito* 50d-e, where suicide is judged to be wrong specifically because it is forbidden by law. See also Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138a 9.
- ³ Of the many common translations of the text only Hugh Tredennick in the Penguin edition has opted to use “guard-post” as a translation for *phroura*.

SOURCES

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