

## WHO DID FORBID SUICIDE AT PHAEDO 62 b?<sup>1</sup>

IN his discussion of the ethics of suicide (*Phaedo* 61 c ff.) Plato alludes to more than one traditional injunction against it: “οὐ γάρ φασι θεμιτὸν εἶναι” indicates a fairly general acceptance of its wickedness. Cebes has heard the Pythagorean Philolaus, among others, saying that suicide was immoral, but has gathered no satisfactory explanation as to why this should be so. One reason, impressive, but, Socrates admits, difficult is to be found ἐν ἀπορρήτοις, namely, ὥς ἔν τινι φρουρᾷ ἔσμεν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ οὐ δεῖ δὴ ἑαυτὸν ἐκ ταύτης λύειν οὐδ’ ἀποδιδράσκειν.

The volume of comment which this passage continues to excite is already large; but as the conclusions reached as to its precise purport have often differed widely there may still be some value in a reappraisal of some of the problems which it has seemed to pose. Symptomatic of, rather than fundamental to the difficulties involved has been the disagreement which continues to flourish over the meaning of φρουρά. From Burnet’s<sup>2</sup> note on the passage it emerges tolerably clearly that the mass of the evidence available to him (much supplemented recently by P. Boyancé)<sup>3</sup> supports the rendering of φρουρά as ‘prison’. Despite this Burnet himself prefers to adopt Archer-Hind’s translation ‘in ward’ which, as he puts it, ‘conveniently retains the ambiguity of the original, which was sometimes understood to mean (1) “watch”, and sometimes (2) “prison”.’ The word ‘ward’ by itself is—or was at one time—used in both an active and a passive sense: but the phrase ‘in ward’ is surely restricted to the latter only, and normally, though perhaps not always, implies protective rather than punitive custody. Now if ‘ward’ is taken to represent the tutelage or guardianship, more or less benevolent, which the gods exercise over men during their lives, this sense, though accepted by a number of eminent scholars (e.g. L. Robin), so far from retaining a useful ambiguity, in fact, as M. Georges and Mme Jeanne Roux have pointed out,<sup>4</sup> coincides with neither of the senses which φρουρά can be shown to bear; if φρουρά means *that* sort of ‘ward’ it does so only in *Phaedo* 62 b. For this reason the Roux reject *garderie* and come down in favour of *poste de garnison*, which can, as they proceed to show, readily be paralleled and was in any case a familiar chore to the citizen-soldier of Plato’s time. This accords well, we are told, with the Pythagorean prohibition ‘de praesidio et statione vitae decedere’ recorded by Cicero (*De Senectute* 20) in a passage which, together with the other piece of Cicero quoted ad loc. by Burnet, they appeal to as showing that ‘la traduction de Cicéron est la plus fidèle au texte grec’. Burnet’s second illustration as far as it is reproduced in his notes is superficially equivocal: ‘piis omnibus retinendus est animus in custodia corporis, nec iniussu eius a quo ille est vobis datus ex hominum vita migrandum est’ (*Somnium Scip.* 3, 10 = *De Re Publica* 6. 15). Is the soul thought of as guarding or guarded by the body? The identification of ‘custodia corporis’ here with ‘statio et praesidium vitae’ in the *De Senectute*, which seems implicit in Burnet,

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my colleague C. W. Chilton and to T. J. Saunders for a number of helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> J. Burnet, *Plato’s Phaedo* (1911), Notes,

pp. 22 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Revue de Philologie*, xxxvii (1963), 7 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* xxxv (1961), 207 ff.

whose juxtaposition of the references is followed by Robin in his edition and by the Roux, is surely precluded by the wider context of the *Somnium* passage: *De Re Publica* 6. 14 '... e corporum vinculis tamquam e carcere'; 6. 15 '... nisi enim deus is... istis te corporis custodiis liberaverit'. The notion of imprisonment in the body is thus brought up twice shortly before the passage in question and clearly guarantees the sense of 'custodia corporis', notwithstanding the immediately following description of the duty to remain in the body as 'munus humanum adsignatum a deo'. There can be little question that the most convenient Latin translation of *φρουρά* was 'custodia'<sup>1</sup> and that the word could, and probably did here for Cicero carry the sense of 'imprisonment'. The *De Senectute* and *Somnium* evidence, then, is sufficient only to show that Cicero, if indeed he did have before him on both occasions the Greek word *φρουρά*, was inconsistent in his renderings. As it happens, however, in two other places also Cicero uses this image, and in each of them it is clear that the allusion is to the soul's imprisonment in the body. In *De Amicitia* 14, we find: 'animus in morte facillime evolet tamquam e custodia vinculisque corporis'; *Tusc. Disp.* 1. 74, where Cicero makes extensive use of the *Phaedo*, contains this passage: 'cum vero causam iustam deus ipse dederit, ut tunc Socrati... vir sapiens laetus ex his tenebris in lucem excesserit nec tamen illa vincla carceris ruperit.'

The conclusion is inescapable that if Cicero modified his translation in the *De Senectute*, written between the *Tusculans* and the *De Amicitia*, he did so in spite of his knowledge of what the text of the *Phaedo* actually meant; he is either not translating directly from the *Phaedo* at all, or consciously substituting for the image there used a military metaphor to the same general effect. That the latter alternative is the more probable is perhaps confirmed by the explicit attribution of the injunction to Pythagoras, whose name, incidentally, is produced by Cicero in this connection only in the *De Senectute*.

But was Cicero right in inferring, as it seems reasonable to assume that he did, from the *Phaedo* that Pythagoras (or at any rate Philolaus) was the source or even a source of the body-prison doctrine? There is, as far as I can see, no real evidence that Plato thought so, nor indeed any certain indication that the body-prison doctrine as such became associated with Pythagorean teaching by any more likely channel than mistaken inference from *Phaedo* 61 a ff.

Such positive evidence as there is in Plato's writings is taken, e.g. by Burnet and later by R. Hackforth<sup>2</sup> as an adequate illustration of the Orphic origin of the notion of the soul's incarceration in the body, but not necessarily of the injunction against escape. Clearchus on the other hand, who wrote at the beginning of the third century, is quoted by Athenaeus<sup>3</sup> as ascribing both parts of the doctrine to Euxitheus, an otherwise unknown Pythagorean; and this is treated by Burnet as vouching for the genuinely Pythagorean origin of the interdict on suicide in the passage under review. Hackforth, at the conclusion of his own comment, which adds little to Burnet's, is no doubt right, *sub specie aeternitatis*, when he says that we shall probably be safe in regarding the whole religious doctrine referred to at 62 b as both Orphic and Pythagorean; but it may seem as much to the point to know whether we should be safe in saying that Plato thought of the doctrine in this way as belonging alike to both sects.

So far as it goes the evidence of *Cratylus* 400 c taken together with the present

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Plato Latinus*, ii (ed. Minio-Paluello), 11.

<sup>2</sup> R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo* (1955), 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Deipn.* 4. 157 c = DK i. 414, cited below, p. 220.

passage seems to be against this. In the *Cratylus* the derivation of *σῶμα* from *σῶζω* is attributed to οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα, who are stated to have held the belief that 'the soul is suffering punishment for some reason (ὧν δὴ ἔνεκα δίδωσιν) and that the body is an enclosure like a prison in which the soul is incarcerated for safe-keeping, as the name *σῶμα* implies, until the penalty is paid'. This derivation is contrasted with the *σῶμα/σῆμα* etymology which is, as Dodds observes in his note on *Gorgias* 493 a 2-3,<sup>1</sup> clearly not regarded as Orphic and may well be Pythagorean. It may, indeed, also be the case that when Socrates talks of ἀπόρρητα at *Phaedo* 62 b, there is an implied contrast with the references to Philolaus in the preceding section. There is certainly no attempt to connect his remarks closely with them, which is what we might expect had Plato been going on to advert to a Pythagorean belief. Nor is what follows, that we are the possessions of the gods, necessarily to be taken as coming from a common source. Socrates may simply be culling beliefs from here and there. When Professor Guthrie<sup>2</sup> asks why Philolaus should forbid suicide 'if not for the characteristically Orphico-Pythagorean reasons which follow', he seems at least to concede a certain looseness in the structure of the dialogue at this point. Philolaus might presumably have had other reasons even if Plato does not mention them. We should not expect a Pythagorean to condone self-murder any more than he would any other activity which involved the destruction of life.

Be that as it may, the *Cratylus* passage is sufficiently clear to prevent doubt that Plato treated the idea of the soul's imprisonment in the body at least as a predominantly Orphic belief.

Hackforth is forced into his safe (Orphico-Pythagorean) conclusion by the weight of the evidence of Clearchus and the lack of any other passage in which the injunction against suicide, which he admits is probably implicit in the *Cratylus*, is recorded as Orphic.<sup>3</sup> In Socrates' statement it is tacked on in the words καὶ οὐ δεῖ δὴ ἑαυτὸν ἐκ ταύτης λύειν. Why the δὴ? Hackforth's translation ignores it, while Bluck<sup>4</sup> renders 'apparently'. The particle may be used inferentially, and in this case the inference may be the speaker's own; at the least it must signify that what follows follows naturally if not indeed *a fortiori*. Such verbal sleight of hand may help to circumvent the need to import Pythagoras to account for the ban on suicide, but it cannot be said to prove that Plato drew not only the body-prison doctrine but this prohibition also from a purely Orphic source. What is required is some independent indication of the existence of *both* parts of the doctrine among Orphic beliefs which can be dated at least as early as the Pythagorean source available to Clearchus. This the admittedly enigmatic explanation of φρουρά attributed to Xenocrates by Porphyrius and quoted by Olympiodorus in his commentary on the *Phaedo*<sup>5</sup> may well provide: Τιτανική ἐστιν καὶ εἰς Διόνυσον ἀποκορυφούται which, if

<sup>1</sup> *Plato's Gorgias* (1959), 300.

<sup>2</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (1962), i. 310.

<sup>3</sup> The translation and commentary of R. S. Bluck (*Plato's Phaedo* (1955), 195 ff.), which provides the best discussion of Orphic influences in the *Phaedo* to be found in any comparable work on the dialogue, follows Dodds (*The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), 147 ff.) in rejecting the contentions of those (Thomas, Linforth) who deny the presence

of any Orphic influence, and accepts the strong possibility that the references to the body-prison doctrine at 62 b and 67 d, together with those to purifications at 67 d and 69 e, imply pervasive allusion to Orphism. The question of suicide in this connection is not, however, specifically dealt with.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ed. W. Norvin, 1913, p. 85.

authentic—and there seems no reason to doubt it—has the great merit of being the most nearly contemporary account of the word we possess. And yet English commentators do not, on the whole, give it much prominence in the elucidation of *Phaedo* 62 b. Whatever else may be obscure in Xenocrates' explanation it is at any rate apparent immediately that it is given in terms of Orphic mythology, and also surely that some form of the myth referred to was known to Plato and his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

The tale of the rending of Dionysus by the Titans and its origins are discussed at length by Guthrie<sup>2</sup> and need not detain us. One form of it is given by Olympiodorus in the general context of Orphic theogony:<sup>3</sup> Dionysus, having succeeded to the throne of Zeus, was torn asunder and eaten by the Titans in conspiracy with Hera. Zeus, in anger, shattered the Titans with thunderbolts, and from the resultant matter men were created.<sup>4</sup> On the allegorical plane this descent from the Titans who opposed the gods is the reason for man's imprisonment (*φρουρά*) and punishment during life (Dio Chrys. 30. 10). For Plato (*Laws* 701 c) 'Contempt for oaths, the plighted word, and all religion' is tantamount to a return to *τὴν λεγομένην παλαιὰν Τιτανικὴν φύσιν*. A similar allusion to the ancient identification of man's unruly nature with the Titans is made, after a reference to the Orphic myth, by Plutarch (*De Esu Carn.* 996 c): *τὸ γὰρ ἐν ἡμῖν ἄλογον καὶ ἄτακτον καὶ βίαιον οὐ θεῖον ἀλλὰ δαιμονικὸν οἱ παλαιοὶ Τιτάνας ἀνόμισαν, καὶ τοῦτ' ἐστὶν κολαζόμενον καὶ δίκην δίδόντος*.

In the light of his own first version of the myth (summarized above) Olympiodorus concludes that the reason why we ought not to kill ourselves is not simply that we have been, as it were, imprisoned in our bodies—Plato, he says, would not have called that *ἀπόρρητον*—but that we are part of the body of Dionysus which the Titans had eaten before their destruction by Zeus. But this explanation is quite out of harmony with the elucidation of *φρουρά* which Olympiodorus gives on page 85 shortly after the mention of Xenocrates. There it is in the *soul* that the combination of Dionysiac and Titan nature is to be found: *τίς ἢ τις φρουρά; ὡς μὲν τὸ φρουροῦν, αὐτὸς ὁ Διόνυσος· οὗτος γὰρ ἐστὶ ὁ λύων τὸν δεσμὸν ὡν ἂν ἐθέλῃ ἅτε αἷτιος ὡν τῆς μερικῆς ζωῆς· ὡς δὲ τὸ φρουρούμενον αὐτὸ τὸ πάθος τοῦ ἐν σώματι δεσμοῦ, ὅπερ κατὰ δίκην ἐπεγένετο ἀναγκαίως*. Thus it is evident that the imprisonment in the body is a punishment from which it is only for Dionysus to release us, a punishment which is parallel to the *δέσμοι* which Olympiodorus includes among the retributive measures imposed on the Titans in the myth a few lines earlier.

Xenocrates' puzzling comment that the imprisonment is 'Titanic and culminates in Dionysus' is adequately accounted for. We are shut up in our bodies as a punishment for the crimes of the Titans to whose guilt we are the successors, or perhaps just simply in virtue of our Titan natures, and our imprisonment 'culminates' in our release by Dionysus alone. The vague and

<sup>1</sup> Dodds (op. cit. 156) finds the conclusion that the complete story of Dionysus and the Titans was known to Plato and his public hard to resist; and in view of the evidence he is able to adduce from Plato and elsewhere (cf. R. Heinze, *Xenocrates* (1892), 150 ff.) it is difficult to see what other conclusion there can be. P. Boyancé ('Xénocrate et les Orphiques', *REA* 1948, 219 ff.) uses the association of Xenocrates with the Titan

myth in establishing the early currency of much of the account given by Olympiodorus.

<sup>2</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (1935), 107 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. (ed. Norvin), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Firmicus Maternus (*De errore Prof. Relig.* 6. 4) adds to his own largely similar version that the Titans were subjected to all manner of tortures by way of retribution.

hospitable phrase used in the *Cratylus*, ὧν δὴ ἕνεκα δίδωσιν, conveniently covers among other things, the original sins of the Titans. This vagueness is characteristic of Plato's unwillingness to detail the ἄτοπα of beliefs he may refer to. For him the purpose of our sojourn in the body is, as it is also for the Orphics, purification, but there the similarity ends; for what the Orphics wanted was something quite other than philosophical detachment in which Dionysus could have no part. For them it is the complete Dionysiac, the man in whom Dionysus has overcome the Titans, who is ready for the life of bliss. If we must wait for the god to release us, then clearly we ought not to cut off our own lives before our ritual catharsis is accomplished; but Plato is not at pains to press the parallel. He has no use for Dionysus as such in the philosophical discussion of the *Phaedo*.

*Conclusion:* A sufficient mass of evidence supports the supposition that Plato found in Orphic mythology not only the body-prison doctrine but also, though he was not concerned with the particular reasons for it, a prohibition of suicide. He need not then be taken to refer to any Pythagorean theory at *Phaedo* 62 b. Yet the passage was read by Cicero and, we may suppose, others before him as reporting a Pythagorean belief. The explanation is not far to seek. Philolaus, Plato tells us, forbade suicide; the only reason he gives us is the Orphic one which follows, and this, in the absence of any decisive contextual indication to the contrary, became attached to the name of Philolaus. The infusion into the Pythagorean canon of the substance of the body-prison doctrine had undoubtedly taken place some little time before the end of the fourth century, as is clear from Clearchus, whose account<sup>1</sup> is in many respects strikingly similar to what we can gather from Olympiodorus: *Εὐξίθεος ὁ Πυθαγορικός . . . ἔλεγεν ἐνδεδέσθαι τῷ σώματι καὶ τῷ δεῦρο βίῳ τὰς ἀπάντων ψυχᾶς τιμωρίας χάριν· καὶ διείπασθαι τὸν θεὸν ὥς, εἰ μὴ μενοῦσιν ἐπὶ τούτοις, ἕως ἂν ἐκὼν αὐτοὺς λύσῃ, πλείοσι καὶ μείζοσιν ἐμπεσοῦνται τότε λύμαις· διὸ πάντας ἐύλαβουμένους τὴν τῶν κυρίων ἀνάστασιν φοβεῖσθαι τοῦ ζῆν ἐκόντας ἐκβῆναι κτλ.* It is at least arguable that Euxitheus himself, or some other Pythagorean may have assumed from the *Phaedo* the authority of Philolaus for this teaching, and that Plato was unwittingly responsible for the adoption of this particular piece of Orphism by the Pythagorean school.

*University of Hull*

J. C. G. STRACHAN

<sup>1</sup> Ap. Athen. 4. 157 c, referred to above, p. 217.