

Olympiodorus on Suicide

Translated by Thomas Taylor

Selections from a book first published as “Translations from the Greek of the following *Treatises of Plotinus; viz. On Suicide*, to which is added an extract from the Harleian MS. of the scholia of Olympiodorus on the Phædo of Plato respecting suicide, accompanied by the Greek text; two books on *Truly Existent Being*; and extracts from his treatise on the manner in which the multitude of ideas subsists, and concerning THE GOOD; with additional notes from *Porphyrus and Proclus* by Thomas Taylor. London: Printed for the Translator by Richard Taylor, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1834.” Republished in: Taylor T. (Tr. & Annot.). *Collected Writings of Plotinus*. (Vol. III of The Thomas Taylor Series.) Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 2000; [pp. 417-18 &. 419-22.]

Φευγωμεν συν νηυσι φιλην εν πατριδα γαιαν.¹

— *Iliad*, ii. 140

“Haste, let us fly, and all our sails expand,
To gain our dear, our long-lost native land.”²

— PLOTIN. *de Pulchritud.*, p. 57

The philosophic reader will find in the Extract from Olympiodorus respecting Suicide, information no less novel than important, and the difficulty attending upon the question, whether suicide at any time, and under any circumstances, is lawful, unanswerably solved. For the sake of the learned and intelligent reader, therefore, the translation of this extract is accompanied by the original Greek. — Thomas Taylor³

On Suicide I, ix.

I. You should not expel the soul from the body. For in departing, it will retain something [of the more passive life], which is necessary in this case to its departure. Since to depart from the body is to pass from one place to another. But it is requisite to remain in life, until the whole body is separated from the soul, and when it does not require migration, but is entirely external to the body. After what manner, therefore, is the body separated from the soul? When no longer anything pertaining to the soul is bound in the body?⁴ For when this takes place, the body can no longer bind the

¹ “Our [true] country [*i.e.* truly existing being] is that from whence we came, and where our father lives.”

² Πατρις δε ημιν οθεν παρηλθομεν, και πατηρ εκει.

³ [Excerpted from his *Introduction*.]

⁴ This is well explained by Porphyry in his *Auxiliaries to the perception of Intelligible Natures* [TTS Vol. II, p. 170], as follows:

“The soul is bound to the body by a conversion to the corporeal passions; and is again liberated by becoming impassive to the body.

“That which Nature binds, Nature also dissolves; and that which soul binds, the soul likewise dissolves. Nature, indeed, bound the body to the soul; but the soul binds herself to the body. Nature, therefore, liberates the body from the soul; but the soul liberates herself from the body.”

[Continued overleaf.]



soul, the harmony of it no longer existing, which the soul possessing, it also possessed. What, then, shall we say, if some one should endeavour to separate the body from the soul? May we not say, that in this case he must employ violence, and that *he* departs, but the *body* does not depart from him? To which may be added that he who effects this separation, is not liberated from passion, but is under the influence of some molestation, or pain, or anger. It is requisite, however, that nothing of this kind should be accomplished. But what if someone should find himself beginning to be insane? Perhaps, indeed, this will not take place with a worthy man;⁵ but if it should, this must be arranged among things that are necessary, and arising from things that are eligible from circumstance, and which are not simply eligible. For it is not, *perhaps*, expedient for the soul to take an envenomed potion in order to its expulsion from body. If, also, a fated time is allotted to each individual of the human race, a separation of the body from the soul cannot be prosperous prior to this period, *unless, as we have said, this becomes necessary*. But if everyone retains that order with respect to proficiency after, which he possessed prior to his departure from the present life, the soul is not to be separated from body while a further proficiency is yet possible.⁶

Notes on Ennead I, ix.

The following is the Extract from MS. Scholia of Olympiodorus on the *Phædo* of Plato:⁷

Εν αυτη τη νυν προκειμενη λεξει εν η κατασκευαζει ο Πλατων, οτι ου δει εξαγειν εαυτους, εμφασιν διδωσι και του αντικειμενου, πρωτον μεν λεγων, ου μεντοι ισως βιαζεται εαυτον. το γαρ ισως υπονοιαν διδωσιν, οτι ποτε και δει εξαγειν εαυτους,

“Hence there is a twofold death; the one, indeed, universally known, in which the body is liberated from the soul; but the other peculiar to philosophers, in which the soul is liberated from the body. Nor does the one entirely follow the other.”

⁵ Plotinus says this conformably to what is asserted by Plato in the *Timæus* [85b], *viz*, that “the disease of the soul is folly, which is of two kinds, madness and ignorance.” (νοσον μεν δη ψυχης ανοιαν συγχωρητιον. δυο δ’ ανοιας γενη· το μεν μανιαν· το δ’ αμαθιαν.)

⁶ Macrobius in his *Annotations* on this book of Plotinus, has the following remarkable passage:

“In arcanis de animæ reditu disputationibus fertur, in hac vitâ delinquentes, similes esse super æquale solum cadentibus, quibus denuo sine difficultate præsto sit surgere: animas vero ex hac vitâ cum delictorum sordibus recedentes, æquandas his, qui in abruptum ex alto, præcipiteque delapsi sunt, unde facultus nunquam sit resurgendi.”

I.e.,

“In the arcane narrations concerning the re-ascent of the soul, it is said, that those who are delinquents in this life, resemble those that fall on level ground, from which they cannot again without difficulty rise; but that souls who depart from this life polluted with crimes, are similar to those who fall from a precipitous altitude into a great depth, from which they will never be able to rise again.”

This extract from arcane narrations is not, I believe, elsewhere to be found.

⁷ Extracts from these Scholia, together with Selections from other MS. Greek Treatises, were published by those modern Greeks, Moustoxydes and Schinas. The Extracts contain twenty pages 8vo of Olympiodorus, among which is the passage that forms a part of this article. But the translation of it was made many years prior to the above-mentioned work of Moustoxydes and Schinas, the title of which is as follows:

Συλλογή Ελληνικών Ανεκδότων Ποιητών και Λογογράφων Διαφόρων Εποχών Έλλος
Σπουδή
Ανδρέου Μουστοξύδου και Δημητρίου Σχινά
Εν Βενετία 1816

The arrangement, also, of some of the sentences in the Harleian MS. is different from that of the Extracts of Moustoxydes and Schinas, as will be immediately evident on comparing the former with the latter. In the following translation, I have adopted that arrangement which appeared to me to be most natural, and therefore the best.



ει μη μεγαλην ο θεος αναγκην επιπεμψη οϊαν την νυν παρουσαν.⁸ δευτερον επιχειρημα, ει αυτος ο Πλατων φησιν οτι εξαγειν εαυτον επιτρεποι και τω σπουδαιω, και τω μεσω, και τω πολλω και φαυλω ανθρωπω· τω σπουδαιω ως ενταυθα, τω μεσω, ως εν Πολιτεια λέγων, οτι δει τον νοσω ανιατω και μακρα κατεχομενον εξαγειν εαυτον ως ακρηστον οντα τη πολει, διοτι βουλεται ο Πλατων τους εαυτου πολιτας τη πολει χρησιμους ειναι, και ουκ εαυτοις. εν δε τοις Νομοις τω πολλω ανθρωπω λέγων, οτι δει τον ανιατοις παθεσει κατεχομενον, οϊον ερωτι μητρος, η ιεροσυλίας, η των τοιουτων τινη, και μη δυναμενον κρατειν εαυτον εξαγειν εαυτον. τρίτον επιχειρημα, ει Πλωτινω γεγραπται περι αλογου (lege ευλογου⁹) εξαγωγης, δει αρα ποτε εξαγειν εαυτον. τεταρτον, ει οι Στώϊκοι πεντε τροπους ελεγον ευλογον εξαγωγης. απεικαζον γαρ τον βιον συμποσιω, και ελεγον οτι δι οσας αιτας λυεται το συμποσιον, δια τας αυτας και τον βιον λυειν. λυεται το συμποσιον η δια χρεϊαν αφνω μεγαλην επιστασαν, οϊον δια παρουσιαν φιλου αφνω ελθοντος· η δια καταλαμβουσιν μεθην λυεται το συμποσιον, και δια το παρατιθέμενα νοσερα οντα. ει μην και δια ετερον τροπον δι ενδειαν των παρατιθεμενων. και τον βιον δε λυτεον δια πεντε τροπους. οϊον δια χρεϊα λυεται το συμποσιον, δει λυειν τον βιον, και δια μεγαλην χρεϊαν, ως Μενοικες αποσφαζας εαυτον δια της πατρίδος, αλλα και δι αισχρορρημοσυνην, ουτω και διλυειν και τον βιον δια τυπαννον αναγκαζοντα ειπειν τα απορρητα, ο και πυθαγορεια τις γυνη πεποιηκεν, αναγκαζομενη ειπειν, διατι ουκ εσθιει κυαμους. εφη γαρ φαγοιμι αν ει¹⁰ ειποιμι αν· ειτα αναγκαζομενη φαγειν εφη, ειποιμι αν, ει¹¹ φαγοιμι αν, και τελος απετεμε την γλωτταν, ως και διαλεκτικον και γευστικον οργανον. αλλα και δια μεθην λυεται το συμποσιον, ουτω και τον βιον λυειν δει δια¹² τον παρεπομενον τω σωματι ληρον. φυσικη γαρ εστι μεθη ο ληρος. αλλα και δια τα παρατιθεμενα νοσερα οντα, και τον βιον λυτεον, δια το σωμα νοσοις ανιατοις κατεχομενον, και ανεπιτηδειον προς το υπουργειν τη ψυχη. αλλα και δι ενδειαν των προσαγομενων λυεται το συμποσιον. ουτω και δια πενιαν δει εξαγειν εαυτους, εαν μη παρεστιν απο αγαθων λαμβανειν· ου γαρ ληπτεον απο φαυλων. μικρα γαρ απο μιρων δωρα, και ου δει ουδε τουτοις μολυνειν εαυτον. τι ουν ημεις φαμεν; εις αντιφασιν γαρ περιεστιν ο λογος. πως γαρ αθεμιτον το εξαγειν εαυτον και ευλογον; η ου δει εξαγειν εαυτον οσον επι τω σωματι· προς κακω γαρ εστι τουτο τω σωματι. αλλα ευλογον εξαγειν εαυτους δια μειζον αγαθον συντελουν τη ψυχη, οϊον ως ηνικα βλαπτεται υπο του σωματος. ωσπερ γαρ ο βουλομενος (lege βουλεομενος) εκεινα αιρειται, οϊς ελασσονα μεν κακα επεται, μειζονα δε αγαθα. και ωσπερ ανοσιον μεν φιλω τυπτομενω μη αμυνειν, ει δε τυπτοιο υπο πατρος ουκ ευλογον αμυνειν, ουτω και ενταυθα και αθεμιτον εξαγειν εαυτον δια το σωμα, και ευλογον ποτε δια την ψυχη, λυσιτελουντος αυτη ποτε τουτου.

⁸ The words of Plato in the Phædo, to which Olympiodorus in the above extract alludes, are in the original as follows: *Εθελήσει τοίνυν και Ευηνος και πας στω αξίως τουτου του πραγματος μετεσθιν, ου μεν ισως βιασεται αυτον, ου γαρ φασι θεμιτον είναι. — Ισως τοίνυν ταυτην ουκ αλογον μη προτερον αυτον αποκιννηται δειν, πριν αναγκην τινα ο θεος επιπεμψη, ωσπερ και την νυν ημιν παρουσαν.*

⁹ Et sic recte Mustox. et Schin.

¹⁰ Pro ει Mustox. et Schin. habent η. sed male.

¹¹ See previous footnote.

¹² δια σεest in Mustox., sed male.



I.e. “Plato, when he here infers that suicide is not lawful, affords an occasion of supporting the opinion that it is lawful; in the first place, by saying, that he [who is worthy to partake of philosophy] will not *perhaps* violently deprive himself of life. For the word *perhaps* affords a suspicion that suicide may sometimes be requisite, unless Divinity sends some great necessity, such as in the present instance [respecting Socrates]. In the second place, Plato admits that suicide may be proper to the worthy man, to him of a middle character, and to the multitude and depraved. To the worthy man, as in this Dialogue; to him of a middle character, as in the *Republic*, where he says, that suicide is necessary to him who is afflicted with a long and incurable disease, as being useless to the city, because Plato’s intention was that his citizens should be useful to the city, and not [merely] to themselves; and to the vulgar character, as in the *Laws*, when he says that suicide is necessary to him who is possessed with certain incurable passions, such as being enamoured of his mother, sacrilege, or anything else of this kind, and who is incapable of governing himself. In the third place, it may be said, if Plotinus has written concerning rational suicide,¹³ it is sometimes necessary for a man to deprive himself of life. In the fourth place, this may be inferred from the authority of the Stoics, who said that there are five ways in which suicide may be reasonably admitted. For they assimilated life to a banquet, and asserted that it is necessary to dissolve life through such-like causes as occasion the dissolution of a banquet. A banquet, therefore, is dissolved either through a great necessity unexpectedly intervening, as through the presence of a friend suddenly coming; or it is dissolved through intoxication taking place; and through what is placed on the table being morbid. Further still, it is dissolved after another manner, through a want of things necessary to the entertainment, and also through obscene and base language. In like manner life may be dissolved in five ways. And in the first place, as at a banquet, it may be dissolved through some great necessity, as when a man like Menœceus¹⁴ sacrifices himself for the good of his country. In the second place, as a banquet is dissolved through intoxication, so likewise it is necessary to dissolve life through a delirium following the body: for a delirium is a physical intoxication. In the third place, as a banquet is dissolved through what is placed on the table being morbid, thus, too, it is necessary that life should be dissolved when the body labours under incurable diseases, and is no longer capable of being ministrant to the soul. In the fourth place, as a banquet is dissolved through a want of things necessary to the entertainment, so suicide is proper when the necessaries of life are wanting. For they are not to be received from depraved characters: since gifts from the defiled are small, and it is not proper for a man to pollute himself with these. And in the fifth place, as a banquet is dissolved through obscene language, so likewise it is necessary to dissolve life when compelled by a tyrant to speak things arcane, or belonging to the mysteries, which a certain female Pythagorean is said to have done.

¹³ It appears to me that Olympiodorus, in what he here says, does not allude to the preceding book of Plotinus *On Suicide*, but to the following passage in Ennead I. lib. iv. of his treatise on *Felicity* [p. 79]: *ει αιχμαλωτος αγοιτο, παντη εστιν οδος εξιεναι, ει μη ειη ευδαιμονειν. i.e.* “If [the wise man] should be led into captivity, there is entirely a way for him to depart from the present life, if he can be no longer happy in it.” And shortly after he adds: *και πολλοι δη και αμεινον αιχμαλωτοι γινομενοι πραξουσι και επ’ αυτοις δη βαρυνομενοισ απελθειν. i.e.* “Besides, many, when they have become slaves, have acted better than they did before their captivity; and it is in the power of those who are bound, to depart from their bondage.”

¹⁴ Menœceus was a Theban, the last of the Cadmeian race, who voluntarily sacrificed himself for the safety of his country.



For being compelled to tell why she did not eat beans, she said, I may eat them if I tell. And afterwards, being compelled to eat them, she said, I may tell if I eat them; and at length bit off her tongue as the organ of speech and taste.

“What, then, shall we say? for the discussion is brought to a contradiction. And how can it be admitted that suicide is unlawful, and yet reasonable? Or may we not say, that a liberation from life is not necessary so far as pertains to the body? for this is evil to the body. For as he who deliberates [about the election of some things rather than others], chooses those that are followed by a less evil, and accompanied by a greater good; and as it is unholy not to give assistance to a friend when he is scourged, but if he is scourged by his father, it is not becoming to assist him;¹⁵ so here, suicide is *unlawful*, when committed for the sake of the body, but *rational*, when committed for the sake of the soul, since this is sometimes advantageous to it.”



[Railway Sleep] by Jacek Yerka

¹⁵ When the truly worthy man is placed in difficult circumstances, yet not of such a magnitude as to prevent him from energizing intellectually, in this case it is not lawful for him to commit suicide; for the affliction is from Divinity, and is analogous to the castigation of a son by his father. For, according to the Platonic philosophy, everything afflictive in life either exercises, or corrects, or punishes. And the most worthy men sometimes require for the health of their souls, severe endurance, in the same manner as the most athletic require great exercise for the health of their bodies.

