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COWARDICE AND INJUSTICE: THE PROBLEM OF SUICIDE IN ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

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Abstract

Contrary to Greek tradition, Aristotle condemns suicide without qualification, citing two reasons for moral disapproval. First, suicide is an act of cowardice. Second, suicide involves an act of injustice toward the state. It is argued that the charge of cowardice is too strong even by Aristotle's own standards. There is evidence that the philosopher recognized a distinction between the cases of self-murder that testify to a cowardly character and the cases when one may be pardoned. It is shown that a suicide acts unjustly toward the *polis* in a way analogous to desertion from an army.

Keywords: Aristotle, suicide, cowardice, courage, injustice

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What was the “commonsense” view of the moral status of suicide that prevailed in ancient Greece? While standard sociological methods cannot discover which attitudes toward suicide were dominant in the classical period, opinions in ancient Greece about this matter have been preserved by historians, poets, tragedians, orators, and philosophers. In our own time, scholarly interest in ancient suicidology is close to 150 years old, and a consensus seems to have emerged: barring a few exceptions, the ancients distinguished certain cases of the taking of one's own life as either honorable or at least justifiable, given dire circumstances, as apart from other cases that betray a cowardly character and lack of good judgment.¹ Historical instances of suicide recorded by Thucydides and Herodotus, suicidal characters in plays by Sophocles and Euripides, and Plato's thought experiments all leave room for viewing at

least certain cases of willful self-destruction without moral revulsion and harsh judgment.² Suicide is not something to be taken lightly. Yet it remains an acceptable option for someone whose foreseeable future holds nothing but shame, dishonor, and unbearable suffering.

At least one powerful voice defied this tradition, however. Despite his well-known leanings toward opinions of “the many” in a number of other difficult cases, Aristotle is willing to oppose popular opinion by apparently condemning suicide without qualification—no matter what the motive might be. On first inspection of the available textual material, it appears that Aristotle leaves no room for honorable suicide and views all such cases as expressions of a less-than-virtuous character. No exceptions mitigate this sweeping condemnation, and no circumstances provide extenuating reasons for the act of self-murder. Unlike the Pythagoreans, however, who opposed suicide on purely religious grounds, Aristotle wants to make a sound philosophical case for his position.³

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, suicide is directly discussed by Aristotle on two occasions, and, in addition, it is once referred to indirectly by mentioning the name of a mythological hero who took his fate in his own hands—a brief reference that will prove central for the full elucidation of Aristotle’s view. The first direct discussion occurs during his analysis of the virtue of courage, and the second appears in the chapter addressing the virtue of justice. On both occasions, suicide is strongly condemned, either as a cowardly act or an unjust one. It will be pertinent to examine both charges more closely, as neither of them appears to be self-evident. For one thing, a common intuition, epitomized in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, takes the fear of death (or, rather, “the dread of something after death”) to present the main challenge for a would-be suicide: whoever overcomes that primordial fear and takes his own life might be accused of many other moral and intellectual failures but certainly not a lack of courage. Likewise, it is less than obvious whether the justice or injustice of the act in question is even relevant for its moral evaluation. Whether a person who intentionally kills himself is acting justly or unjustly toward himself or the state is likely to be a very distant concern on the mind of an ordinary observer. Our immediate task, then, will be to inquire into specific arguments for such a stand and to evaluate their strength in the context of Aristotle’s overall ethical doctrine. The final goal is to develop a balanced interpretation that takes into account both direct and indirect textual evidence.

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It will be helpful to begin by quoting in full the first passage where suicide is mentioned in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE):

As we have said, then, courage is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses to endure things because it is noble [καλὸν] to do so, or because it is base not to do so. But to die to escape from poverty or love [ἔρωτα] or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness [μαλακία] to fly from what is troublesome, and such a man endures death not because it is noble to do so but to fly from evil [κακόν]. (*NE* 1116a11–15)⁴

In the chapter of the *Ethics* where suicide first appears, the main topic is the nature of courage, and Aristotle goes to great lengths trying to distinguish genuine virtue from its many imitators. His remark about suicide is made almost in passing, and he seems to take it as obvious that possible motives for suicide fail to satisfy the criterion of nobility—which, as we will see below, is an integral part of his conception of true courage.⁵ He starts by mentioning specific incentives for ending one's existence—such as a desire to escape poverty or “love” (ἔρως)—apparently referring to ordinary cases that his audience could easily illustrate.⁶ But the second clause quickly generalizes to include within unfitting causes of suicide *any* wish to relieve oneself from anything painful or distressing (λυπηρός), thus virtually excluding the possibility of a legitimate suicide. The final sentence reiterates Aristotle's insistence that fleeing from any kind of trouble is less than noble and goes on to accuse suicides of a certain kind of blameworthy softness—μαλακία—as distinct from the endurance (καρτερία) needed by an agent facing a “sea of troubles.”⁷

At first sight, Aristotle's claim appears too strong: that all suicides, by seeking to escape life's hardships, exhibit the blameworthy softness characteristic of cowards. On the contrary, most cases of suicide indicate a familiar moral ambivalence: on the one hand, a person attempts to find an easy way out of overwhelming troubles rather than endure them as a courageous person would do; on the other hand, this person is willing to overcome one of the strongest natural fears and face certain death, typically the behavior of a nontimorous soul. To understand why Aristotle is unwilling to credit a suicide with any courage at all, we must address, however briefly, his understanding of this cardinal virtue.

A number of definitions of courage—supplementing each other in several crucial respects—can be found in Aristotle, and interpreters have tried to remake his presentation of this virtue into a single coherent whole. Various aspects of his analysis are still controversial. The most puzzling ones include the narrow scope of circumstances in which true courage can be exhibited, the ambiguous relation between fear and confidence as the two main emotions bearing on the definition of courage and the emotional satisfaction or pleasure experienced by a courageous agent in the face of a deadly risk; finally, and, above all, the proper or

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“noble” goal of courageous effort requires elucidation.⁸ Without entering into details about each of these issues, I will focus only on the last because it is directly relevant for understanding Aristotle’s resentment of suicide. The central definition that indicates the criteria for a courageous person reads as follows:

Properly, then, he will be called brave who is fearless in face of a noble death [καλὸν θάνατον], and of all emergencies that involve death; and the emergencies of war are in the highest degree of this kind. (*NE* 1115a32–35)

The first thing to notice here is that not every risky action, even one that leads to certain death, counts as truly courageous for Aristotle. The focus from the beginning is on military valor as the highest, or, perhaps, the only type of courage, excluding any form of political, social, or intellectual daring from risky acts that are morally praiseworthy. This limitation has been criticized both by Aristotle’s predecessors (Plato in the *Laches*) and by numerous successors, prompting some observers to posit a radical discontinuity between Aristotle’s conception of this virtue and our modern intuitions.⁹ On the other hand, to claim that battle is the only possible setting for genuine courage might just reflect assumptions made by most male Greeks of Aristotle’s class at a certain time in history. A different and broader view is that paradigmatic instances of courageous behavior can occur in the context of any risky confrontation—that is, a confrontation that might result in a seriously negative outcome for the agent who, while aware of the risks, still freely chooses to face the danger. On this most charitable conception of courage, it is not obvious that someone who chooses suicide suffers from lack of courage. Hence, if the charge of cowardice is to be justified, a better reason will be needed.

In fact, the second half of Aristotle’s definition of courage presents a greater challenge to a hypothetical defender of suicide: a death-defying act is not fully virtuous unless its intended goal is “noble.” This normative requirement, I believe, is the most difficult aspect of the Aristotelian conception of courage. Moreover, understanding what type of noble goal is proper for a courageous action holds the key to the meaningfulness of this trait of character.

A courageous person is praiseworthy, admirable, and commendable. The inherently normative element of courage would preclude attempts to reduce courage to mere fearlessness even in the face of death, since mere fearlessness, when divorced from contextual clues, lacks the necessary evaluative features. As Curzer rightly observes, “the mere mastery over fear in the face of the fearsome is not a valuable accomplishment, in itself” (2012, 31). Similarly, as Aristotle seems to have realized, omitting the specification of a courageous action’s proper goal from the definition

of courage diminishes the virtue's normativity. Unless courage leads to some substantive good, it is not clear what makes it a virtue and why it is desirable to acquire this character trait. The substantive good that a courageous agent seeks to achieve is what Aristotle means by the "noble end" (τέλος καλόν) of courage.

The notion of nobility in Aristotle's discussion of courage remains one of its most elusive elements. The adjective "noble" or "fine" (καλόν) is applied by Aristotle in the course of his analysis of this virtue to warfare (1115a27–30), to death (1115a32–35; 1115b5–7), to danger (1115a30), to courage itself (1115b20–22), to the deeds in battle (1117b14), and, most important, to the expected result of a courageous action (1115b11–13; 1115b21–22). If a courageous person is willing to die and if the death is noble and praiseworthy, the nobility of such a death evidently derives not from the person's achieving happiness (since being alive is necessary for being happy) but from some other worthy goal, somehow furthered because the person perishes.¹⁰ But what could that other goal possibly be?

Surprisingly, Aristotle give us no hint of the possible options. Michelle Brady believes that Aristotle's silence can be explained because his immediate audience needed no explanation. In Aristotle's Athens and elsewhere in Greece, it was a universally shared assumption that a soldier sacrificed himself to preserve the *polis*, a point that Aristotle felt no need to reiterate (2005, 199).¹¹ Curzer's view of possibly legitimate goals of courageous action is broader than Brady's; he includes saving one's comrades (even if this harms the *polis*), rescuing someone in need, and freeing the city from tyranny (2012, 28–29).

Whatever interpretation of "noble" we prefer, it is obvious that a courageous behavior for Aristotle needs to be motivated by some strong altruistic concern—a person is willing to face death in order to promote the well-being of others. This is precisely where a typical incentive for suicide, namely, a quick relief from a person's own troubles, fails to satisfy the nobility condition. A suicide intentionally faces the most fearful end but does this for the wrong reason. At best, this behavior might display a spurious form of courage, similar to the type displayed by a fearless warrior heading into battle for the promise of spoils.

But killing oneself for bad reasons is not enough to make the suicide cowardly: after all, not every act that fails to be truly courageous is *eo ipso* a cowardly act. A mercenary, no matter how fearless and daring he might be in battle, also fails to be courageous by Aristotle's demanding standards. But it would be excessive to call every mercenary a coward. Yet this is how Aristotle categorizes suicides, citing their *softness* (μαλακία) as an incriminating feature. It is thus not just the suicide's

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unworthy goal but a serious character flaw that motivates Aristotle to condemn suicide as cowardice. His charge of softness needs further consideration.

3

In his *Life of Cleomenes*, a biography of a king of Sparta who lived in the third century BCE, Plutarch records the following episode. After the Spartans were defeated by Antigonos at Sellasia and the king was forced into exile in Egypt, one of his friends, Therycion, suggested that suicide was the only way to escape the shame of being ruled by inferiors. The response given by Cleomenes and his reasoning against suicide are conspicuously Aristotelian in spirit:

Wretch, do you think that by suicide, the easiest way out of all difficulties, you will gain a reputation for bravery, and will not rather be flying before the enemy more disgracefully than at Sellasia? More powerful men than ourselves have ere now been defeated, either by their own evil fortune or by the excessive numbers of their enemy: but the man who refuses to bear fatigue and misery, and the scorn of men, is conquered by his own weakness [μαλακίας]. . . . It is disgraceful either to live or to die for oneself alone: yet this is the course which you recommend, namely, that I should fly from my present misery without ever again performing any useful or honorable action. (Plutarch 2015, 31.4–5)

Cleomenes, like Aristotle before him, refuses to condone suicide under any conditions, neither severe physical discomfort (“fatigue and misery”) nor social disapproval (“the scorn of men”). Escaping from life by one’s own hand is like fleeing in disgrace from the enemy, the behavior of a coward; moreover, the act of suicide is also condemned as utterly selfish. Finally, Cleomenes says something about the character of a suicide—defeated by “weakness” or “softness”—and, suggestively, he uses the same term, μαλακία, found in Aristotle’s analysis.

When Aristotle charges a suicide not only with cowardice but also with softness (μαλακία) (1116a11–15), he uses these terms as if they were linked conceptually. More precisely, softness seems to be the *central* feature of a coward’s character—understood, roughly, as a stable disposition to avoid what is troublesome or painful. Courage is the habit of facing such terrors and threats, whereas a “soft” person is disposed to break under these pressures and avoid the threat. In the extreme case, when life itself feels unbearable and death seems to be a lesser evil, a “soft” agent will flee from life by ending it. In this context, the term μαλακία has another important connotation—suggesting a lack of virility, the manly qualities that are essential for standing firm in the face of troubles.¹²

Accordingly, softness by nature “distinguishes the female sex from the male” (1150b15), and, in some rare cases, it may even be a hereditary disease that plagues males—an ailment that, interestingly enough, might eliminate blame.¹³ But a person who simply refuses to endure pain and discomfort is effeminate by choice and thus more blameworthy than someone overcome by harsh circumstances after honestly trying to overcome them.

Softness as a metaphor for a weak will and lack of determination is familiar enough. But Aristotle has something else more technical in mind when he uses *μαλακία*—a use that was certainly inherited by Plutarch. When discussing forms and subdivisions of incontinence in his *Ethics*, Aristotle singles out *softness* distinctly as a flawed state of character, defining a soft person as one “who avoids bodily pains not because he is defeated by them but by choice” (1150a24–25). He adds that a soft person is the opposite of “the man of endurance” (*καρτερία*) and explains that such a man “is defective in respect of resistance to the things that most men both resist and resist successfully” (1150a33–b3). Endurance is then explicitly correlated with and compared to continence, suggesting a moral hierarchy: “Endurance consists in resisting while continence consists in conquering, and resisting and conquering are different, as not being beaten is different from winning; this is why continence is also more worthy of choice than endurance” (1150a35–b1). If a man of endurance ends in failing, despite resistance to illicit desires, while the continent man prevails, how does endurance differ from incontinence? In fact, a person disposed to endurance ends up on the same moral level with an incontinent person, since they share an essential feature—both resist temptations or pressures but, in the end, they yield: “The case [of endurance] is similar with regard to continence and incontinence. For if a man is defeated by violent and excessive [*ὑπερβαλλουσῶν*] pleasures or pains, there is nothing surprising in that; indeed we are ready to pardon him *if he has resisted as the Cercyon of Carnicus did in the Alope*” (1150b5–10).¹⁴

Aristotle’s literary illustration is of utmost importance. In traditional mythology, Cercyon was a notorious king of Eleusis, whose daughter Alope was raped by Poseidon. The usual reading presents Cercyon as a cruel father and a cruel ruler who was eventually defeated and justly killed by Theseus.¹⁵ But Carnicus, a dramatist of the fifth century BCE, apparently gave the story an unorthodox interpretation in his *Alope*. That Aristotle specifies the version of the story by Carnicus is significant. Not a single line has survived, but an anonymous commentator on Aristotle gives the following summary of the plot:

Cercyon had a daughter, Alope. When he found out that Alope had been raped, he asked her who it was who had violated her, saying

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that if she were to tell him the identity of the rapist he would not feel so entirely undone by the grief. But when Alope told him the name of the rapist—Poseidon—Cercyon's own grief was such that he could not bear to live on, and he chose to commit suicide. (Wright 2016, 111)

If the commentator is to be believed, we now have a clear case of a suicide that, even if not praised by the philosopher, is at least not judged too harshly ; nor is the tragic hero accused by Aristotle of being a coward. Cercyon killed himself, being unable to bear the shame of family dishonor, but his behavior does not betray a vicious nature, since he at least made an attempt to endure the psychological pressure. The fact that he turned out to be too weak to resist suicide as an escape from pain might be explained by the intensity of that pressure ("violent and excessive") or perhaps by peculiarities of his character. In either case Aristotle "was ready to pardon him," finding him less than fully blameworthy.¹⁶ But unlike the "soft" person, who flees any prospect of pain and danger at the earliest opportunity, Cercyon, at least as described by Carnicus, resisted up to a point. He was disposed to endurance even though his final choice to kill himself had the same result as the suicide of a coward *simpliciter*.

As we can now see, not all persons who commit suicides are thus necessarily "soft" for Aristotle, although this might not be obvious on a first reading of μαλακία in the relevant passage. But this telling ambivalence about softness does not warrant Garrison's much stronger conclusion that "both Plato and Aristotle distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable suicides" on the basis that "[Aristotle] creates a list of unacceptable suicides which *suggests* that some types of suicide are acceptable" (1991, 14; 19).¹⁷ On the contrary, Aristotle's moral opposition to suicide in general is plain enough, even though he accepts some mitigating conditions when judging a self-murderer. To be sure, if at least some suicides are like cases of incontinence, it follows that not everyone disposed to suicide is a coward: instead, the person may have some innate (or acquired) peculiarity, or the "excessive" pressures faced may *not* be of the kind that "most men both resist and resist successfully" (1150b3–7). Aristotle often reminds us that "incontinence and vice are different in kind" (1151a1). Cowardice is certainly a vice, but an incontinent suicide may not be blameworthy for lacking courage.

This qualification does not eliminate the immorality of the act itself; at best, it absolves the agent of *full* responsibility. The distinction between an agent's character, on the one hand, and a particular act that looks virtuous or vicious, on other hand, is fundamental to Aristotelian ethics. Accordingly, he can say that "incontinent people are not criminal, but they will do criminal [unjust] acts" (1151a10). Even a "pardonable" or "understandable" suicide (like Cercyon's) is an

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immoral act, though not the kind that necessarily indicates that the agent's character is thoroughly corrupt. Furthermore, what makes suicide wrong for Aristotle is not merely a character flaw of any kind. His subsequent and the most perplexing claim is that a suicide's act is unjust to the state.

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Aristotle notices an ambiguity in the Greek adjective *unjust* (ἄδικος), referring sometimes to a person who breaks the law and sometimes to a person motivated by greed or "grasping" (πλεονέκτης).¹⁸ It seems obvious that he treats suicide as unjust in the first sense. He also notes that justice can be used both in a broader and in a narrower sense. In the broader sense, justice is coextensive with virtue as such, encompassing all the concrete virtues; used in this way, the contrasting pair, "just" and "unjust," is semantically equivalent to "virtuous" and "vicious" (1130a1–13). In the narrow sense, justice is a *part* of virtue as such, a trait of character or a disposition to act—along with courage, generosity, temperance, and other virtues. Note that being unjust in the narrow sense would *eo ipso* make an action unjust in the wider sense as well—but not vice versa.¹⁹ But since Aristotle insists that the main goal of his investigation is justice as a *part* of virtue, where his task is to pin down its "genus and differentia," we may expect suicide to be unjust in this narrower, more specific sense.²⁰

Aristotle's final discussion of suicide occurs at the very end of Book Five, and his mention of suicide in that chapter seems almost incidental. His main concern is to ask again whether a person can treat *himself* unjustly, and self-murder comes up as the most plausible candidate for a case of injustice toward oneself: no other scenarios of self-inflicted harm are realistic. After all, no one can "commit adultery with his own wife or break into his own house or steal from his own property" (1138a25–26). A clearer picture will emerge from the relevant passage (quoted in Ross's translation):

The law does not command a man to kill himself, and what it does not expressly command it forbids. When a man in violation of the law harms another (otherwise than in retaliation) voluntarily, he acts unjustly . . . and he who through anger [δι' ὀργήν] voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to right reason [ὁρθὸν λόγον], and this the law does not allow; therefore, he is acting unjustly. But towards whom? Surely towards the state [πόλις], not towards himself. For he suffers voluntarily, but no one is voluntarily treated unjustly. This is also the reason why the state punishes; a certain loss of civil rights [ἀτιμία] attaches to the man who destroys himself, on the ground that he is treating the state unjustly. (NE 1138a6–14)

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Aristotle's verdict that a suicide commits an offense against the state—and is thus guilty of a legal (and, hence, rational) blunder—complements his earlier point that anyone ending one's life by one's own hands has a cowardly character—the point that comes with a caveat discussed above. The initial impression is that Aristotle takes a “legalistic turn” at this point, claiming that whosoever kills himself violates not only the requirements of virtue but the accepted legal norms of a *polis* as well (without mentioning which *polis* he has in mind). It would be hasty to conclude, however, that the legal and moral domains were seen as separate by Aristotle as we usually conceive of them today. The requirements of morality are generally conceived by Aristotle as overlapping the requirements of the law—whether the actual laws of a certain *polis* or an idealized version of them.²¹ At the very least, the *Ethics* presents two sets of reasons—legal and moral—against suicide, and each needs to be considered.

Admittedly, the passage quoted above is baffling in many ways. The central argument against suicide rests heavily on the general principle that “what [the law] does not expressly command it forbids,” which strikes the reader as plainly false. Commentators have felt the need for a footnote to explain this statement, trying in various ways to make the claim more palatable.²² The principle of charity alone would prevent us from ascribing such a questionable thesis to Aristotle, but there are more substantial reasons for doubting its authenticity. Assuming that the phrase was interpolated later, several translations have abridged the first sentence in the passage above. Terence Irwin, unlike Ross and earlier commentators, chooses a shorter version, rendering the first line simply as “we are legally forbidden to kill ourselves” (1999, 84; 238 notes). Rackham, while retaining the controversial phrase, reads the passage more plausibly as “*any form of homicide* that [the law] does not expressly permit, it forbids” (Aristotle 1956, 318 notes).²³ An interpretation along these lines fits the context of Aristotle's discussion and might even be seen as alluding to the death of Socrates.²⁴

If adjusting the text is not a convincing way to dismiss Aristotle's account of why suicide is unjust—since his reasoning rests on an obviously unacceptable premise—then the account as it stands needs to be explained. Strangely, most of Aristotle's efforts in the chapter go to prove that a suicide commits an offense against the *polis* rather than against himself, and he says very little to defend the underlying assumption that *any* kind of injustice at all has been committed. Someone *must* have been wronged unjustly by suicide, Aristotle assumes, and the main question is which party has been wronged—a citizen who kills himself or the citizen's *polis*. Then, since no one would choose to act unjustly toward himself, and since “the just and unjust always involve more than

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one person" (*NE* 1138a19), it must be the state that suffers the wrong because of the citizen's suicide.

One way to approach Aristotle's reasoning about suicide is to treat self-murder as a special case of illegal injury against another human being—injuries not explicitly authorized by the state. Killing in self-defense, retaliating for murder, or executing a convicted criminal are all legal injuries because the state either sanctions them explicitly or permits them tacitly. Since suicide, by contrast, is deliberate inflicting of an injury that the state neither permits as self-defense or retaliation nor sanctions as an execution, the injury is an illegal offense against the *polis* as the lawgiver. Having seen how other-directed injuring might shed light on self-directed injuring, we can still ask a more fundamental question: what is it, in general, that makes injuring others *unjust*? For Aristotle, the injustice is an unjustified taking of *what belongs to someone else*—be it cattle, freedom, health, or life itself: on purpose of the virtue of justice is to regulate transactions between property-owning agents (1130b29–1131a5). In the case of suicide, however, a person takes his *own* life, not someone else's, leaving it unclear how this action violates norms of justice.

Another way out of the predicament is to suppose that a citizen's life ultimately belongs not to himself but to the state. A familiar argument in Plato's *Crito* maintains that the *polis* (or "the Laws") can make such claims on a person because the community has provided social benefits to the person throughout life. The *Phaedo* provides a more radical statement of the alienation of the individual's rights to life. Socrates condemns suicide because he believes that we, humans, are possessions of the gods. The gods would be justly angry at chattels who took the liberty of destroying themselves (62b–c). Could it be that Aristotle—in the manner of Durkheim—has simply secularized Plato's argument by replacing the gods of Socrates with the *polis*? Does Aristotle believe that the state *owns* its citizens?

With a possible exception for slaves, the assertion that the state owns its citizen seems too strong. Aristotle treats the state as more important than any member of the state, but the state's priority over individuals is not the same as an owner's relation to rightful possessions (*Politics*, 1253a19–23). Fortunately, there are clues in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* that suggest a more plausible model of the relationship between citizens and the *polis*, and these may make the charge of injustice against a suicide more understandable. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes that a person can act unjustly in either of two ways—"towards one definite person, or towards the community." An example of the latter form of injustice is crucial: "the man who avoids service in the army is doing wrong to the community" (*Rhetoric*, 1373b22–24). Since the community's existence is necessary for human existence (only gods or beasts

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can live by themselves), citizens incur obligations to the state simply in virtue of being members of it (*Politics*, 1253a23–30). Although these obligations do not yet reduce a person to the status of a possession, they are still serious and may include an obligation to defend the *polis* by serving in the army or to contribute to its welfare in some other way. Fulfilling such obligations at the risk of life and limb requires, at the very least, that the citizens do not kill themselves capriciously. We can now understand Aristotle's claim that a suicide injures the city: suicide deprives the community of a valued defender whose behavior is like that of a deserter's abandoning the army. In Aristotle's view, the deserter, who lets the city down in this way, is a coward who deals unjustly with the state and is not essentially different from a soldier with a self-inflicted wound. Both the suicide and the runaway soldier commit an act of injustice against the community in the same way.²⁵

In the same context, Aristotle appeals to the official practice of “dishonoring” those who killed themselves as another proof that suicide violates requirements of justice. “Dishonoring” the suicide is a penalty exacted by the state, not by any individual, because it is the state that the suicide has injured. But it is not obvious what “dishonoring” (ἀτιμία) amounted to in Aristotle's time.²⁶ Details are scarce. Irwin suggests that “the specific form of ‘dishonor’ that Aristotle has in mind is the loss of the status of a free citizen, and hence the withdrawal of civil rights” (1999, 238). But it is not clear what the withdrawal of civil rights from the dead citizen could mean—unless it was the family of a suicide that suffered the consequences. But this is just a conjecture based on no historical evidence. Garland, on the other hand, believes that penalties were leveled against those “who made unsuccessful attempts at suicide” (1985, 98). Finally, Garrison suggests that *atimia* “means lack of commemoration, and perhaps curtailment of the usual rituals” (1991, 19). His reading is partly based on Plato's *Laws*, where the Athenian proposes how to treat suicides:

But the graves of [suicides] must, in the first place, be solitary; they must have no companions whatsoever in the tomb. Further, they must be buried ignominiously in waste and nameless spots on the boundaries between the twelve districts, and the tomb shall be marked by neither headstone nor name. (*Laws* 873d2–e1)

This passage seems to give a detailed description of the dishonor that a suicide's corpse would suffer. But Plato wrote the *Laws* not to give a historically accurate record of actual practices in ancient Athens but rather to present a grand picture of an ideal community. This is how cowardly suicides *should* be treated in a well-governed state, according to Plato, but there is no evidence that this is how they *were* treated—whereas Aristotle clearly refers to an established practice.

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A more severe dishonoring would have been to mutilate the corpse of a suicide, which is what a contemporary of Aristotle, Aeschines of Athens (1919), seems to describe as customary: “When sticks and stones and iron, voiceless and senseless things, fall on any one and kill him, we cast them beyond the borders, and when a man kills himself, the hand that did the deed is buried apart from the body” (*Against Ctesiphon*, 3.244). Perhaps Aristotle had some similar custom in mind when he wrote about the state’s dishonoring of suicides.²⁷ But since there is no solid evidence for choosing among the available options, all we know is that *atimia* in *some* form was the fate of suicides during Aristotle’s time.

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Aristotle’s explicit condemnation of suicides on moral grounds is widely known, and his arguments have entered the heritage of ancient philosophy. Without querying the evidence, Caroline Whelan, for example, simply records as established the view that in the ancient world “opposition to suicide was, in fact, confined to two schools: the Pythagoreans and Peripatetics” (1993, 514). Indeed, it is hard to deny that Aristotle’s stand on this issue differs significantly from the attitudes of his predecessors and contemporaries, and I do not wish to argue for a radical reinterpretation of his position. Instead, I have tried to clarify his arguments against self-slaughter in the context of his ethical theory, focusing on the two main charges that Aristotle puts forward—cowardice and injustice. In this framework, what may seem at first glance to be a sweeping accusation of cowardice looks much more nuanced. Indirect textual evidence indicates that Aristotle recognized that, in certain cases of suicide, the agent’s behavior might be categorized as incontinence and is not the mark of a vicious character. This modest qualification of the agent’s character does not exculpate the act itself because it still violates norms of justice. Thinking of Aristotle’s view of suicide as unjust, I have explained how he could have concluded that a suicide wrongs the city—a conclusion befitting Aristotle’s conception of the nature and purpose of a political community.

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NOTES

1. The first systematic studies of ancient attitudes toward suicide appeared around the turn of the twentieth century in works by Geiger (1888) and Hirzel (1908). These studies were corroborated and expanded by Battin (1982), Garland (1985), van Hoof (1990), and Garrison (1991). It appears that Pythagoreans and

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members of the Orphic sects were absolutely opposed to suicide on religious grounds. See Plato's *Phaedo* 62b, Burnet's discussion (Plato 2016, 22), and Strachan's interpretation (1970).

2. Garrison observes that, while straightforward approval of suicide is rare, sometimes the choice of words suggests a particular moral perspective. Evocative language used by historians, for example, creates a tragic atmosphere, in one case presenting suicide as an "honorable release from a life made unbearable because of shame or dishonor" (1991, 14).

3. As Fedden points out, Pythagorean opposition to suicide has a mathematical dimension: the number of souls in this world and the next must be balanced, but the suicides upset the ratio (1972, 73).

4. Unless specified otherwise, all quotes from Aristotle are from the revised edition of W. D. Ross's translation (1995).

5. "The noble" or "the fine" (τὸ καλὸν) is the worthy goal of a risky action undertaken by a courageous agent, the final cause that motivates the act.

6. The second reason (escaping "love") seems like wanting to escape "the pangs of *despised* love," since, presumably, no one would kill himself because of successful efforts. Phaedra's suicide over her unrequited love for Hippolytus (from Euripides's tragedy) would be the most obvious example for Aristotle's students.

7. Besides λυπηρός (painful), Aristotle uses ἐπίπονος (painful, wearisome) and κακός (bad, evil). The first two connote both physical and mental suffering, implying that neither physical pain nor psychological distress justifies taking one's life. The third term is a general Greek lexeme for anything undesirable.

8. For more comprehensive discussions of the necessary conditions for genuine courage and Aristotle's efforts to distinguish this virtue from others, see Brady (2005), Pears (1980), Young (2009a), and Zavaliy (2017).

9. Thus, Pears argues that "Aristotle's concept of *andreia* [courage] does not map onto our concept of courage" (2004, 12). Even a committed defender of Aristotle like Curzer concedes that "limiting courage to life-threatening situations flies in the face of common sense" (2012, 25). For reconciling the Aristotelian heritage with modern intuitions, see Zavaliy and Aristidou (2014).

10. There is little doubt that physical death is the end of a human's life for Aristotle. Unlike Socrates in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*, Aristotle never seriously entertains a possibility of postmortem happiness. In the *Ethics*, he is very straightforward: "Death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead" (1115b25–27).

11. This opinion is shared by Young: "Aristotle thinks that courage is shown only in the face of a fine death [. . .] But what makes the risks of battle the finest risks? Aristotle does not answer this question for us [. . .] No doubt the idea is that the risks of battle are the finest risks because in the typical case they are undertaken in the service of one's community. Aristotle may be taking it as a datum that risking one's life in these circumstances counts as fine" (2009a, 455).

12. The semantic evolution of the term μαλακία added explicit sexual overtones to the word, including the identification of the “soft ones” with homosexuals. When Paul lists μαλακοί among those who “shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9), he is not talking about cowards or the weak-willed people, although the exact meaning of the New Testament passage is under dispute.

13. “It is surprising if someone is overcome by what most people can resist not because of his hereditary nature or because of disease as, for instance, the Scythian kings’ softness is hereditary” (*NE* 1150b14–15). Aristotle refers here to Herodotus’s account of Scythian kings who were punished by the goddess with a certain hereditary “female disease” (θήλειαν νοῦσον, renders as μαλακία by Aristotle) for pillaging a temple (*Histories* I.105).

14. My emphasis.

15. For example, *Alope* by Euripides.

16. As Aristotle observes, “the incontinent man is like the one who gets drunk quickly and on little wine, i.e., on less than most people” (1151a7)—a physiological idiosyncrasy that one cannot be held responsible for.

17. My emphasis. Garrison’s reading of Aristotle seems farfetched: since Aristotle’s identification of the main motives of unacceptable suicides—desires “to escape from anything painful” and “to fly from evil” (1116a12–14)—is broad enough to cover *all* actual cases, there is no suggestion of *other* motives that might justify the act. After all, no one commits a suicide just because of good and pleasant experience.

18. See *Apology* 24b8–c1 and *Republic* 343e7–344a2 for both usages of “unjust.” Translation of πλεονεξία as “greed” or “undue grasping” does not capture all the connotations of the original term. Young thinks that the term is utterly mysterious for modern readers: “So what, exactly, is *pleonexia*, that is, Aristotelian greed? Nobody knows” (2009b, 465).

19. Since Aristotle seems not to have favored a Socratic “unity of the virtues,” he could find someone guilty of bad temper and prodigality without any charge of injustice in the strict sense (e.g., *NE* 1130a16–24).

20. Cooper (1989), in contrast, argues (unconvincingly, in my view) that Aristotle takes suicide to be unjust in the *broader* sense and cites the “excess of anger” (ὀργή), or irascibility, as a particular vice exhibited by a suicide. Being angry, or excessively angry, may indeed lead one to commit acts of violence toward other people, namely, those that one is angry at. But it is quite unnatural to view a person, who decides to end his life, as doing it out of anger at himself.

21. “The law bids us do the acts of a brave man, and those of a temperate man, and those of a good-tempered man, and similarly with regard to the other excellences” (*NE* 1129b19–22; see also 1130b21–24). That does not exclude the possibility that *particular* written laws might fall short of requirements of natural justice or be less effective at promoting virtue (e.g., *Rhetoric*, 1373b10–12; 1374a24–26; *Politics*, 1338b9–19).

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22. An early commentator on Aristotle, R. W. Browne, tried to accommodate the passage by citing the idiosyncratic conception of the main function of law in ancient Greece: "The Greeks recognized the principle that it was the duty of their state to support the sanctions of virtue by legislative enactments. The principles of our law, on the contrary, are derived from the Roman law, which confines itself in all cases to forbidding wrongs done to society. Hence, the rule with us is exactly the contrary, 'Quae lex non vetat permittit'" (1895, 147).

23. My emphasis. Rackham follows John Burnet, who offered the following interpretation: "the law does not expressly provide an exception to its prohibition against murder for killing yourself, and so suicide must fall under its general prohibition" (Aristotle 1900, 148).

24. Despite Frey (1978), it seems farfetched to see cases like the drinking of hemlock by Socrates at the order of the jury instances of intentional suicide (see Smith 1980). Eckstein (1981) argues that anyone sentenced to death who forfeits an opportunity to escape thereby commits suicide.

25. For an alternative interpretation of the meaning of injustice in suicide, see Burnet, who argues that the *adikia* "consisted in bringing blood-guiltiness [μιάσμα] on the state, not in depriving the state of a citizen" (Aristotle 1900, 245). For a similar claim, see Parker (1983).

26. "Dishonor" or "disgrace" is a more literal translation of Greek ἀτιμία, by comparison with Ross's interpretative phrase "a certain loss of civil rights."

27. Garrison points out that the context of this passage permits seeing it in a different light—the hand of a suicide is "blamed" for the killing, and, by analogy with any other murder weapon, should be buried separately from the corpse, *lest the suicide victim is offended* (1991, 9). On this reading, the aim was not to "dishonor" the dead but to spare him from suffering an additional offense. Since this is the only mentioning we have of such a practice, how widespread it really was is unknown.

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