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General Remarks on the Issue of Suicide in Antiquity versus Modern Times

Nowadays suicide, regarded as a voluntary act of taking one's own life, is a very controversial issue and is generally seen in a negative light. Most Christian religions do not accept it, even in cases of extreme pain or discomfort. Despite the fact that attitudes towards suicide in Christianity have evolved over the years, it is still regarded as a mortal sin and a serious crime against God, punishable in Hell. Even Dante placed those who committed suicide in the seventh circle of the Inferno, while the ninth was the closest to the Devil.¹

The first modern theory of suicide was announced probably in 1985 by Beck and his colleagues.² They regarded overwhelming thoughts and hopelessness as factors which could develop suicidal ideation and lead to death. The sense of hopelessness of an individual, who may be convinced that *'no matter what he does, it always ends in failure'*, was similar to Durkheim's anomic suicide.³ Durkheim used the term *anomie* with reference to the lack of any moral regulation, which can also be a suicidal factor. An *anomic suicide*⁴ is – according to his theory – a pathological result of a moral drift and the lack of any future vision or personal direction.⁵ Moreover, the researchers pointed depression, biological factors (even genetic transmission and predispositions) among other suicidal factors.⁶ In ancient times the issue of suicide was interpreted in a completely different way – as an honourable option.⁷

¹ Kazarian-Evans 276.

² Beck-Steer-Kovacs-Garrison 559–563.

³ Nock 292.

⁴ As far as the Durkheim's theory of suicide is concerned, it is necessary to mention that he advanced three more types of suicide involved with social forces to integration and regulation. There are: egoistic, altruistic and fatalistic suicides. Bryant-Peck 909.

⁵ Appelrouth-Edles 111.

⁶ Bryant-Peck 909.

⁷ Ermatinger 223.

First theories on ethical assessment of suicide probably go back to philosophy of ancient Greece.⁸ Philosophers explained it variously and very often presented significantly different views on the topic.⁹ Pythagoras undertook this debate as first. He founded his opinion on the basis of theological premises¹⁰ and claimed that suicide is unacceptable: one could not leave their place on earth against the will of God.¹¹ Pythagorean religious principle claims that it is a direct violation of one's own duty towards God to prematurely end their own or another person's life.¹² Aristotle also opposed suicide – he maintained that it is an act against the state and accepted rules.¹³ It is necessary to stress that dishonour affected even suicide's family which was disenfranchised. Furthermore, the right hand of the deceased was cut off and buried separately from the body.¹⁴

Next generations of philosophers differed from Stagirite's stand and considered this issue in terms of earthly existence instead of the transcendent world.¹⁵ The Cynics regarded suicide as one of possible ways which lead to overcome the evil of unfavorable fate, while Hegesias was convinced that a neutral attitude towards both life and death is crucial in one's existence. He claimed that a man should renounce comfort, wealth and honor because generally it is impossible to attain *eudaimonia*. The mere mitigation of suffering (a reference to Epicurus' negative ideal of painlessness as pleasure) and a conviction that even life is *adiaphoron* were regarded as the *optimum* to which a man could rationally aspire.¹⁶ That is why he was in favour of suicide if it could bring relief. That is also an explanation for his nickname *Peisithanatos* (“the Death Persuader”).¹⁷ Epicurean philosophy presents only partial justification for suicide. Epicurus noticed that it is possible to identify it with the man's essential moral good, hence with a state of bliss connected with peace and happiness.¹⁸ The

⁸ Skowroński 11–18.

⁹ Holmes 228.

¹⁰ It is crucial to distinguish Pythagoras' *theology* from Christian perspective. Reference to Pythagoreans' pursuits to rationalize the assumptions and rules of the Orphic religion are important here. Orphism, as a monotheistic religion, established a belief in the preexistence and post-existence of the human soul as a kind of a reward for fair behavior and living in fear of gods. Świercz 37.

¹¹ Ślipko 7.

¹² Carrick 153.

¹³ Bryant 2003: 310.

¹⁴ Scherer-Simon 2.

¹⁵ Ślipko 10.

¹⁶ Bryant 1996: 458.

¹⁷ Tatarkiewicz 90; Bryant 458.

¹⁸ Ślipko 11.

Stoics regarded the issue of suicide as a simple and ultimate consequence, which arose from ethical principles. Death was a part of the nature of the universe, an element in the process of both disappearance and creation of particular things. It had negative connotations only when as a destructive factor it forced a man to take some action, which destroyed human attachment to life and filled someone with the fear of nothingness. Everyone should have demonstrated a rational explanation for the willingness to end their own life.¹⁹

In ancient Rome suicide was a very frequent phenomenon determined by social, health and cultural factors. It could assume different forms, but always gave individuals an opportunity to avoid contradictions on their way to happiness. The Romans generally did not regard suicide as a distinct category or an offence. Mass suicides, hysteric self-destructions as well as suicides committed due to imitation and suggestibility were common among them. The Romans were motivated to do so by a sense of honour to avoid humiliation, slavery or capture.²⁰ James Ermatinger summarised that:

“Some of the more common reasons why suicide might occur would be if the individual had lost public honor and their reputation suffered. Another common reason was as a form of protest, especially against a tyrant, while for everyday issues it was frowned upon, not because suicide was seen as evil but rather because the individual was seen as a coward. In the Roman Republic if an elite was found guilty at a trial they were typically allowed to return to their home, put their affairs in order, and then commit suicide so as to avoid the public humiliation of an execution. This was later transformed into imperial orders, especially under Nero, for an individual to commit suicide and therefore save the rest of the family from death and certain poverty”.²¹

Ancient literature provides various examples which confirm that contemporary authorities even supported people who decided to end their lives. Valerius Maximus, in his *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri novem* recorded that the municipal councils of the

¹⁹ Ibidem 11–12.

²⁰ Bryant 2003: 311.

²¹ Ermatinger 223.

Massilians and Cea Island were willing to offer hemlock to everyone who had proved that it was crucial to end their life:

*Venenum cicuta temperatum in ea ciuitate publice custoditur, quod datur ei, qui causas sescentis id enim senatus eius nomen est exhibuit, propter quas mors sit illi expetenda, cognitione uirili beniuolentia temperata, quae neque egredi uita temere patitur et sapienter excedere cupienti celerem fati uiam praebet, ut uel aduersa uel prospera nimis usis fortuna utraque enim finiendi spiritus, illa, ne perseueret, haec, ne destituat, rationem praebuerit conprobato exitu terminetur.*²²

According to Valerius' report there are two reasons which make one end their life: the first one could be severe suffering or other hardship. The second reason is the situation when someone who is successful in their life did not want to face a future decline. The latter is directly connected with respect of the senior dignity. Such a preemptive suicide, undertaken in a *proper* time of "sufficiently satisfied senior", might be a moment of a conscious decision not to undergo anything typical for aging.²³ There is also another factor which needs to be mentioned here, namely *taedium vitae*²⁴ (weariness of life) – old age, which was distinguished by physical and mental pain. It also could be a reason to commit suicide. There are only a few examples noticed in ancient literature but it is confirmed that such suicides always came as a shock and surprise among the suicide's family and friends, even if *taediosus* earlier had told them about their plans.²⁵

Ancient suicide in the majority of cases had nothing in common with a depressive state, or any kind of pathological changes (well-known in modern times). However, such

²² Valerius Maximus 2.6.7 Bailey: "A poison compounded of hemlock is under public guard in that community, which is given to one who has shown reasons to the Six Hundred, as their senate is called, why death is desirable for him. The enquiry is conducted with firmness tempered by benevolence, not suffering the subject to leave life rashly but providing swift means of death to one who rationally desires a way out. Thus persons encountering an excess of bad fortune or good (for either might afford reason for ending life, the one lest it continue, the other lest it fail) find a finish to it in an approved departure" [transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey].

²³ Muders 215.

²⁴ *Taedium vitae* can be interpreted as a category of philosophical suicide. It is possible to distinguish two more categories: eschatological suicide (due to the desire to go to Paradise) and immortality one (caused by the willing to achieve wide recognition. Pioreschi 344.

²⁵ Hooff 122.

examples can also be found in Roman literature. Tacitus in his *Annals* described the death of Plautius Silvanus whose *mens turbata* (ill, unconscious and outraged mind) led him to suicide:

Per idem tempus Plautius Silvanus praetor incertis causis Aproniam coniugem in praeceps iecit, tractusque ad Caesarem ab L. Apronio socero turbata mente respondit, tamquam ipse somno gravis atque eo ignarus, et uxor sponte mortem sumpsisset. non cunctanter Tiberius pergit in domum, visit cubiculum, in quo reluctantis et impulsae vestigia cernebantur. refert ad senatum, datisque iudicibus Vrgulania Silvani avia pugionem nepoti misit. quod perinde creditum quasi principis monitu ob amicitiam Augustae cum Vrgulania. reus frustra temptato ferro venas praebuit exolvendas. mox Numantina, prior uxor eius, accusata iniecisse carminibus et veneficiis vaecordiam marito, insons iudicatur.²⁶

Agony caused by physical pain could also be an impulse to take one's own life in ancient times. Among all complaints, which triggered unbearable pain and could have been a reason for self-killing, Pliny the Elder mentioned e.g. bladder stones, stomachache or headache caused by tumours and illnesses, which nowadays could be recognized as cancer.²⁷

Suicides committed by Seneca the Younger, Lucretia or Mark Antony are among the most popular examples described in ancient literature. Seneca the Younger – a Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman born in Cordoba – took his own life, because he had been accused of participating in the plot of Nero's assassination:

Seneca interim, durante tractu et lentitudine mortis, Statium Annaeum, diu sibi amicitiae fide et arte medicinae probatum, orat provisum pridem venenum, quo d[am]nati publico

²⁶ Tacitus 1925: 4. 22 Goelzer: "About the same time Plautius Silvanus, the praetor, for unknown reasons, threw his wife Apronia out of a window. When summoned before the emperor by Lucius Apronius, his father-in-law, he replied incoherently, representing that he was in a sound sleep and consequently knew nothing, and that his wife had chosen to destroy herself. Without a moment's delay Tiberius went to the house and inspected the chamber, where were seen the marks of her struggling and of her forcible ejection. He reported this to the Senate, and as soon as judges had been appointed, Urgulania, the grandmother of Silvanus, sent her grandson a dagger. This was thought equivalent to a hint from the emperor, because of the known intimacy between Augusta and Urgulania. The accused tried the steel in vain, and then allowed his veins to be opened. Shortly afterwards Numantina, his former wife, was charged with having caused her husband's insanity by magical incantations and potions, but she was acquitted" [transl. A. J. Church].

²⁷ Everitt 119–123.

*Atheniensium iudicio exstinguerentur, promeret; adlatumque hausit frustra, frigidus iam artus et cluso corpore aduersum vim veneni. postremo stagnum calidae aquae introiit, respergens proximos servorum addita voce libare se liquorem illum Iovi liberatori. exim balneo inlatus et vapore eius exanimatus, sine ullo funeris sollemni crematur. ita codicillis praescripserat, cum etiam tum praedives et praepotens supremis suis consuleret.*²⁸

In one of his works Seneca claims that death was within everyone's reach and therefore nobody should be afraid of it:

*siue fauces nodus elisit, siue spiramentum aqua praecusit, siue in caput lapsos subiacentis soli duritia comminuit, siue haustus ignis cursum animae remeantis interscidit, quidquid est, properat.*²⁹

Seneca regarded suicide as a confirmation of contempt for death. A man could lose a sense of humanity due to madness, which results in the lack of control over one's own life. "When *libertas*, *pudicitia* or *mens* are threatened then death seemed to be the best solution".³⁰ In such an extreme way he approved of a stoic conviction of "well-reason" suicide, which could help to preserve moral integrity.³¹

The analysis of the examples found in ancient literature clearly shows that the Romans did not share the modern view that suicide may be a desperate cry for help. The method, which could be used in order to draw someone's attention, was *inedia* – starvation. *Abstinentia cibi* was a very distinctive way of suicide, which was regarded as showing wisdom and dignity. It was popular especially among philosophers, who regarded it as a

²⁸ Tacitus 1925: 15. 64 Goelzer: "Seneca meantime, as the tedious process of death still lingered on, begged Statius Annaeus, whom he had long esteemed for his faithful friendship and medical skill, to produce a poison with which he had some time before provided himself, the same drug which extinguished the life of those who were condemned by a public sentence of the people of Athens. It was brought to him and he drank it in vain, chilled as he was throughout his limbs, and his frame closed against the efficacy of the poison. At last he entered a pool of heated water, from which he sprinkled the nearest of his slaves, adding the exclamation, »I offer this liquid as a libation to Jupiter the Deliverer.« He was then carried into a bath, with the steam of which he was suffocated, and he was burnt without any of the usual funeral rites. So he had directed in a codicil of his will, when even in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of his life's close" [transl. A. J. Church].

²⁹ Seneca. *De Prov.* 6. 9 Basore: "Whether the throat is strangled by a knot, or water stops the breathing, or the hard ground crashes in the skull of one falling headlong on its surface, or flame inhaled cuts off the course of respiration, - be it what may, the end is swift" [transl. A. J. L. van Hooff].

³⁰ Sapota 2009, 281–287; Seneca. *Ben.* 1.11.4.

³¹ Veyne 113.

very noble way of ending one's life.³² Furthermore, there were other ways of committing suicide e.g. with the usage of a weapon, self-immolation in public places or taking a poison. Some of them gave a potential suicide an opportunity to give up on their fate.³³

In ancient times people ended their lives in the face of threat of insult or failure. For instance, Marc Antony and Cleopatra (after the lost battle of Actium) were forced to escape to Egypt. Octavius – who wanted to come to power in the whole Empire, followed him. In consequence, Marc Antony, conscious of the fact that surrendering to Octavius was a harbinger of death or captivity, decided to end his life by stabbing himself with a sword. However, he only managed to hurt himself badly. When he found out that his beloved Cleopatra was still alive, he ordered his men to carry him to the mausoleum. Probably there he died in Cleopatra's arms.³⁴

Lucretia committed suicide in the name of her own dignity. She was a daughter of a Roman patrician, and Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus' wife. During his absence she was raped by Tarquinius Superbus' son.³⁵ Despite the fact, that she could prove her innocence, she decided to commit suicide, which became a reason for the revolt. As a result the monarchy was overthrown and the republican system was introduced instead.³⁶

Modern researches prove that sex and age could have had an important impact on one's decision to commit suicide. The analysis of possible motifs for suicide established that women are more likely to commit suicide in order to escape from unbearable pain. However, they are generally less likely to do it due to unrequited love or heartbreak than men³⁷. In the Roman law a woman was characterized by *infirmitas sexus* (weakness that arose from gender) and *imbecillitas mentis* (mental disability to make appropriate decisions). That is why suicide committed because of unfulfilled love or other extreme emotions, was regarded as typical for women.³⁸ However, such a scheme does not seem to be relevant for the example of Dido – the mythical founder and queen of Carthage. According to the Aeneid, written in the first century B. C. by Vergil, the Trojan hero Aeneas landed on the coast of the present-day

³² Hooff 42.

³³ Suetonius *Vit.* 2. 3 Ihm.

³⁴ Sauthern 158.

³⁵ Livius 1. 58 Weissenborn.

³⁶ Matthes 24–25.

³⁷ Gunn-Lester 19.

³⁸ Sapota 2016, p. 14.

Tunisia, where he met Dido and fell in love with her. Later he left her alone – that is why she decided to commit suicide.³⁹ Surrounded by objects associated with Aeneas, burning at the stake, she killed herself with a sword.⁴⁰ The choice of the sword – as a tool which she used to end her life – is in accordance to the techniques of committing suicide in the Roman Republic. Moreover, the idea of double death – at the stake and with a sword – can be interpreted as an allusion to Cato’s suicide. What is more, the death at the stake seems to be a direct reference to the suicide of Hasdrubal’s wife.⁴¹ Florus, in his *Epitome de Tito Livio*, outlined his recognition for Hasdrubal’s wife, who – taking into consideration the helpless situation – killed herself together with her children:

*Quanto fortius femina et uxor ducis! Quae comprehensis duobus liberis a culmine se domus in medium misit incendium, imitata reginam quae Carthaginem condidit.*⁴²

Hasdrubal submitted to Scipio, the winner of the third Punic war, after a few days of a fierce battle. His wife, who saw her husband’s cowardice, decided to push her children into the burning ruins. She also jumped into the flames. The ground on which Carthage had been founded, was plowed and sacrificed to the chthonic gods – then Rome gained a new province Africa.⁴³

As far as the problem of suicide in ancient times is concerned it is necessary to outline the idea of *devotio*. It was an act of sacrificing oneself to the chthonic gods to ensure the victory over the enemies during the battle. Such a rite was performed in exceptional situations when the battle took an unfavorable turn. The rite, according to Roman tradition, could have been performed by a consul, dictator or praetor. By sacrificing his own life or the life of his soldier, he sealed the fate of the enemy army, which followed him to the land of the dead.⁴⁴

³⁹ Maria 193.

⁴⁰ Syed 129.

⁴¹ Sapota, 2016, p. 15.

⁴² Florus 1.31.17 Jal: “How much braver was the conduct of a woman, the wife of the commander, who, with her two children in her arms, hurled herself from the roof of her house into the midst of the flames, following the example of the queen who founded Carthage!” [transl. E. S. Foster].

⁴³ Jacynowska-Pawlak 78.

⁴⁴ Gryksa 219.

The term *devotio* refers also to the sacrifice of an individual for the society, such as the example of a slave, who gave his life for Piso:

*Sed ubi Festo consternatio vulgi, centurionis supplicium veraque et falsa more famae in maius innotuere, equites in necem Pisonis mittit. illi raptim vecti obscuro adhuc coeptae lucis domum proconsulis inrumpunt destrictis gladiis, et magna pars Pisonis ignari, quod Poenos auxiliaris Maurosque in eam caedem delegerat. haud procul cubiculo obvium forte servum quisnam et ubi esset Piso interrogavere. servus egregio mendacio se Pisonem esse respondit ac statim obtruncatur.*⁴⁵

According to modern research *devotio* can be regarded as a kind of suicide committed with dedication; however, it is difficult to estimate it as a category of suicide *sensu stricto*. Death, thanks to which the other person can gain a better life or existence, loses the feature of an attempt, which can affect somebody's reputation and moral values. An individual, by killing themselves can be improved in the end. Therefore one does not downgrade themselves, but instead stands on a higher level of humanity.⁴⁶

In the texts of ancient authors we can also find numerous examples of suicides committed because of *desperata salus*. In the case of the Roman soldiers it refers to the lack of another perspective on the battlefield. However, it should not be interpreted as a panic reaction. It was completely motivated by crucial values and patterns for ancient soldiers, who – according to Roman tradition – should have been brave (*virtus militaris*), devoted to their homeland, and willing to make tremendous sacrifices – even to lay down their lives for the happiness of their family, society and homeland. That is the reason why an individual, who did not want to be captured or to live being unconditionally submitted to the enemy, preferred ending their life. In that way one proved their braveness and awareness of their

⁴⁵ Tacitus 1980: 4.50.1 Goelzer: “But when the agitation of the people, the execution of the centurion, and other news, true or false, exaggerated as usual by report, came to the ears of Festus, he sent some cavalry to put Piso to death. They rode over at full speed, and broke into the dwelling of the proconsul in the dim light of early dawn, with their swords drawn in their hands. Many of them were unacquainted with the person of Piso, for the legate had selected some Moorish and Carthaginian auxiliaries to perpetrate the deed. Near the proconsul's chamber they chanced to meet a slave, and asked him who he was, and where Piso was to be found? The slave with a noble untruth replied, »I am he« and was immediately cut down” [transl. A. J. Church].

⁴⁶ Ślipko 158.

decisions. The leaders of the army, who decided to commit suicide with dignity and respect for traditional customs, were allowed honorable burials inside the city. Suicides committed by soldiers did not bring dishonour to themselves or their family, which was still entitled to full inheritance.⁴⁷ There were also situations when soldiers preferred to kill themselves instead of being taken captive by the battle winners:

*Quippe vix mille iuvenum manus circumfusi exercitus per totum diem tela sustinuit, et cum exitum virtus non haberet, tandem, ne in deditionem veniret, hortante tribuno Vulteio mutuis ictibus inter se concucurrit*⁴⁸.

Desperata salus, interpreted as the lack of possibility for rescue or being saved, made Floronia – who had been accused of prostitution – to commit suicide. This event was precisely described by Livy:

*Territi etiam super tantas clades cum ceteris prodigiis, tum quod duae Vestales eo anno, Opimia atque Floronia, stupri compertae et altera sub terra, uti mos est, ad portam Collinam necata fuerat, altera sibimet ipsa mortem consciuerat.*⁴⁹

In ancient times the issue of suicide was approached and assessed differently. Its interpretation in the context of ethics, politics or philosophy varied significantly. Nevertheless, the topic of suicide – more or less justified – still is a subject of heated discussions, inquiries and research carried out not only by experts, but also by those interested in ancient arcana.

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⁴⁷ Holmes-Holmes 19.

⁴⁸ Florus 2.13.33: Jal “A band of barely 1,000 men withstood for a whole day the weapons of an army which had completely surrounded them, and when their valour procured no way of escape, at last, at the exhortation of the tribune Vultei, in order that they might not be forced to surrender, they fell upon one another and died by the blows of their fellows” [transl. E. S. Foster].

⁴⁹ Livius 22.57.2 Weissenborn: “They were terrified not only by the great disasters they had suffered, but also by a number of prodigies, and in particular because two Vestals, Opimia and Floronia, had in that year been convicted of unchastity. Of these one had been buried alive, as the custom is, near the Colline Gate, and the other had killed herself” [transl. B. O. Foster].

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Summary

The article presented various examples of suicides committed in ancient times, as well as its assessment – outlined in accordance to contemporary politics, culture, ethics and philosophy. Despite the fact that opinions about it were different, the most important role of suicide was to prove one's honour, dignity and value of undertaken decisions. Among the

reasons, which made an individual end their own life, it is necessary to mention e.g. *devotio* – one’s own sacrifice in order to ensure victory over enemies; *taedium vitae* – tiredness of physical and mental pain in old age, and *desperata salus* – the lack of rescue options. Moreover, ancient literature provided numerous cases when individuals committed suicide in the face of insult or failure. It was common among soldiers to end their own life instead of being captured or killed by their enemies. Thanks to the analysis of the chosen ancient authors’ texts (e.g. Livy, Florus, Tacitus) it was possible to evaluate the cultural background and interpretation of the examples. A strong emphasis was put on a comparison of ancient suicide with modern one.

KEYWORDS: Roman literature, suicide, *devotio*, *taedium vitae*, *desperata salus*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: literatura rzymska, samobójstwo, *devotio*, *taedium vitae*, *desperata salus*

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