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Did Socrates Commit Suicide?

R. G. FREY

It is rarely, if at all, thought that Socrates committed suicide; but such was the case, or so I want to suggest. My suggestion turns not upon any new interpretation of ancient sources but rather upon seeking a determination of the concept of suicide itself.

Suppose Sir Percy is cleaning his gun, and that his finger slips on to the trigger, as a result of which the gun discharges, mortally wounding him: does Sir Percy commit suicide? It seems reasonably clear that he does not: if killing oneself is a part of committing suicide, it is not the whole. What seems wanted is a reference to the fact that Percy did not intend to take his life; it is killing oneself intentionally, or self-murder, and not self-killing, that constitutes suicide. If this is so, then Socrates (I mean the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedo*) did plainly commit suicide. For he drank the hemlock knowingly, not unknowingly or in ignorance of what it was or what its effect on him would be, and intentionally, not accidentally or mistakenly; and he died as a result of his act of drinking the hemlock.

A number of ways in which one might try to avoid this conclusion come to mind; but each of them, I think, fails.

'Socrates did not want to die.' This is not so very obvious. It is apparent from Plato's narrative of Socrates's last hours with *Phaedo* and his friends that Socrates intends to drink the hemlock. At least ordinarily, however, an agent intends an act only if he knows he is doing it and wants to do it either as an end in itself or as a means to some further end. So unless one is prepared to say that Socrates did not intend to drink the hemlock, we can infer from the fact that he intended to drink it, together with his knowledge of what its effect on him would be, that he wanted to die. (It should perhaps be added, too, that in the early passages of the *Phaedo*, where Socrates expounds his view of what the philosopher's attitude towards death should be (61c-69e), he does betray a wish to die.)

'Socrates was forced to drink the hemlock.' This is simply untrue. He did not take the cup of hemlock reluctantly. Nor, after he had taken it, did he throw its contents to the floor. He did not drink the hemlock against his will: his jailers were not required to listen to his protests or pleas, and they did not have to hold him down and pour the hemlock down his throat. Even granted that he had to die, Socrates had a choice between drinking the hemlock willingly and having it, so to speak, force-fed; and only by choosing to be force-fed would Socrates have been forced to drink the hemlock, that is, compelled to die against his will.

'Socrates was under duress.' Even if true, this fact is irrelevant, unless one is prepared to argue, what is almost certainly false, that duress vitiates choice. Socrates had to die, but he could die by his own hand, by taking and drinking the hemlock willingly, or by the hand of another, by having the hemlock force-fed. What duress Socrates is under pertains to his having to die, not to his having to die by his own hand.

'The whole context in which Socrates drinks the hemlock, namely, his trial, the verdict and the drinking of hemlock as his sentence, is what is important; he does not commit suicide because he takes the hemlock in the context of an execution by the state of Athens.' I agree that Socrates takes the hemlock as a result of his sentence, indeed, as his sentence, but I deny that intentionally taking one's life because it is one's sentence *ipso facto* precludes committing suicide. Suppose that the sentence for murder were a bit different, that every convicted murderer was allowed to live for twelve months from the date on which his sentence was passed, and could either take his own life within this period or else face the absolute certainty of a state execution at the end of twelve months: do not the murderers who intentionally take their own lives commit suicide? The fact that their sentence is as it is does not preclude their doing so; on the contrary, given that they have to die, they intentionally take their own lives and thereby make plain their decisions to commit suicide rather than to undergo state executions. True, their acts of intentionally taking their own lives can be described as 'implementing their sentence' as well as 'committing suicide'; but the use of the former description in no way bars the use of the latter to describe what they did.

'The time of Socrates's death is fixed by his sentence, and this is what is important; he does not commit suicide because he does not choose when to die.' The assumption that choosing the time and moment of death is part of what it is to commit suicide is false. Suppose Sir Percy decides to commit suicide but simply cannot face cutting his wrists or shooting himself in the temple; instead, he plants hundreds of pounds of gelignite under his house and attaches the fuses to his telephone, so that, if his telephone rings, his house explodes; and then he sits down to wait. Percy will die whenever his telephone rings, but *he* does not know or determine (or perhaps even care) when that will be; and if, unknown to him, his telephone has been disconnected, then it may never ring. But if at some time or other it does ring, and if Percy does die, he has certainly committed suicide. Again, Captain Oates was aware that, in walking away from Scott's camp, he was walking to his death; and he could have been reasonably certain of dying soon. But he did not know or choose the moment of death, and in reaching his decision to walk away, I doubt if he cared just *when* death would come. Thus the fact that Socrates does not choose the time and moment of his death does not *ipso facto* preclude his committing suicide.

Discussion

'Socrates died a noble and dignified death and suicide is ignoble and undignified.' On the contrary; the fact that Socrates died a noble and dignified death does not show that he did not commit suicide, but rather that suicide need not be ignoble and undignified.

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