

Singing Without an Instrument: Plotinus on Suicide<sup>1</sup>

JOHN DILLON

The attitude to suicide of the philosopher Plotinus was made the subject of discussion, some time ago now, by John Rist in *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*,<sup>2</sup> but I am not sure that his position has ever been adequately countered.<sup>3</sup> He takes Dean Inge to task for expressing the opinion, in his lectures on Plotinus,<sup>4</sup> that Plotinus, like the Stoics, was prepared to endorse suicide in certain circumstances. Despite Rist's forceful arguments, I feel that this vexed question deserves further examination, as the topic is not only interesting in itself, but serves to illustrate rather well both other aspects of Plotinus' ethical position and his methods of dialectical argumentation.

Let us first consider the arguments advanced by each of these scholars and then see how well they square with the utterances of Plotinus himself. Inge says: "On this side [*sc.* the advocacy of freedom from bodily and mental disturbance], the influence of Stoicism is very strong in all the later Greek thought. Even suicide, the logical corollary of this system (since there are some troubles to which the sage cannot be indifferent), is not wholly condemned by Plotinus, though he has the credit of dissuading Porphyry from taking his own life." He then continues, in a note: "The authoritative passage on suicide for the school of Plato is *Phaedo*, p. 62, where Socrates says that a soldier must not desert his post. Plotinus argues that the suicide can hardly leave this life with a mind free and passionless; if he had vanquished fear and passion he would, almost always, be content to

<sup>1</sup> This may seem a somewhat gloomy subject to include in a Festschrift, but I would prefer to see it as a suitable tribute (through an attempt at emulation) to a master of the close analysis of philosophical texts, such as is our honorand. I am much indebted, in composing this, to the recent unpublished thesis of K. McGroarty, *Plotinus, Ennead I 4: A Commentary* (St. Patrick's College, Maynooth 1992), who discusses the issue of suicide well in his commentary on chapters 8, 5-9 and 16, 17-20.

<sup>2</sup> *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge 1967) 174-77.

<sup>3</sup> It is followed by R. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London 1972) 84, and, while commentators on *Enn.* 1, 4, such as Beutler and Theiler in Harder's edition (*Plotinus Schriften* [Hamburg 1960] Band Vb) and A. H. Armstrong in the Loeb ed. (as had Bréhier already in 1924 in his Budé edition), have recognised that Plotinus envisages the justification of suicide in that work, no refutation of Rist's position, so far as I can see, has yet found its way into any recent general work on Plotinus.

<sup>4</sup> *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (London 1929) II 173.

live. But in 1. 4. 16 he says that the Soul is 'not prevented from leaving the body, and is always master to decide in regard to it'."

Inge is quite right to make allusion to the last chapter of *Enn.* 1. 4, to which I will turn in due course, but it is strangely inapposite of him to allude to *Phaedo* 62b, since it is notable that Plotinus does *not* appeal to this Platonic proof-text in this connection, either in *Enn.* 1. 9 or in 1. 4. 16, and that fact is actually significant evidence in favour of Inge's interpretation of his doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Rist, however, will have none of this. He begins (175) by mentioning, as does Inge, Porphyry's account of how Plotinus dissuaded him from suicide (*V. Plot.* 11), but rightly accepts that that is irrelevant to the question of whether Plotinus accepted the Stoic doctrine of "rational withdrawal" (εὐλογος ἔξαγωγή), because the basis of Plotinus' position in this case, as Porphyry freely admits, was that the balance of Porphyry's mind was disturbed—he was suffering from depression, and simply needed a holiday in Sicily (from which he subsequently returned to do thirty years of his best work).

Rist, however, goes on: "Inge is wrong to imply that a passage of 1. 4. 16 means that Plotinus thought that suicide was ever in practice justifiable. Plotinus simply says in this passage that the soul is not prevented from abandoning the body and always has the authority to decide whether to abandon it or not. But this is the kind of decision readers of Plotinus should understand very well. The soul can choose for or against suicide, but the good soul will always in practice choose against. It merely remains to see why it will choose against."

And Rist now turns to an examination of the curious fragment or note, placed by Porphyry at the end of the first *Ennead* (1. 9), and identified by him as an "early" work, composed before his own arrival in Rome to join Plotinus' circle in 264, entitled *On Withdrawal* (*sc.* from the body), with which must be taken the equally curious report of the later Aristotelian commentator Elias,<sup>6</sup> referring to another work of Plotinus', not included in

<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as Harder remarks in his introduction to the comments on this text ([above, note 3] Band Ib 546), this *Phaedo* passage is not Plato's last word on suicide. At *Rep.* 3. 406de (Harder wrongly refers to 407de), he commends an honest carpenter or other artisan for not endeavouring to keep himself alive by sophisticated medical practices, but being prepared to die if he cannot live a normal life. This is admittedly not quite the same as deliberately freeing oneself from the body, but at *Laws* 9. 854c he actually exhorts anyone who finds himself irremediably addicted to criminal tendencies to "consider death the more noble course, and remove yourself from life (ἀπαλλάττου τοῦ βίου)." Again, this is not advice relevant to the wise man, but it is an indication that Plato was not wholly averse to the idea of removing oneself from life. It is interesting that these texts are adduced in an argument produced by Olympiodorus, *In Phaed.* 1. 8, pp. 5–7 Norvin (pp. 46–51 Westerink), to air the case for suicide in a Platonist context. More interestingly still, Olympiodorus also adduces Plotinus, *Περὶ εὐλόγου ἔξαγωγῆς*, in support of this argument (p. 49, 16–17 Westerink). Whether this is identical with the text in Porphyry's edition, however, or rather with that quoted later by Elias (see below), is not clear.

<sup>6</sup> In his *Prolegomena Philosophiae* 6. 15, 23–16, 2 Busse (CAG XVIII).

the *Enneads*, entitled *On Rational Withdrawal*, using exactly the Stoic terminology.<sup>7</sup>

First let us try to sort out the different nuances of doctrine exhibited in either of these two texts. In 1. 9, Plotinus, interestingly, starts from what appears to be his sole reference to the *Chaldaean Oracles*, given by Michael Psellus in his commentary on the *Oracles* (1125D Migne) as *Μὴ ἔξῃης, ἵνα μὴ τι ἔχουσα / ἐξίη*—"Do not take out (your soul), that it may not go out bringing something with it (*sc.* of earthly concerns)."<sup>8</sup> The tone of Plotinus' comments on this tag is naturally very much in keeping with its general purport, which is that there are *virtually* no circumstances in which it is proper for one to commit suicide, since it is extremely difficult to conceive of this being achieved without some element of passion being present, which would constitute a burden on the disembodied soul, such as would tend to drag it down into a body again.<sup>9</sup> Rather, one should wait calmly for the body to take its departure from the soul. It will do this when it is unable to hold the soul together any longer, since its harmony has gone from it (1. 9. 5–8)—that is to say, at natural death.

Plotinus then (1. 9. 11 ff.) raises what he sees as the most difficult situation that a wise man might be faced with—worse than the problem of physical pain (*trans.* Armstrong, *my italics*):

But suppose he is aware that he is beginning to go mad (*ληρεῖν*)?<sup>10</sup> This is not likely to happen to a really good man (*σπουδαῖος*); but if it does happen, he will consider it as one of the inevitable things, to be accepted

<sup>7</sup> The provenance of this *monobiblon* to which Elias refers is quite mysterious. Its contents are plainly divergent from what is contained in the note published by Porphyry. It may emanate from the lost edition of Plotinus' personal doctor Eustochius, as was originally suggested by Creuzer. But in this case, are we to assume that Eustochius is presenting another, fuller (or interpolated?) version of the same document that Porphyry is presenting here? We should note, by the way, as regards the title of 1. 9, that in the *Life* (4. 54) Porphyry lists the tractate as *Περὶ εὐλόγου ἐξαγωγῆς*, whereas the title prefixed to the piece in the mss. is simply *Περὶ ἐξαγωγῆς*.

<sup>8</sup> It remains a mystery why Plotinus should have chosen to quote, or refer to, the *Oracles* here, especially in a passage composed (as it seems) before Porphyry (who might be suspected of shoving them under his nose) joined his circle. But in fact, I think, this Chaldaean reference in Plotinus is not as uncharacteristic as has been made out. I have discussed the question in an article, "Plotinus and the Chaldaean Oracles," in *Platonism in Late Antiquity*, ed. by S. Gersh and C. Kannengiesser (Notre Dame 1992) 131–40. In this case, I would suggest, the catchy form of the Chaldaean phrase stuck in Plotinus' mind.

<sup>9</sup> F. Heinemann, in his *Plotin* (Leipzig 1921) 40–45, has some pertinent remarks to make on 1. 9, despite his basically unpersuasive thesis (*viz.* that this is not a genuine work of Plotinus at all). He argues that the notion of a soul departing from the body dragging something with it is not consistent with the developed Plotinian concept of the utter impassibility of the true soul, as set out, for instance, in 3. 6. 1–5, or indeed in 1. 4 (see below). This is a valid point, though it is true that Plotinus continues to avail himself of the language of contamination of the soul by the body, and of the purification of the soul, derived from the *Phaedo*, even after he has developed his distinctive theory. On the other hand, he may very well not have done so by the time he composed 1. 9, and conversely, the fact that he has done so by the time of writing 1. 4 may make it easier for him to endorse a theory of suicide.

<sup>10</sup> This was in fact one of the five Stoic conditions for "rational withdrawal" (*cf.* note 12 below).

because of the circumstances, though not in themselves acceptable. And after all, taking drugs to give the soul a way out is not likely to be good for the soul. And if each man has a destined time (εἰμαρμένος χρόνος) allotted to him, it is not a good thing to go out before it, *unless, as we maintain, it is necessary* (εἰ μὴ, ὡς περ φαιμέν, ἀναγκαῖον).

All this is consistent and perspicuous, up to the last phrase. What does Plotinus mean by that? Does he mean, perhaps, simply that one may meet with an accident before one's "destined time"? But that would surely be an illogical remark. It really sounds as if, quite against the run of the play so far, Plotinus is recognising here some kind of "necessity" that might constrain the wise man to take himself out of this life.<sup>11</sup>

If he is, however, he certainly is not inclined to expand on it here. And the report which Elias gives of the treatise available to him does not encourage one either to think that Plotinus left any room for suicide. Elias declares (*Proleg.* 6. 15. 23 ff.) that in his *monobiblon* about "rational withdrawal" Plotinus rejects all of the five reasons for suicide offered by the Stoics,<sup>12</sup> maintaining that the philosopher must await the natural dissolution of the body: "It is wrong to take oneself out before the right time (πρὸ καιροῦ), when he who bound (body and soul together) looses (the bond)."

This last remark introduces a consideration very proper to the Platonic tradition, going back to the *Phaedo*, but one conspicuously absent from the little treatise 1. 9, as we have seen. It is really hard to know what to make of Elias' report. Its pedigree is not very good.<sup>13</sup> Let us turn instead to see what we can derive from Plotinus' remarks at the end of *Ennead* 1. 4.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Of course, he may only, after all, be referring to the remark of Socrates in *Phaedo* 62c that "a man must not kill himself until God sends some necessity upon him (πρὶν ἂν ἀνάγκην τινα θεὸς ἐπιπέμῃ), such as just now has come upon me." This seems to relate, however, only to the curious Athenian habit of making condemned persons in effect execute themselves by drinking hemlock. This was not a necessity that anyone in the Roman Empire would have to face. However, Plotinus, while alluding to the *anankê* of *Phaedo* 62c, may be generalizing its application, as Olympiodorus certainly does later (*In Phaed.* 1. 8. 3-8, p. 49 Westerink).

<sup>12</sup> *SVF* III 768. The five were: (1) dying for one's country; (2) to prevent being compelled by a tyrant to betray secrets; (3) the onset of madness or senility; (4) incurable disease, such as makes the body unfit to minister to the soul; (5) irredeemable poverty. Plotinus makes no reference to any of these in 1. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. note 7 above. It is, in this connection, very odd that Olympiodorus (cf. note 4 above), when discussing *Phaedo* 61c ff., should give as one of a set of arguments (ἐπιχειρήματα) in favour of suicide that "Plotinus has written about 'rational withdrawal' (περὶ εὐλόγου ἐξαγωγῆς); consequently it is sometimes right to take one's own life." This is on the face of it an absurd conclusion to draw, since Plotinus' argument is entirely directed *against* this Stoic concept. Westerink is no doubt right in suggesting that Olympiodorus "remembered only the title and had no clear notion of the content of the treatise." However, it remains interesting that Olympiodorus should have felt it possible to produce this argument at all, and it is possible that he is reflecting a view of Plotinus' doctrine on suicide derived rather from *Enn.* 1. 4 (see below) than from either this tractate or the one that Elias is summarizing. Olympiodorus' own view, one may add, as a Platonist of the later sixth century, is that "one should not 'withdraw oneself' in so far as concerns the body, since this is an evil to the body, but it is reasonable to 'withdraw oneself' because of a greater good accruing to the soul, as when the soul is being

1. 4 is a relatively late treatise,<sup>15</sup> and it is possible that Plotinus has come to modify any earlier absolute objection to suicide he may have had under the influence of what was to prove to be his final illness, but it is to be noted that he did not in fact see fit to take his own life, despite his sufferings.<sup>16</sup> If his position has changed, it is more probably, as I have suggested (above, note 9), because his doctrine of the impassibility of the soul has developed in interesting ways. In this treatise he is primarily concerned with the nature of *eudaimonia*, and of possible threats to it. A number of the arguments against the permanence of *eudaimonia* in the face of various kinds of misfortune are of a very similar nature to those that were employed by the Stoics in favour of suicide, so that it is perhaps natural enough that this latter question should be touched on in this context.

And so it is. In chapter 7, first of all, arising out of Plotinus' point that not even the greatest of evils should be of concern to the wise man, so as to shatter his *eudaimonia*, we find the following (7. 27 ff.):

If he himself is offered in sacrifice, will he think his death an evil, if he dies by the altars?

*But if he is not buried?*

His body will rot anyhow, on the earth or under it. If he is distressed because he does not have an expensive funeral but is buried without a name and not thought worth a lofty monument—the pettiness of it!

*But if he is taken away as a war-slave?*

Well, "the way lies open"<sup>17</sup> to depart, if there is no further possibility of happiness.

This is plainly a reference to the option of the "rational withdrawal," in circumstances of which the Stoics would *probably* have approved, though it is somewhat strange that Plotinus chooses the *relatively* non-hopeless

harmed by the body. Anyone who has to make a decision chooses that course of action which involves the lesser evils and the greater goods" (1. 9. 2–6, p. 51 Westerink).

<sup>14</sup> There is also, I think, a significant passage in the middle-period treatise 2. 9 [33], *Against the Gnostics*, but it could be dismissed as polemic, so I will place no great weight on it. Plotinus there says (chapter 8. 43 ff.) that if the Gnostics believe that souls came willingly into the universe, "why do you blame that into which you came of your own free will, when it gives you leave, too, to get out of it, if any of you dislike it?" and (chapter 9. 17): "But if you have come by now to dislike the world, you are not compelled to remain a citizen of it." This does certainly seem to imply an assumption by Plotinus that there is no bar to suicide, but he might perhaps be held to be making a dialectical point. Rist, at any rate, seems to regard it as such ([above, note 2] 262 n. 17).

<sup>15</sup> No. 46 in Porphyry's list, composed during Porphyry's absence in Sicily just three years before Plotinus' death, and sent to him there (*V. Plot.* 6).

<sup>16</sup> For an account of Plotinus' final illness and death, see Porph. *V. Plot.* 2. It is the view of McGroarty ([above, note 1] 105 and 197) that it was his final illness that was the decisive factor in changing Plotinus' views on suicide. I would prefer, as I say, to hold that it was rather his changing view of the nature of the soul, which is expounded in 1. 4, though his illness may indeed have been a factor.

<sup>17</sup> We may note this (slightly coy?) use of a tag from Homer; *πᾶρ τοι ὁδός* is taken from the speech of Diomedes to Agamemnon at the beginning of *Iliad* 9 (43), where he is reproaching him for his proposal that they should abandon the siege and go home.

misfortune of being enslaved as a result of war as his paradigm case for rational withdrawal. One would have thought that one of the standard situations cited by the Stoics (cf. above, note 12), such as an incurable illness or the conviction that one is going mad (both of which he mentions later, in chapters 8 and 9, but dismisses as insufficient to disturb true happiness), would have been more suitable, especially as he remarks just below (7. 42–43) that, after all, many people will actually do better through being enslaved in war.<sup>18</sup> However, it is not our business to criticise Plotinus' choice of example (being taken prisoner in war may just have been his favourite private nightmare); all we need to note is that he (quite casually) mentions this possibility of "withdrawal" in the midst of dismissing the seriousness of all sublunary miseries.

Again, in the next chapter (8. 5–9), a propos the bearing of great pain (and just following on his notable image of the true self as a light enclosed within a lantern when a storm is blowing hard outside), he remarks: "But suppose the pain brings delirium, or goes on to such a height that, though it is extreme, it does not kill? If it goes on, *he will consider what he ought to do* (τί χρῆ ποιεῖν βουλευέσεται); for the pain has not taken away his power of decision-making (τὸ ἀντεξούσιον)." This again seems a fairly plain reference to the possibility of "withdrawal," though Rist could argue that it is less than explicit exactly what Plotinus is advocating. He adds, after all, immediately after this: "One must understand that things do not look to the good man (σπουδαῖος) as they look to others; none of his experiences penetrate to the inner self, pleasures and pains no more than any of the others."

However that may be, Plotinus seems certainly to return to the possibility of suicide at the end of the tractate, again in the context of the triviality of all bodily existence. A major aspect of his argument throughout the essay has been that the true self resides in the soul, and that soul in the strict sense is not affected by bodily or external influences, so that the true self, once we (that is to say, our *vulgar* selves) connect up with it, is impervious to the vicissitudes of physical existence. It is a remarkable theory, strongly counter-intuitive but obstinately maintained, and it colours his whole approach to ethics. It is behind this final passage from 1. 4 (chapter 16. 18 ff., trans. Armstrong, my italics):

He must give to this bodily life as much as it needs and he can, but he is himself other than it and free to abandon it, and he will abandon it in nature's good time, *and, besides, has the right to decide about this for himself*. So some of his activities will tend towards well-being (*eudaimonia*); others will not be directed to the goal and will really not

<sup>18</sup> Looking back in history, one could cite the case of the historian Polybius, and even, stretching a point, Diogenes the Cynic—as well as innumerable slaves who did well in the service of generous and enlightened masters; but these latter, at least, would not generally be sages (Epictetus, however, being a counter-example).

belong to him but to that which is joined to him,<sup>19</sup> which he will care for and bear with as long as he can, like a musician with his lyre, as long as he can use it; *if he cannot use it he will change to another, or give up using the lyre and abandon the activities directed to it.* Then he will have something else to do which does not need the lyre, and will let it lie unregarded beside him *while he sings without an instrument.* Yet the instrument was not given him at the beginning without good reason. He has used it often up till now.

Now of course John Rist could not ignore a passage like this, nor indeed the earlier one from chapter 7 (which he mentions in a footnote), but he has persuaded himself, as we have seen above (p. 232), that they do not add up to an endorsement of suicide. "The soul can choose for or against suicide," says Rist ([above, note 2] 175), "but the good soul will always in practice choose against."

I am afraid that I do not see why he comes to this conclusion. He goes on (175–76) to adduce *Enn.* 1. 9, as if that were Plotinus' last word on the subject, which seems rash. If anything, 1. 4 [46] should be Plotinus' last word. But it is the logic of Plotinus' argument that should be decisive. What can he have meant by "giving up using the lyre" and "singing on without an instrument"? The point being driven home in this final chapter of the tractate is that the *eudaimonia* of the *spoudaios* resides in his true self, which is the pure soul, and that soul is fixed in the noetic world. His happiness is assured, and cannot be affected by the vicissitudes of material existence. However, Plotinus recognizes that those vicissitudes can in certain circumstances come to constitute an intolerable distraction, disrupting the link in consciousness between a man and his true self, and, if such a situation shows no sign of a possibility of improvement, he sees no problem about rationally discontinuing the connection. He no longer seems bothered about problems of "contamination" or of "one's rank in the other world," such as exercised him in 1. 9, since his doctrine of the impassibility of the soul has made such concerns meaningless. The only important thing is to establish conscious contact with one's true self, which is the key to *eudaimonia*, and which, once truly gained, cannot be lost. If the physical instrument, the "lyre," becomes permanently and seriously dysfunctional, to the extent of disrupting one's intellectual communion with one's self<sup>20</sup> and with the noetic world, then it may be set aside, and one can sing on without it.

<sup>19</sup> τὸ προσεξευγμένον, that is, the animate body, or "composite" (elsewhere termed by Plotinus τὸ συναμώτερον) of lower soul (which is not really soul, but a sort of illumination from it) and body.

<sup>20</sup> The cautionary note sounded in the last two lines of the chapter should not be ignored. Our instrument was given to us initially "not without good reason (οὐ μάτην)," and should not be cast aside for any trivial reason.

We may see, I think, from all this that, on the subject of suicide, as of so much else,<sup>21</sup> Plotinus' position is more immediately affected by Stoicism than by what we might take to be strict Platonism. He is certainly not an enthusiastic advocate of suicide—any more than were the Stoics, after all—but, like them, he held that there was no absolute reason why the soul, especially that of the sage, should be bound in the trammels of bodily existence if no further degree of enlightenment could be derived from that, or if the enlightenment already attained was in danger of being obscured (for it could not be *lost*) by obstacles set up by the body or external circumstances. The argument produced by Socrates in the *Phaedo* about our being placed here on guard-duty by the gods, and our not being free to leave without their permission, does not, it seems, particularly impress him, though he was earlier (in 1. 9) concerned by the problem of the psychic disruption and consequent "contamination" which seems inextricably associated with the process of doing away with oneself. Once, however, his doctrine of the impassibility of the soul became fully developed, this concern ceased to be a serious one, though suicide remained a step not to be taken lightly. Indeed, in the remark that one's instrument is not given to one "without good reason (μᾶτην)" one might discern a residual recognition that we are assigned a role to play in the world, and that, as long as one can make some attempt to play it, one should not abandon one's post. But this does not for Plotinus preclude the option of rational withdrawal, of playing on without the lyre. It is a decision entirely within the competence of the achieved sage, though it was not a decision that he ever felt called upon to take himself.

*Trinity College, Dublin*

<sup>21</sup> I think in particular of his position on free will and determinism, as set out in *Enn.* 3. 2–3, but also of his Logos doctrine, and much of his ethics, as set out, for example, in 1. 4 (though here he criticizes the Stoic materialist doctrine of the soul; cf. e.g. chapter 13).