VIEWS ON SUICIDE AND FREEDOM IN STOIC PHILOSOPHY AND SOME RELATED CONTEMPORARY POINTS OF VIEW

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καπνὸν πεποίηκεν ἐν τῷ οἴκηματι; ἂν μέτρον μενῶ· ἂν λίαν πολὺν ἐξέρχομαι.

Epictetus: Discourses, Book I, XXV

It has been said that Stoic philosophy, more than any other, offers a justification of suicide. While such a comment would be true of Seneca, the justification of suicide offered by most Stoic philosophers is certainly not unqualified and there are of course differing lines of thought on the subject amongst the Stoics.

The question of suicide seemed bound to arise for them because of the nature of the questions which interested them, and because of their conception of philosophy. They were concerned with the nature of man and human dignity, and with questions concerning freedom, the sovereignty of reason over the passions, choice, necessity and consent. They explored the ideas of ‘living according to nature’ and of human self-sufficiency and independence of good or evil fortune.

Mention is often made of the notable suicides among the Stoic philosophers themselves. Zeno, Cleanthes, Antipater, Cato the Younger and Seneca all ended their lives by suicide. The suicide of Cato has become the classical and most quoted example of the ‘ideal’ Stoic suicide. Generally, however, suicide would not be thought to be justified or desirable among the Stoic philosophers for any trivial or unworthy motive. Suicide seemed to them to require an ethical justification in terms of their idea of what would be acceptable to the man who was in possession of himself and lived his life according to reason. The suicide of a weak man or one merely escaping the consequences of his own misdeeds or a prey to some temporary emotional state would not have been regarded as ethically significant in the same way. At the same time, for Seneca at all events, one would say that any suicide would be acceptable in so far as it is a free decision of the man himself, because it is one act at least which asserts that the person’s reason is in control of his destiny:

1. Recounted by Plutarch, Cato the Younger.
'If the soul is sick and because of its own imperfection unhappy, a man may end its sorrows and at the same time himself. To him to whom chance has given a king that aims his shafts at the breasts of his friends, to him who has a master that gorges fathers with the flesh of their children, I would say: "Madman, why do you moan? Why do you wait for some enemy to avenge you by the destruction of your nation, or for a mighty king from afar to fly to your rescue? In whatever direction you may turn your eyes, there lies the means to end your woes. See you that precipice? Down that is the way to liberty. See you that sea, that river, that well? There sits liberty — at the bottom. See you that tree, stunted, blighted, and barren? Yet from its branches hangs liberty. See you that throat of yours, your gullet, your heart? They are ways of escaping from servitude. Are the ways of egress I show you too toilsome, do they require too much courage and strength? Do you ask what is the highway to liberty? Any vein in your body!"'

This attitude, although very typical of Seneca himself, is not typical of the attitude of most of the Stoic philosophers. The attitude of the older Stoa would be closer to that of Plato in the *Laws* in that they would not justify suicide in cases of sloth or cowardice. They might even agree with Plato's proposed legal penalties which entail a certain disgrace on the perpetrator. Plato however clearly justifies suicide when the man kills himself in obedience to a legal decision, or when under extreme pressure of illness or misfortune including an irremediable disgrace which he cannot live with. The Stoic attitude to suicide was not greatly influenced by this passage in the *Laws*. It was however very significantly influenced by the death of Socrates and by the attitudes towards death which Socrates expresses in the *Apology, Phaedo,* and *Crito.*

The death of Socrates is regarded as a suicide because he accepted the order that his execution should take place by his own hand and because he could have escaped into exile and continued living. Two characteristics of his death in particular, seem to have been singled out in Stoic philosophy as typical of the wise and courageous man. First Socrates himself felt that he was going to his death in accordance with a divine sign. He said that a necessity was laid upon

him by the gods to take his own life and he consequently accepted
that he should do so. Secondly, as he had already made clear in the
Apology, he was not prepared to change his way of living in order to
escape death. His death fitted the integrated pattern of his life.
Escape, exile, or refusal to take the poison would all have seemed
out of keeping with what he had found to be his philosophical
vocation and with the fundamental structures of his own person-
ality: that is with what came to be known in Stoic philosophy as his
ηγεμονικόν or individual guiding principle. If man can be defined in
terms of genus and specific difference, it seems that rules of conduct
and a way of living might be discovered which would be the best for
all men. But in the Stoic’s definition of man as ‘that individual
existence in which different parts are integrated into a unity,’ the
emphasis is on the individual rather than on man as a species and
‘living in accordance with nature’ in their conception is living in
accordance with one’s own personality; when the personality is
ordered according to a rational principle.

Part of the Socratic legacy to the Stoics was therefore the
conception of an appropriate death which gives a man’s life its
definitive character. It seems to be a consequence of this conception
that the Stoic attitudes to suicide are not thought of in moralistic or
legalistic terms. Both Plato and Aristotle thought that to some
extent a suicide was committing an offence against the community
in that they thought that suicide deprived the state of the services of
a subject. Plato talks of the man who kills himself as the killer of
what is οἰκεώτατον to him, that which is most intimately his own,
but he still regards the loss of the man as in a sense a deprivation
suffered by the state. If this use of the word οἰκείω is in any way
relevant to the later Stoic theory of οἰκείωσις then it would mean
that the Stoics did not think of man as ‘belonging’ to the state in
every sense, but allowed the individual to possess himself in that
which is most ‘individual’ to him. οἰκείωσις is in some sense a
principle of choice, and the Stoic ideal of living in accordance with
nature is realized in this principle which is the perception and
appropriation by the person of that which is most akin to himself.

5. Ludwig Edelstein, The Meaning of Stoicism, p. 27, Harvard University
Press.
is made especially to p. 44 where Rist mentions Plutarch’s
Although no doubt like Plato and Aristotle the Stoics thought of man as realized in society and having a duty to society, they would not hold that his obligation to society extended to this last act, which would rather be an ultimate realization of his personal pattern of life.

If we consider the suicide of Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, it seems very probable that Zeno’s intention was that his death should be, like that of Socrates, a fitting terminus to his own philosophic way of living. Zeno seems to have accepted from Socrates the idea that a man should wait for a sign from the gods, if he is to take his own life, and such a sign would have to be convincingly connected with his own particular life and character. Zeno was coming out of his school at the age of seventy-two when he tripped and broke his toe. He is reported to have struck the ground and quoted the words: ‘I am coming, why do you call me?’ and then to have committed suicide. To suggest that Zeno killed himself in a fit of anger because he broke his toe seems completely inadequate as an explanation. It seems far more probable that he should think that the fall should be his ‘sign’ from the gods, and also, with the acceptance that death was inevitable in any case, that at the end of a philosophical life death would be better chosen than ‘awaited’ at the expense of senility and the disintegration of his faculties and personality. In this way his suicide, like that of Socrates, could be an expression of the involvement of his life with his circumstances and the drawing together of the threads of his own character. Thus although suicide is usually thought of as a refusal of one’s circumstances or one’s destiny, Zeno’s death like that of Socrates, could be thought of rather as a consent, or amor fati in the Stoic sense.

Another important consideration in regard to suicide arises here: the question of belief or disbelief in the immortality of the soul. When Cicero discusses the death of Cato in the Tusculan Disputations he quotes the Phaedo: ‘For the whole life of the philosopher, as the wise man says, is a preparation for death!’ Socrates in saying this in the Phaedo is stressing that philosophy as an activity always involves the withdrawal of the mind from preoccupations
with the body and the world. Philosophy is as it were the activity of the soul seeking its own life apart from the body. Since death is regarded in the dialogue as a final separation of body and soul, philosophy is regarded as a preparation for death. Cicero in his discussion certainly emphasizes this point of view, saying that Cato 'departed from life with a feeling of joy in having found a reason for death,' taking it that Cato's life had been a preparation for death in the way Socrates speaks of in the Phaedo and that Cato could regard Caesar's victory as the Socratic 'sign' for his departure. That Cato himself thought of philosophy as a preparation for death in exactly this way, could not however necessarily be assumed from what Plutarch says of him. In Plutarch's account, Cato does not speak of a possible future life, although he shares with Socrates a certain independence of bodily and worldly cares which fits him to abandon them and an extreme firmness of mind which enables him to stand by his resolve. In any case it would obviously be an injustice to Socrates to understand his philosophy as a doctrine of ascetic withdrawal, since his philosophical life consisted in both participation in and withdrawal from worldly and bodily affairs. We might doubt whether Cato shares in Socrates' capacity for contemplation or his devotion to philosophical questioning, but it is certainly clear that he shares other attributes including a determination not to 'act out of character' by allowing himself to lose the independence which was an indispensable part of his way of living. At the same time there is no reason why we should not conjecture also that Cato read the Phaedo, as he did just before he died, with an interest in its doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Plutarch reports Cato's last words to the two friends who were with him as follows:

"I suppose," said he, "that you also have decided to detain in life by force a man as old as I am, and to sit by him in silence and keep watch of him: or are you come with the plea that it is neither shameful nor dreadful for Cato, when he has no other way of salvation, to await salvation at the hands of his enemy? Why, then, do you not speak persuasively and convert me to this doctrine, that we may cast away these good old opinions and arguments which have been part of our very lives, be made wiser through Caesar's efforts, and therefore be more grateful to him? And yet I, certainly, have come to no resolve about myself; but when I have come to a resolve, I must be master of the course which I decide to take. And I shall come to a resolve with your
aid, as I might say, since I shall reach it with the aid of those doctrines which you also adopt as philosophers." 9

There is no doubt that Cato's words reflect the Stoic principles which have been discussed above. They also illustrate once again the Socratic heritage which is implicit in Stoicism. Circumstances had arisen for Cato which he would not accept, and he refused to accept in particular that the determination as to whether he should live or die should rest with a victorious enemy. To live in accordance with his nature meant that he should remain master of his own course of action.

Cicero is usually taken as expressing the views of the middle Stoa and it is thought that the influences of Panaetius and Posidonius become apparent in his writings. Their influence does not seem to have altered very greatly the Stoic tradition in relation to suicide and the associated attitudes towards life and death which we are discussing here.

However in the middle Stoa a new question arises which concerns the metaphysical nature of the ἡγεμονικόν rather than its experienced character as the personality of the man. Chrysippus had considered that man's nature was psycho-somatic and that bodily movements such as walking and sweating for instance and feeling emotions like anger were all states of the ἡγεμονικόν. At the same time he had thought that the soul would survive the body, not as immortal but for a considerable time. The ἡγεμονικόν would then survive as the state or condition of the soul at the time of death and would not change after death. Although there does not seem to be any explicit discussion on this point, one would think of this as an important additional reason for Zeno wanting to choose the appropriate time for his death. It seems that Panaetius denied Chrysippus' theory of the continuing life of the soul and as Rist observes 'took what might have been an intelligible step for Chrysippus himself and denied that the soul survives its separation from the body in any mode whatsoever.' 10 Panaetius' argument if accepted would leave us with death as a terminus. A man with a deep sense of the value of his individual life and personality might still wish to terminate his life if in fact an inevitable future state of affairs threatened to destroy this personality. Cicero himself however clearly defends the Platonic position based on the *Phaedo*

9. Plutarch, *Cato the Younger* LXIX.
and considers it regrettable that Panaetius should have abandoned Plato’s conception of immortality.\(^{11}\)

Suicide, if we judge by Cicero, was regarded as acceptable, and sometimes desirable, by the middle Stoa as it had been for Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus, but it is not until we reach Seneca that the idea of suicide becomes a centrally important preoccupation. It seems probable that the possibilities latent in the early Stoic doctrines became increasingly relevant to Seneca’s life and times. Seneca’s views are significantly different from those of the earlier Stoics. Seneca discusses suicide far more frequently, and no longer confines it specifically to the wise man’s way of terminating his life at the appropriate moment. He understands suicide more as a way of escape. Various ways of escape are provided by nature as we saw in the passage quoted above. It is part of man’s essential freedom that he is able to avail himself of them, and it is the act of a noble nature to choose freedom. Seneca’s eulogy on Cato’s death takes this single point of view. What we have called the Socratic elements in Cato’s decision seem to be lacking in Seneca’s description. Although the circumstances remain as described by Plutarch, Seneca’s emphasis is different from that of both Plutarch and Cicero. Death chosen as an expression of freedom seems to become an end in itself:

> ‘Surely the gods looked with pleasure on their pupil as he made his escape by so glorious and memorable an end! Death consecrates those whose end even those who fear must praise.’\(^{12}\)

Many other passages from Seneca confirm the same and similar views on death by suicide. It is important too as Rist points out that while ‘the early Stoics defined freedom as the opportunity for personal action. . . . Seneca seems to regard freedom not so much as the opportunity to act as a state in which one cannot be forced to act. His emphasis on suicide is an emphasis on a negative concept of freedom which is almost totally absent among the early Stoics.’\(^{13}\)

For Seneca suicide is not a completion of life but an escape from it. In Epictetus we find an attitude which seems more typical again of the older Stoic tradition. Epictetus considers that a man can attain freedom by liberating the mind from dependence on the body and material possessions. Like the early Stoics too he feels that a man should wait for a sign from God before he leaves this life. Man has a divine appointment and should wait for his release from God.


\(^{12}\) Seneca, *De Providentia* II, 12.

He goes back to the Socratic position that acceptance of death will be a continuation of a chosen (or appointed) way of life. Epictetus does not of course frown on suicide or take up any moralistic attitude towards it. For rational man it would have to be appropriate. In his view one could not commit suicide for any trivial reason, yet at the same time he suggests that life can be given up as children give up a game: when it becomes intolerable it is best to go in a dignified way rather than to stay and complain about one's lot. For Epictetus too, a rational man will live in accordance with his nature and the impositions of conditions which would make this impossible becomes the signal for his retreat:

'If Thou dost send me to a place where men cannot live as their nature requires, I shall go away, not in disobedience but believing that Thou dost sound the note for my retreat.'

In Epictetus' doctrine, a man's true nature, his conception of himself, and the face he presents to the world are involved with each other. If circumstances prevent a man from living according to his conception of his true self, suicide becomes reasonable. There is of course a possible flaw in this argument, because the change of circumstances which leads to suicide could perhaps lead to a new interpretation of the man's true self. It is clear however that a certain firmness stands higher than humility in the Stoic estimation of virtuous character. We find this exemplified in Socrates and also of course in Cato, Brutus and the other noble Romans whose suicides are spoken of as exemplary. For Epictetus the philosophic life begins with the discovery of 'the true state of one's own mind.' It therefore begins as for Socrates with self knowledge, but at the same time the first and most necessary part of philosophy for him is in action according to philosophical principles. His position is rather similar to Aristotle's in that man will act according to his habit of character, while the habit of character in turn is constantly being formed by the actions. Epictetus recommends that a man's concern should be with his own rational self. He should learn its constituents, its principle of union, its articulations and its faculties: all of which make up what we have called the ἡγεμονικόν.—

Only incline your mind to these things, bestow a little time if no more, on your own Governing Principle, consider what this possession is and whence it has come to you, this faculty which

15. Ibid., Bk. I, Ch. 24.
16. Ibid., Bk. III, Ch. 24.
uses all the rest, which proves all the rest, selecting and rejecting. So long as you busy yourself with external things, no one will succeed with them so well as you, but this faculty of reason will be, what your own choice makes it, mouldy and neglected."17

A man with the sort of self knowledge he describes would make the best decisions possible in relation to his circumstances, and a reasonable man's philosophy (while not a 'learning to die' in the strictly Platonic sense) would help a man to identify the right moment to die. Once again the Socratic heritage is apparent and we can perhaps best understand Epictetus’ views in relation to death and suicide through his frequent references to Socrates.

When we turn our attention to Marcus Aurelius we are conscious of a significant contribution to our topic, but at the same time we miss the emphasis on personal character which played so important a part in the earlier Stoic doctrine.

In the early Stoics, as we have seen, the main significance of suicide lay in the fact that it was considered as a personal end and a choice preferred to the loss of one's individual character. Marcus Aurelius's view is rather different. For him the principle of choice is that which is in accordance with the general nature of man as 'rational social animal.' Something of the Stoic consciousness of personal character seems to have been lost.

For Marcus Aurelius man's principal needs, in keeping with his rationality, are the virtues of equanimity and magnanimity. He defines the former as the voluntary acceptance of the things assigned by common nature and the latter as the elevation of the intelligence above bodily pleasure and pain, fame, death and all such things. Equanimity and magnanimity will be a man's defence against evils that may happen as well as positive character traits enabling him to live in accordance with his nature as a man and therefore fully, or if we care to use the term, happily. The exercise of the contemplative faculty will become possible too with the possession of these virtues.18

Marcus makes it clear that suicide is to be thought of as a last resort. Rational man can govern his life in most things and make the necessary attitudinal adjustments. He says 'If thou art pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that disturbs thee but thy own judgment about it.'19 Without entering into any explicit argument

17. Ibid., Bk. IV, Ch. 7.
19. Ibid., VIII, 47.
about it he adopts what has often been regarded as the typically Stoic attitude, that with reason in control a man can detach himself from physical pain, the passions and the opinions or attacks of others. If however a man's powers do not succeed in overcoming circumstances and he finds it no longer worth while to live then he should 'take his departure from life contentedly, just as he dies who is in full activity, and well pleased with the things which are obstacles.' If one were to commit suicide as a result of having incurred an intolerable disgrace according to one's own standards, or because of evidently inescapable madness, or an incurable illness, Marcus would seem to approve. As long as the act is done in a dignified manner the death would be a worthy one. Suicide does not interest Marcus very much except as the last resort of rational detachment when other methods of withdrawal have failed. If we decide on suicide we should quit life in true Stoic fashion without fuss: 'The house is smoky and I quit it.'

In recompense for the lack of a sense of involvement in human things and the tendency towards generalization of the rational character which are noticeable in Marcus Aurelius there is a strong sense of rational man's essential dignity which pervades the *Meditations*. Marcus is free from any passionate over-valuation of mortal things. No doubt, too, his conception that human life is an unimportant fragment in terms of time and space has a contributory influence in this respect. Man's rational reflection detaches him from time, places him beyond or above it and allows him to have a very selective evaluation of life and a contempt for death.

A new and more positive reflection results from Marcus' view of human time:—

'The man to whom that only is good which comes in due season, and to whom it is the same thing whether he has done more or fewer acts conformable to right reason, and to whom it makes no difference whether he contemplates the world for a longer or a shorter time — for this man neither is death a terrible thing.' and emphasising the underlying meaning of this paragraph:—

'Not as in a dance and in a play and in such like things, where the whole action is incomplete, if anything cuts it short; but in every


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part and wherever it may be stopped, it makes what has been set before it full and complete, so that it can say, I have what is my own.\footnote{Ib\ id., XI, 1.}

As Rist observes, this is perhaps an older Stoic idea which recurs in Marcus – 'The life of the rational soul when it is living well, is complete at any time.'\footnote{Rist, \textit{Op. Cit.}, p. 284.}

We find the same idea in Montaigne:–

\begin{quote}
...d'où qu'il vienne, c'est toujours le sien; en quelque lieu que le filet se rompe, il y est tout, c'est le bout de la fusée.\footnote{Montaigne, \textit{Essais}, Book II, 3.}
\end{quote}

Death is seen here as an end in the sense of terminus rather than telos. It is that which draws together all the threads of significance which make up the man's life. It is in this sense I think which we could understand the older Stoics' point of view on suicide. The ηγεμονικόν (as that which the man was) could be preserved by death but lost by remaining alive. Marivaux, also, preserves this Stoic conception in a very profound utterance when he says:–

'The life is cheaper to us than ourselves, our passions. Seeing at times what goes on in our instincts on this score, one would say that it is not necessary to live in order to be, that we live only by accident, but that it is by nature that we are.'\footnote{Quoted by Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Signs}, p. 22.}

In this essay I do not of course pretend to deal exhaustively with the Stoic conceptions of suicide and still less of course with the possibilities of comparison between their views with contemporary points of view. Regarding the latter I am able to mention only four contemporary philosophers: Heidegger, Camus, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. Three of these do not mention suicide itself although their thought gives us interesting lines for comparison with the Stoics. I shall speak first of Camus who opens the \textit{Myth of Sisyphus} with the observation that 'there is only one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.'

I think we should disagree immediately with Camus if he meant that philosophers should make this judgment in general, i.e. on behalf of others. But this would be a misinterpretation. Camus recalls the Stoic point of view that philosophy (or at all events practical philosophy) gives us our principles of personal action: that
a rational man is confronted consciously with choices to be made, whether these are existential or ethical, and that it is his philosophy which determines his choices. For Camus, man’s defining characteristic, as it was for the Stoics, is rationality, and so by his very nature man, above all else, seeks and demands clarity. For this reason, a true human life will be founded on truths of clear reason, not illusions. However, according to the *Myth of Sisyphus* and other of Camus’ writings, the world is not rational. It is not a place where man could be at home since it does not meet man’s demand for rationality and clarity. Man’s existence is therefore absurd.

Camus uses the term ‘Absurd’ for the condition which arises when there is a complete divorce between the person and his circumstances. He says that ‘the divorce between the person and his life, the actor and his decor, is properly speaking, the feeling of absurdity.’

The untenable situation depends on both the man and his circumstances and it is neither the man himself nor the world he lives in which is, as it were, at fault. It is the confrontation between man’s reason and the world’s irrationality which gives rise to it. For the man who has accepted the absurd, eternity, or the promise of a future life, is a cheat. Belief in such things would be an intellectual suicide, as would be any appeal beyond the rational resources of the man himself. Since the absurd is a complete incompatibility between a man and his setting, and since, for the man of intellectual integrity who applies his reason to the circumstances of his life, an awareness of the absurd becomes inevitable, one might expect Camus to answer his question inevitably in favour of suicide. However he does not do so. In the preface to the English translation of the book published fifteen years after his writing the original he says:—

‘...although the *Myth of Sisyphus* poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and create in the midst of the desert.’

It is inevitable that the intellectually honest man should reject the human condition because it is absurd, but he finds a way of living with it. He has:—

‘...his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to be content with what he has, the second informs him of his limits.’

The answer to the question about suicide seems to be that a consciousness of the absurd is at the same time a consciousness of

29. Ibid., p. 93.
death as a meaningless end to life. With the recognition of the absurd it is found that for life to go on it can be lived in spite of the absence of meaning. Suicide would become a sort of acceptance:— "it resolves the absurd. It draws it into the same death."30 Although, except to a man who is deluded in some way, there is no hope, the only truly human answer is to live without hope. Otherwise the man ends himself and with himself, the whole recognition of the situation, and above all the revolt against it, which makes him what he is.31

Camus says that it is impossible to form a general notion of freedom. The notion loses its meaning once it goes beyond my own individual frame of reference. Freedom could not be accorded to me by a superior being because it would be hardly freedom if it were in the gift of a superior being. He therefore says:— "The only conception of freedom I have is that of a prisoner or of a modern individual in the midst of a state." He knows freedom only as a personal experience. However the withdrawal of hope and future which comes with the recognition of the absurd "restores and magnifies my freedom of action." The withdrawal of hope and future means an increase in 'availability' (disponibilité): availability which comes about because of increased freedom of action and total commitment to a decision in the present because there is nothing but this life to consider and even more important, no illusions about the value of life itself. Although the conception of death as absurd would be foreign to the Stoics, yet the consequences of its recognition in man's increased 'availability', and above all the sense of man's rejection of illusory hopes and acceptance of his own limitations and resources, all seem to have much in common with the Stoic tradition. The ethic underlying the actions of Dr Rieux and his associates in Camus' novel The Plague also has much that is recognisably in common with Stoicism.

For Camus, speaking as one of the last of the rationalist tradition, reason is in conflict with itself and with the circumstances surrounding human life, but nevertheless it persists as the only touchstone of behaviour and criterion of humanity. The weakness of Camus' philosophy is that he does not offer any critique of reason itself nor does he seek for the sources of reason in man's relationship with the world. The divorce which is the basis of the absurd is more

30. Ibid., p. 77.
31. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
complete than the dichotomy which is traceable in Marcus Aurelius between man's circumstances and his judgments about them, and is no doubt the ancient dichotomy between man and the world of objects expressed in existentialist terms.

The other philosophers I wish to mention offer us a resolution of this essentially rationalist dilemma because of their complete rejection of the ancient dualisms.

Heidegger's treatment of death, or rather his conception of the way a conscious assumption of one's own death completes and integrates personal existence, was discussed in a recent article in Prudentia in a comparison with Marcus Aurelius.\textsuperscript{32} Interesting comparisons and contrasts could also be drawn between Heidegger and the earlier Stoics, but this would involve a long and complicated undertaking. It will have to be sufficient to remark here that Heidegger does not speak of death by suicide. The assumption of one's personal death seems to depend for Heidegger on the fact that death, as well as being an ultimate renunciation of all possibility of being, and a future certainty, is not determined in regard to time. There is therefore a character of contingency about it which suicide might be thought to remove. On the other hand we could not say that the Stoic suicides such as Cato's were premeditated in regard to the time of their occurrence. They are much nearer to Heidegger's conception of living towards death as that which gives life its meaning, than they are to Camus' conception of death as absurd and suicide as the ultimate concession to meaninglessness. Freedom, for Heidegger, as it was for the early Stoics, is achieved in authentic individual existence, only Heidegger is more aware than they were of death as the terminus which gives life its meaning. Another point of dissimilarity is that Heidegger would not speak of death as a transition to another state of being, as Socrates did, but only as utter annihilation. Socrates' assumption of his own death is still however that which gives his life its meaning, as we have seen above, and he leaves the nature of death an open question:

'Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything; or as we are told, it is really a change: a migration of the soul from this place to another.'\textsuperscript{33}

The Platonic influence particularly in late Stoic thought seems to have led to the conception of man as soul and body, with the

\textsuperscript{32} K.B. Pflaum, 'Marcus Aurelius: Ruler-Philosopher', Prudentia, November 1970.

\textsuperscript{33} Plato, The Apology, 40.
rational soul (ideally) in command and, so far as possible, independent of the body and material needs. The later Stoic conception of freedom seems to have been founded on this view.

Merleau-Ponty offers us the radically different conception that man is in the world as a body, sharing in the sensible attributes of the objects of experience. The human body is of course also sentient and so is ‘subject’ as well as ‘object.’ Its characteristic is to be sentient-sensible, an incarnate subject which sees, hears and touches while it is there to be seen, heard and touched. Because man’s corporeal nature has this dual rôle man exists in a state of engagement in the world, and not as a knowing mind in a world of knowable objects. The ability to reflect, that is the withdrawal of consciousness to observe and consider what is encountered, implies a detachment which is obviously a possibility for man, but this possibility has its source in the primary involvement and is not evidence of an ontological duality. It is not part of man’s ontological structure (as it is for Camus) to be estranged or alienated.

At first sight it might appear that a conception of freedom based on an ontology such as the above would differ fundamentally from that of the Stoics. But in fact although this is true in certain respects (especially where the dualism is as apparent as it is in Marcus Aurelius), there are more points of resemblance than of dissimilarity. The basis of Merleau-Ponty’s thought on freedom is that actions partly anticipate social and historical circumstances and at the same time the actions are themselves evoked by the opportunities and demands of the circumstances. In the more everyday situation too, while we recognize ourselves as individuals, we offer our initiatives in what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘a zone of generalized existence and of projects already formed.’ We find ourselves in a world of pre-formed and partly formed significances which confer on us our social situations and determine the springs of our actions and the fields of our influence. Man’s freedom is always to be understood as situated:

‘The generality of the “rôle” and of the situation comes to the aid of decision, and in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine precisely the “share contributed by the situation” and the “share contributed by freedom”.’

34. The early Stoics, especially Chrysippus, were more conscious of man as a psycho-somatic unity (vide p.20 above).
36. Ibid., p. 453.
The passage immediately following upon this brings us to the significance of this understanding of man’s interacting physical and social relationships for the particular context of this discussion on suicide, although Merleau-Ponty is not speaking about suicide. In the comments which follow I shall merely try to draw implications from what he says for our context. He says:—

‘Let us suppose that a man is tortured to make him talk. If he refuses to give the names and addresses which it is desired to extract from him, this does not arise from a solitary and unsupported decision: the man still feels himself to be with his comrades, and, being still involved in the common struggle, he is as it were incapable to talking. Or else, for months or years, he has, in his mind, faced this test and staked his whole life upon it. Or finally, he wants to prove, by coming through it, what he has always thought and said about freedom. These motives do not cancel our freedom, but at least ensure that it does not go unbuttressed in being. What withstands pain is not, in short, a bare consciousness, but the prisoner with his comrades or with those he loves and under whose gaze he lives; or else the awareness of his proudly willed solitude, which again is a certain mode of the Mit-Sein. And probably the individual in his prison daily re-awakens these phantoms, which give back to him the strength he gave to them. But conversely, in so far as he has committed himself to this action, formed a bond with his comrades or adopted this morality, it is because the historical situation, the comrades, the world around him seemed to him to expect that conduct from him. The analysis could be pursued endlessly in this way. We choose our world and the world chooses us.’37

The prisoner of whom Merleau-Ponty speaks maintains his freedom in terms of his own principles, his conception of himself and his friends’ conceptions of him. It has happened that prisoners in similar circumstances have committed suicide because they did not consider themselves able to withstand torture and interminable interrogations. In these cases too there is a coherence and interaction between the man and the situation of which he is part. His integrity is not an isolated state; it knows and realizes itself in a close involvement.

In the older Stoic models of death by suicide we find an expression of freedom which is rooted in a similar involvement.

37. Ibid., pp. 453-4.
When Cato speaks of the ‘good opinions and arguments which have been part of our very lives,’ it is clear that his freedom ‘does not go unbuttressed into being.’ His relationships with his associates and friends are of the greatest significance to him, as we see in all his words and actions, for instance, his check, immediately before his suicide, on the safety of his friends who were leaving by sea.\textsuperscript{38}

It would be necessary to admit, however, that suicides like these, which take place as instances of solidarity with one’s associates, consent to one’s circumstances and integrity of character, are probably less frequent than those which do not. Suicide seems to follow more frequently on a state of rupture between a person and his companions or his circumstances. Certain types of disgrace or rejection cut the person off from his own possibilities or make his own possibilities intolerable to him. Instances such as this would not in any way run counter to the theory of intersubjectivity and involvement which we have discussed, because it is clear that the whole strength of the feeling of rejection or failure that leads to the suicide must have its roots in an involvement which is indispensable to the person.

For Ricoeur also, subject and world are interdependent, mutually creative and mutually limiting. He would say that it is not possible for me (except in a secondary process of reflection) to detach myself from the world to observe its defects and judge it unsatisfying or absurd. ‘Another world would bring about another myself.’\textsuperscript{39} I cannot really speak of the world as good or bad because there is no other possibility with which I could compare it. It is good, not by comparison with any other possible world, but according to the principle that existence itself is good. ‘Ens et bonum convertuntur’. If this is accepted, the Stoic principle of ‘living according to nature’ acquires additional nuances. It becomes a consent to the world which is at the same time a consent to myself. Recognition of necessity is in itself a moment of freedom, but consent implies more than recognition because it involves choice. Consent is an ‘active adoption of necessity’,\textsuperscript{40} and therefore an active adoption of myself.

Here we might say that we have the inverse of the attitude in which suicide might be contemplated. But of course the very fact that consent is a factor in existence makes refusal equally a possibility, except once again for the strange feature that suicide is a

\textsuperscript{38} Plutarch, \textit{op. cit.} Ch. 70.
\textsuperscript{39} P. Ricoeur, \textit{Le Volontaire et l’involontaire}, Dubier Montaigne, p. 447.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 322.
last and irreversible refusal which negates itself together with all that is refused, and the refusal is itself a feature of the involvement which it rejects.

It would seem that in any philosophy, ancient or modern, in which a world view is developed, the question of suicide, as a possibility of freedom, is likely to arise. It remains a philosophical problem because on our side of it, the side of the living, it evinces important effects, as our examination has shown, either as a manner of completion of life or a way of escape from it.

In conclusion I think we could say that although in principle suicide fails as an act of freedom because it dissolves the concept of freedom, we could not conceive of freedom in the way we undoubtedly do if suicide were not a possibility, and the Stoics, conceiving philosophy as they did as a way of living, show a very clear appreciation of this relationship between freedom and suicide.