

## ELLIPSE AND ASYNDETON IN PLATO'S *PHAEDO* 62 A 1–7

‘ἀλλὰ προθυμεῖσθαι χρή’, ἔφη· ‘τάχα γὰρ ἂν καὶ ἀκούσῃς. ἴσως μὲν-  
τοι θαυμαστόν σοι φανεῖται εἰ τοῦτο μόνον τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων  
ἀπλοῦν ἔστιν, καὶ οὐδέποτε τυγχάνει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, ὥσπερ καὶ τᾶλ-  
λα, ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν· οἷς δὲ βέλτιον τεθνά-  
ναι, θαυμαστόν ἴσως σοι φαίνεται, εἰ τούτοις τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μὴ  
ὅσιον αὐτοὺς ἑαυτοὺς εὖ ποιεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἄλλον δεῖ περιμένειν εὖ-  
εργέτην’.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is one among those most discussed in Plato's writings. The vagueness and ambiguity of the syntactical structure of the lines 62 a 2–7 have caused a variety of sometimes contradictory interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Among others, the one proposed by Leonardo Tarán stands out as an original approach: he attempts to solve the textual difficulties by altering the punctuation. This has resulted in an ellipse after τᾶλλα and an asyndeton between τᾶλλα and ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς.<sup>3</sup> As far as I know, none of the commentators has fully accepted this punctuation, while it is not rejected as totally impossible. I tend to agree with the view that there is no need to alter the traditionally accepted punctuation; moreover, Tarán's interpretation on the whole seems to me misleading. At the same time, I think that Tarán's suggestions concerning the syntactical structure of the passage deserve more attention. It would therefore be worthwhile to take a closer look at his interpretation in order to evaluate its merits.

The main difficulties that tend to arise as we attempt to interpret this text can be reduced to the following questions: 1) what is the subject to the verb τυγχάνει? 2) how are the word-groups ὥσπερ καὶ τᾶλλα and ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς syntactically related to each other and to the other words in the sentence? 3) what is the real meaning of the pronouns (τοῦτο, τὰ ἄλλα ἅπαντα, τᾶλλα)? 4) how to explain the use of different tenses – future

---

<sup>1</sup> The text is taken from C. J. Rowe's edition: Plato, *Phaedo* (Cambridge 1993). Like the majority of recent interpreters Rowe regards Heindorf's conjecture α 4 βέλτιον <δὸν> as unnecessary.

<sup>2</sup> Good summaries of the different interpretations are presented by D. Gallop, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford 1975) and by R. Loriaux, *Le Phédon de Platon, Commentaire et traduction* I (Namur – Gembloux 1969). See also: Kenneth Dorter, *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation* (Toronto – Buffalo – London 1982) 12.

<sup>3</sup> Leonardo Tarán, "Plato, *Phaedo*, 62 A", *AJPh* 87 (1966) 326–336.

and present – in two otherwise identical phrases: ἴσως θαυμαστόν σοι φαίνεται and θαυμαστόν ἴσως σοι φαίνεται?

First it is useful to review the context, in which this passage occurs. In the conversation between Socrates and his friends and disciples, which takes place in prison on the last day of Socrates' life, there is a particular discussion about suicide. The passage 62 a 1–7 is a part of this discussion. It begins just after the introductory scene, and Socrates' main interlocutors are the Thebans Simmias and Cebes, although there are other disciples present as well. The discussion begins as if by chance. Some of Socrates' friends and acquaintances, the philosopher Euenos among them (none of them present), have been surprised to learn that Socrates, who has never written a line of poetry, now, in prison, is setting Aesop's fables to verse. Cebes asks Socrates what he should say to Euenos about this matter. Socrates explains his reasons: certain dreams have advised him to practise poetry. He concludes his answer with these, rather strange words (61 b 7–8):

Ταῦτα οὖν Εὐήνω φράζε, καὶ ἐρρῶσθαι καὶ, ἂν σωφρονῆ, ἐμὲ διώκειν ὡς τάχιστα ...

To the indignant reaction of Simmias Socrates replies (61 c 6–10):

Τί δέ; οὐ φιλόσοφος Εὐήνος; ... Ἐθελήσει τοίνυν καὶ Εὐήνος καὶ πᾶς ὄτω ἀξίως τούτου τοῦ πράγματος μέτεστιν. οὐ μέντοι ἴσως βιάσεται αὐτόν· οὐ γάρ φασι θεμιτὸν εἶναι

Cebes is astonished at the logical contradiction implied in Socrates' words (61 d 3–5):

Πῶς τοῦτο λέγεις, ὦ Σώκρατες, τὸ μὴ θεμιτὸν εἶναι ἑαυτὸν βιάζεσθαι, ἐθέλειν δ' ἂν τῷ ἀποθνήσκοντι τὸν φιλόσοφον ἔπεσθαι;

Instead of giving a definite answer, Socrates asks what Cebes and Simmias have heard about this matter (περὶ τῶν τοιούτων) from the Pythagorean philosopher Philolaos, for during Philolaos' stay at Thebes, Cebes and Simias might have been among his listeners. Cebes says that he has heard nothing definite. Socrates then declares that he too can speak about this only from hearsay, but that he has no objection to communicating what he has heard (φθόνος οὐδεὶς λέγειν, 61 d 10). Nevertheless, he avoids answering the question put to him directly. Instead, he avows his readiness to discuss (διασκοπεῖν) and mythologize (μυθολογεῖν) about habitation in the other world (περὶ τῆς ἀποδημίας τῆς ἐκεῖ), by stating that such talk would fit the occasion best. This, however, is quite different from what Cebes seems to be interested in at the moment, and for that reason he reiterates his question (61 e 5–9):

Κατὰ τί δὴ οὖν ποτε οὐ φασι θεμιτὸν εἶναι αὐτὸν ἑαυτὸν ἀποκτείνοναι, ὧ Σώκратες; ... ἤκουσα ... ὡς οὐ δέοι τοῦτο ποιεῖν σαφὲς δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν οὐδενὸς πάποτε οὐδὲν ἀκήκοα.

Socrates' ensuing reply is the passage under consideration: instead of an explanation, an obscure, enigmatically worded statement. It appears significant, that in such a relatively short fragment one and the same statement, about the illicitness of suicide, should appear three times. The first time it is pronounced by Socrates himself, then it resurfaces twice in Cebes' questions. No less remarkable is Socrates' avoiding a direct answer to this question.

Tarán proposes the following interpretation of this passage (pp. 334–335):

It will perhaps seem surprising to you that this (prohibition of suicide) is alone of all prohibitions simple, i. e., it never applies to man in the way others do; sometimes and for some people death is better than life; but for those for whom death is better, you are surprised if for these very men it is unholy to do good to themselves, but they must wait for another benefactor.

The originality of Tarán's interpretation consists in taking the part of the sentence after τὰλλα as a new main clause and putting a colon after τὰλλα. It certainly makes the syntactical structure of the whole passage more perspicuous and simple, so that the major difficulties seem to be solved. Rejecting as unsatisfactory the interpretation of 62 a 3–5 as a single clause, Tarán considers the word groups ὥσπερ καὶ τὰλλα and ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς as each belonging to a different sentence. The two parts of this passage, as they appear in Tarán's interpretation, thereby become clearly distinguishable. The problem with the subject of τυγχάνει disappears as well: it is now the pronoun τοῦτο, the real meaning of which is inferred from the preceding text – Tarán takes it to refer to the much repeated statement “it is unlawful to kill oneself”. Nonetheless, this interpretation seems open to objections just from the grammatical point of view: the weak points are the ellipse after τὰλλα and the asyndetical bond between these two parts. Tarán considers the possible objections unreasonable, “since this interpretation makes sense in the context” (p. 336). Though I accept some aspects of Tarán's interpretation, I suggest that there is another possible way to solve these syntactical difficulties and to understand this text as a whole.

I agree with Tarán on two points: (i) that τοῦτο refers to the preceding text, and (ii) that “we can not get a satisfactory meaning as long as we persist in taking οὐδέποτε τυγχάνει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ὥσπερ καὶ τὰλλα ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν as one sentence (p. 334). But on the

whole his interpretation seems to me misleading because of an erroneous interpretation of the pronoun τοῦτο.

I do not agree with Tarán that the real meaning of the pronoun τοῦτο is *prohibition of suicide*. According to Tarán's interpretation, Cebes will be surprised to learn that the prohibition of suicide is the only prohibition that prevents people from doing good to themselves, whereas the other prohibitions forbid bad things. "The exceptional character of suicide consists in its being wrong in any circumstance" (p. 335), even when there are people who consider that death is better than life. "So, τοῦτο in 62 a 2 is not the only thing absolutely prohibited, but it is the only exception to a general rule" (p. 335).

I suppose that the pronoun τοῦτο stands for ἑαυτὸν ἀποκτείνουσαι or ἑαυτὸν βιάζεσθαι, i. e., that τοῦτο refers to suicide itself. On the other hand, the pronouns τὰ ἄλλα ἅπαντα and τᾶλλα may then be considered to be all other intentional actions taken for one's sake. The distinctive feature of suicide is the equal worth of the action and its result. Since soul is regarded as being immortal, one who commits suicide, in effect, does not achieve the intended purpose. At the end of the dialogue, this idea is expressed in unequivocal terms (107 c 5 – d 2):

εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν ὁ θάνατος τοῦ παντὸς ἀπαλλαγῆ, ἔρμαιον ἂν ἦν τοῖς  
κακοῖς ἀποθανοῦσι τοῦ τε σώματος ἀπηλλάχθαι καὶ τῆς αὐτῶν κα-  
κίας μετὰ τῆς ψυχῆς· νῦν δ' ἐπειδὴ ἀθάνατος φαίνεται οὐσα, οὐ-  
δεμία ἂν εἴη αὐτῇ ἄλλη ἀποφυγὴ κακῶν οὐδὲ σωτηρία πλὴν τοῦ ὡς  
βελτίστην τε καὶ φρονιμωτάτην γενέσθαι.

The goodness or the harm of the achieved result does not depend upon this action. Death itself is defined as being only the separation of the soul from the body (ἀπαλλαγῆ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος, 64 c 4–5) and ἑαυτὸν ἀποκτείνουσαι, "to cease living" means just this single act of the separation.

Thus, the exceptional character of suicide consists not "in its being wrong in any circumstance", as Tarán claims: suicide is "simple" in the sense that to commit suicide means nothing but to perform an action for the sake of the action itself, because ἀποθανεῖν is not the way of obtaining what one considers to be better to oneself. And so, the first statement of this passage may be rendered in the following terms:

this (suicide as an intentional action) alone of all other (actions) is simple  
(that is, without any additional sense and effect) and it never happens to  
man as others do.

As to the pronouns τὰ ἄλλα ἅπαντα and τᾶλλα their real sense in which they express opposition to suicide is secured only in the course of

the discussions throughout the whole dialogue. So, in the final part of the dialogue Socrates, when admonishing his listeners to take care of themselves (οὐκ ἀμελεῖν ἑαυτῶν, 115 b 8) assures them that it is necessary for a man to make great efforts in order to obtain virtue and wisdom in this life (χρῆ πᾶν ποιεῖν ὥστε ἀρετῆς καὶ φρονήσεως ἐν τῷ βίῳ μετασχεῖν), because the prize is beautiful and the hope is great (καλὸν γὰρ τὸ ἄθλον καὶ ἡ ἐλπὶς μεγάλη, 114 c 7–8). But if they neglect themselves, they will accomplish nothing (οὐδὲν πλέον ποιήσετε, 115 c 1). There is a picturesque panorama of many strange places in the other world (ἀποδημία ἢ ἐκεῖ) and an impressive description of the complicated itinerary which souls must cover in accordance with their ethical quality. Death itself is only the beginning of movement, like the first impact. The route of this journey, for evil and base souls, is gloomy and sometimes excruciating. On the other hand, wise and pious souls arrive at beautiful dwelling places in heaven.

But real death is not regarded as the sole means whereby the separation of soul and body is accomplished. There is a special activity that philosophers are said to practise during their lives and that is called μελέτη θανάτου (81 a 1) “exercise or training for death”. Its attachment to the sphere of death might seem to be paradoxical since this “exercise”, on the contrary, provides for constant activity of the soul. However, describing the philosopher who practises philosophy in the right way and makes great effort to detach himself from all sense perception, Socrates speaks in the same terms: ἀπαλλαγεῖς ὅτι μάλιστα ὀφθαλμῶν τε καὶ ὠτῶν καὶ ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν παντὸς τοῦ σώματος (66 a 3–5). In both cases there is a separation, the separation of the soul from the body. The difference between them is that in the case of real death the soul does not belong to man any more, whereas in the other case, the philosopher yearns to be free from all impediments and troubles that the body causes to the soul so that he can contemplate the truth as clearly as possible. Through this allusion Socrates points not only to the similarity but also to the essential difference between these two “separations”. Ordinary people, however, such as Cebes’ compatriots, regard the true philosopher as being nearly dead.

And so, suicide itself does not provide for an effect which would justify one’s confidence that τεθνάναι could be really βέλτιον ἢ ζῆν to him. As such, suicide is incompatible with other human activities: οὐδέποτε τυγχάνει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ὡσπερ καὶ τᾶλλα. This is the idea which, according to Socrates, could seem surprising to Cebes when revealed in the course of their further discussions. In saying this, Socrates already has in mind, although only in outline form, what he is going to talk about later,

especially concerning the real meaning of the τὰ ἄλλα ἅπαντα and τᾶλλα. Hence the future tense of the verb – φανεῖται.

With the words ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς ... Socrates returns to the subject of Cebes' question, namely, to the prohibition of suicide. At the same time, Socrates has anticipated what actually interests Cebes concerning this problem: it is not so much why it is forbidden to kill oneself, but rather why it is forbidden for people to do good to themselves in this way (an allusion to the statement ἐθέλειν δ' ἂν τῷ ἀποθνήσκοντι τὸν φιλόσοφον ἔπεσθαι; 61 d 4–5). Therefore, in repeating Cebes' question at the end of this passage Socrates modifies it accordingly:

for those for whom it is better to be dead than to live, you are surprised if for these men it is unholy to do good to themselves, but they must wait for another benefactor.

The undertone of irony is deliberate: Socrates speaks in the name of Cebes, and Cebes' agreement with this modification in his native Boeotian dialect ("Ἴττω Ζεύς, ἔφη, τῇ αὐτοῦ φωνῇ εἰπών, 62 a 8–9) shows that just this problem is urgent for him at that moment; hence the present tense of the verb – φαίνεται.

Concerning the statement ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς βέλτιον τεθνάναι ἢ ζῆν ("sometimes and for some people it is better to be dead than to live"), I suggest that it may be a transitional phrase marking a shift from Socrates' personal opinion about suicide and, accordingly, from what he is planning to talk about (expressed in extremely obscure wording) to the issue at hand, i. e., to what Cebes is actually interested in. In other words, from thoughts about suicide Socrates now returns to the question about the prohibition of suicide, or, more precisely, to the question why suicide is prohibited even for those for whom death would be better. As often happens in lively conversation, in developing one idea a speaker has the next one in mind so that the previous and following statements merge into each other. The words ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς are a logical link between these two ideas and, to some extent, belong to both, since ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ οἷς can be equally applied both to human activities and to their purposes, but grammatically they belong to the next clause. The ellipse and the asyndeton are typical of conversational speech and thereby are justifiable in this passage, however only on the condition that we acknowledge that Socrates' answer takes the conversational form.

If we are to accept Tarán's interpretation, then we must suppose there is only one idea astonishing to Cebes – the prohibition of suicide, – yet the point of view is different in each part. In the first part it is maintained that the prohibition of suicide is the only exception to the general rule, whereas the second part concerns how this exception manifests itself, namely, that

men cannot do good to themselves. Tarán's argument for placement of the colon after τᾶλλα is based on the assumption that the second part of passage "contains the explanation of the previous one" (p. 336), or, in other words: "εἰ τοῦτο μόνον τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων ἀπλοῦν ἐστὶν acquires definite meaning only when we reach the second part of the passage, especially the lines 6–7. This is the reason for the future φανεῖται" (p. 334). Hence it follows that Cebes will be astonished at the exceptional character of the prohibition on suicide only until the second part has been pronounced, where the object of astonishment is supposed to become why people are not allowed to do good to themselves by committing suicide. This explanation is hardly plausible. Besides, the attempt to explain the different tense forms of the verb φαίνεσθαι within the limits of this passage is not convincing either.

As to the syntactical bond of the two last statements, I regard δέ (in οἷς δὲ βέλτιον) as a copulative rather than adversative particle. And so, the proposed interpretation of this passage runs as follows:

Perhaps it will seem surprising to you if this (suicide) alone of all other (intentional actions) is simple and never happens to man as others do, sometimes and for some people it is better to be dead than to live, and for those for whom it is better to be dead, you are then surprised if for these men it is unholy to do good to themselves, but they must wait for another benefactor.

In 62 b 1 – c 8 Socrates gives at last the direct answer to Cebes' question about the illicitness of suicide, why it is unlawful to kill oneself. Referring to the mysteries, Socrates acknowledges that, although it seems unreasonable to forbid doing good to oneself, there is perhaps a reason behind it. He accepts the explanation, that human beings are regarded as the possessions of gods (ἐν τῶν κτημάτων τοῖς θεοῖς, 62 b 8), as the most appropriate and most understandable for him (τόδε μοι δοκεῖ εὖ λέγεσθαι, 62 b 6–7). Socrates declares his agreement with the prohibition against suicide only because it is the authority of God which in such cases is to be respected (62 c 4–6). In other words, suicide requires the sanction of God. The idea of God's sanction is implied already in the meaning of the words θεμιτόν and ὄσιον, which appear in our passage. It is significant that Socrates' answer is based on the reference to traditional and generally accepted views. He himself had hardly ever been concerned with the actual reason for the prohibition of suicide, least of all on the last day of his life. Hence his persistently evasive answers to this question, coupled with the simultaneous promise to discuss questions that truly befit the occasion.

The enigmatic wording in the passage 62 a 2–7 becomes clear if we take into consideration both the nearby context and the dialogue as a

whole. Socrates' intention is evident: the best one can do for his own sake is not to run away from gods, but to make great efforts to be as close to the divine as possible. Instead of self-destruction, Socrates offers μελέτη θανάτου and constant effort to ethically improve the soul; instead of curiosity about the simple fact of death, which lacks any ethical evaluation, Socrates reveals his readiness to discuss those aspects of death that are most closely connected to the ethical virtue of the soul. In the course of the conversation, these issues are talked about *expressis verbis*.

Inara Kemere  
*University of Riga*

Среди многих толкований трудного места из платоновского диалога “Федон”, относящегося к запрету на самоубийство (62 а 1–7), предложение Леонардо Тарана выделяется оригинальным изменением принятой пунктуации. Хотя предлагаемая пунктуация, как и понимание общего смысла пассажа, неприемлемы, трактовка Тараном синтаксической структуры этого места заслуживает внимания. Автор статьи защищает эллипс и асиндетон, которые содержит пассаж, если принять интерпретацию Тарана. Для того чтобы прояснить смысл слов Сократа, привлекается не только непосредственный контекст, но и тема μελέτη θανάτου, играющая важную роль во всей беседе в целом.