We usually know how to determine whether someone was a suicide; for we usually know what evidence would show us whether he intended his own death: did he want to die; did he know he was taking a fatal dose; did he pull the trigger on purpose? But some cases puzzle us; not because we do not have all 'the facts', but because we are not sure what to make of the facts we have. Socrates is such a case:1 we do not lack historical data, but are not sure how to understand the data we have; we need, not more data, but a deeper consideration of his action and its context, and of the concepts of suicide and intention.

My purpose in asking whether Socrates committed suicide is not primarily to settle that question, but to use it to raise some more general issues about the concepts of suicide and intention, and to cast some doubt on three propositions which may initially seem tempting.

First, that we can and should define 'suicide' in advance of taking any view about its moral character; that we can first determine that A was a suicide, and then ask whether and why this suicide was, or suicide in general is, right or wrong or morally indifferent.

Second, that any doubts we may have about the scope of the concept of suicide will be doubts about whether and how far it extends to cases in which the agent does not strictly intend his own death; that it is at least and certainly true that anyone who carries out an intention to cause his own death is a suicide.

Third, that any doubts we have about whether a particular agent intended his own death will be due to our lack of some relevant factual information about his reasons for acting; that there is no theoretical difficulty in specifying what counts as intending one's own death.

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1 Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held at 5/7 Tavistock Place, London WC1, on Monday, 8 November, 1982 at 6.00 p.m.
I

Socrates drank the hemlock which killed him. He did not drink it unwittingly or involuntarily: he intended to drink from the cup, knowing it to contain a fatal poison. But this does not show that he intended his own death: for we distinguish the intended effects of a man's act, those which form part of his reason for acting, from those which he foresees but does not intend. Nor, therefore, does it show that he was a suicide: for a suicide paradigmatically intends his own death.

But we also call a man a suicide if he persists in an activity (e.g., taking heroin) which he knows will very probably cause his own death: so we already know enough to call Socrates a suicide.

We do talk of 'suicide' in some cases in which death is not directly intended, which we think are sufficiently similar to those in which it is directly intended; we talk as if the agent intends his own death. But we cannot yet call Socrates a suicide: for such talk depends, not just on the agent's foresight of his own death, but on our judgment of the worth of his action, and thus of his responsibility for his death.

We call the heroin-taker a suicide because we do not think the drug is worth dying for; we blame him for his own death. We may say 'You might just as well shoot yourself', meaning that shooting is a quicker way of killing himself and that, since we can see nothing which could make it worth taking heroin at the cost of his life, his persistence in taking it could be rational only if he intended to kill himself: so we talk as if he has that intention. But we should not call a man a suicide who persists in an activity which we can see to have real significance (perhaps it gives his life an important part of its meaning), knowing it will kill him: for the worth of the activity makes it intelligible that he should persist in it even at the cost of life. We cannot yet say that the values which informed Socrates' action were trivial or insignificant: so we cannot yet call him a suicide.

A judgment that someone is in this extended sense a suicide rests on an understanding of the reasons and values which inform his intended action: so we must seek a clearer understanding of what it was that Socrates intended to do; of the
reasons which informed his action of drinking from the cup. We may thus usefully focus on the question of whether in doing so he intended to cause his own death.

II

It was integral to the Athenian practice of capital punishment that the condemned man should drink the hemlock himself. Socrates thought it his duty as a citizen to obey the court’s verdict, though that verdict was unjust: in drinking the hemlock he intended to play his part in a judicial execution. Does this mean that he intended his own death? He also ‘wanted’ to die, in that he longed to enter the blessed state of the virtuous dead: a philosopher should welcome death, and regard his life as a preparation for it. But he believed that, as a chattel of the gods, he could not act on that desire: he should not kill himself unless ‘God sends some compulsion like the one which we are facing now’. His attitude to death provided reasons for many of his actions, and informed his response to his own impending death: but it did not give him reason to intend his own death. An agent may know that his action will bring about an effect which he wants or welcomes without thereby intending that effect; and we have grounds for saying that Socrates’ attitude to death was not such as would lead him to intend his own death. Had he been reprieved at the last minute, he would not have failed to achieve what he intended; for what he intended was to obey the orders of the court.

But all this is beside the point. He intended to play his part in his execution; this required him to drink the hemlock which would kill him: so surely he intended his own death in drinking it.

I will leave Socrates for the moment, to look at some other cases in which someone kills himself when and because he is sentenced to death, and in which the question of suicide is more straightforward.

A prisoner is offered and accepts the option of taking poison before the day of his execution; or a Roman senator accepts the option of killing himself rather than being killed by the soldiers whom the Emperor sends to ‘execute’ him. These agents intend their own deaths: they commit suicide in order to avoid the pain
or indignity of being killed by others. They would of course die shortly anyway: they choose, not simply death, but death now by their own hand rather than death shortly at the hands of others. But they choose and intend their own deaths as much as someone who kills himself because he has a terminal illness.

But this is not Socrates’ case. Others would have killed him had he not drunk the hemlock: so one could describe the options facing him as ‘Kill yourself or be killed’ (someone in his position, but unimpressed by the law’s authority, might see the options thus). But this would be a distortion: it conceals the fact that the court ordered Socrates to take the hemlock, as the proper mode of execution, whereas these other men are given the chance to avoid execution, by committing suicide.

Suppose the Emperor orders the senator to kill himself, backing this order by the threat that he will be killed if he disobeys. But how is that order to be seen: as the legitimate command of a lawful sovereign who has sentenced him to death; or merely as the personal will of one who has the power to coerce others in this way? If the senator takes the latter view, and kills himself, he is a suicide, though a coerced one: he slits his wrists, not in obedience to lawful authority, but to avoid a painful or undignified death at the hands of others; his death enters his intention as a necessary means to his end. If he takes the former view, and sees his death as a lawful execution, his is a Socratic case: it may seem obvious that he still intends his own death, in obedience to an order to kill himself; but we must ask more carefully whether and when participation in one’s own execution involves an intention to bring about one’s own death.

III

A prisoner walks calmly to the scaffold: he regards resistance as futile, or thinks it more dignified to face death thus; or perhaps his behaviour expresses his approval of his own execution, or his desire to die. But it cannot manifest an intention to bring about his own death: for the context—the fact that he cannot avert the execution which has been decreed and will be brought about by others—leaves no room for such an intention. Similarly, he might express his belief that his execution is unjust in a symbolic resistance which he knows will be practically futile: but he does not resist with the intention of avoiding execution if he knows
that he cannot avoid it. If I know that the occurrence or non-
ocurrence of an event will be independent of anything I do,
my actions may express my attitude towards that event, but
cannot manifest an intention to bring it about or to avert it.

A senator may not resist being killed by the soldiers; he may
offer his neck to their swords. If he knows that resistance would
be futile, this cannot manifest an intention to die. If he thinks he
could avoid death by flight or resistance, a failure to resist or flee
could manifest an intention to die; this may be a convenient way
of securing his own death. But it need not manifest such an
intention: he may have reasons against resistance or flight other
than that they would save his life, and believe that the decision
about his life or death rests with those who would kill him; he
knows that they will kill him, but his decision not to resist is not a
decision to die. There is a logical gap between his intention and
his death: if the soldiers spare him, he will not have failed to
achieve what he intended.

A prisoner could play a larger part in his execution: he could
be required to choose the time and manner of his death. Even if
the law deems a refusal to choose to be the tacit choice of a
specified option, he may refuse to choose, and leave the choice to
those who would kill him. But if he makes the choice, does he
then choose, and intend, his own death, like the man who kills
himself before execution?

But he is killed by others. He says ‘If you are going to kill me, do
it in this way’; but one who kills himself before execution says ‘If
you are going to kill me, I will kill myself instead’. His death is in
the hands of others: after he has chosen, they must kill him and
could reprieve him. He cannot hope that he will not die: but
there is a logical gap between his choice and his death which
there is not for one who kills himself to avoid execution. If he is re-
prived after making his choice he has not failed in his inten-
tion: but if the other survives the poison he has failed; his failure
may be lucky, if a reprieve then arrives, but it is still a failure.

Such cooperation with one’s execution does not amount to
intending one’s own death, whether it reflects a view of the law
as an external force which it would be futile or undignified to
resist, or as a source of legitimate demands which one should
obey. Can we then say that Socrates simply cooperates with an
execution which others have decreed, and which he cannot
avert; that he is not a suicide who intends his own death? But Socrates does what he knows will lead, without further human intervention, to his own death: since he does this in obedience to an order which he knows is aimed at bringing about his death, must he not in obeying that order intend to bring about his own death?

To do what I know will lead, without further human intervention, to my own death need not be suicide. Captain Oates walked into the snow, knowing he would die, so that his friends would go on without him. If he intended that they should go on because they knew he was dead, he intended his death as a means to that end: but if he intended simply to remove himself from the party, so that they would respect his decision to leave and go on without him, he did not intend his death; for his death did not enter into the practical reasoning which informed his action. So can we make a similar move in Socrates’ case: can we show that the reasons which informed his action did not involve his death either as an end or as a means?

IV

Professor Holland thinks that we can:

Taking hemlock does not, in the context of an Athenian judicial execution, amount to slaughtering oneself: in this circumstance it is no more an act of suicide than the condemned man’s walk to the scaffold’. ³

He contrasts Socrates with a spy who swallows poison when captured, to avoid betraying his friends: for to become a spy is to enter into an institution the ethics of which require that in a certain eventuality you poison yourself; and the poisoning is not transformed into something other than suicide by the institutional role as it was in Socrates’ own case.⁴

The spy entered the ‘suicidal game’ of spying ‘with his eyes open’; he was not forced into it. But Socrates’ death was decreed for him by the court, to which he owed obedience: he was required to take the hemlock; and ‘to the extent to which a man acts from compulsion, so the scope for the idea of intending a result diminishes’.⁵

There are three related suggestions here: that Socrates acted
from a 'necessity' which limited the scope of his intention; that
the spy had a choice which Socrates did not have—to refuse to
enter an institution which might require him to kill himself; and
that the spy's act was personal, expressing his own choice about
whether and when to kill himself, in a way in which Socrates' was not.

The fact that I act from 'necessity'—from a perception of my
duty—sets limits to, and changes the character of, my intentions.
Such an act is personal; it expresses my own beliefs: but it also
partakes of the impersonal; 'not my will but Thine'; I do not act
for myself, but follow the call of duty. That duty sets limits to my
intentions: they should not reach beyond the action identified as
a duty. But intention is not absent: if my duty is to pay a debt, I
must intend to pay it. A spy may think that he must kill himself:
but he must then intend his own death, as a means to his silence.
To show that Socrates was not a suicide we must show, not just
that he acted from necessity, but that what was required of him
was not 'Kill yourself'; or perhaps, that killing himself was not in
that context suicide.

The spy became a spy voluntarily: Socrates had no choice
about being born and bred in Athens. Nor did he, as an adult,
have the option of 'resigning', by leaving Athens: he thought it
his duty to stay in the state which nourished him, and obey its
laws. But he could still be a suicide in obeying its laws: for a state
could order a citizen to commit suicide (e.g., to become a spy
and kill himself if captured). Someone who believes that he must
obey the state and that suicide is a sin may then face a moral
conflict: but he cannot resolve it simply by claiming that he is
not ordered to commit suicide.

Could we say, however, that the institutional character of
Socrates' action, as part of a judicial execution, makes a crucial
difference to the character of his intention: that in that context
he does not intend his own death; or perhaps that, though he
does intend it, the character of that intention is so altered by its
institutional context that we cannot properly call him a suicide?
Analogously, an executioner might admit that he intends the
death of the man he hangs, but claim that the institutional
context of his action prevents this making him a murderer; or he
might deny that, in pulling the lever, he intends to kill. I will
discuss the latter possibility first.
V

The court decreed that, when and how Socrates should die. To know whether, in obeying that decree, Socrates intended his own death, we must know what order he took himself to be obeying: for an order, whether direct or implicit in an institutional role, specifies an action to be done; to obey the order I must intend to do the action specified. The order does not remove my action from the category of the intended, but may set limits to my intention: it may require or permit me to attend to, and intend, only the particular action specified, and to ignore its further effects. How far it does this will depend on just what the order must or can be taken to be.

Socrates knew that his action satisfied a number of descriptions: 'drinking from the cup'; 'drinking hemlock'; 'drinking a fatal poison'. We need to know under which descriptions he intended his action: for only if it was intended under the last of these descriptions did he intend his own death. Since he intended to obey what he saw as a lawful order, we thus need to know what order he felt himself bound to obey: was it simply 'Drink from this cup'; or 'Drink this fatal poison', i.e., 'Execute yourself'? An executioner who is ordered to carry out an execution is ordered not just to pull a lever, but to ensure the prisoner's death in the prescribed way. His role alters the character of his intended action: it is an impersonal execution, not a personal act of vengeance. And he may deny that further aspects of his action are any concern of his: it is not for him to worry about the prisoner's guilt or about the further effects of the execution; his job is simply to carry out the sentence of the court (though there are of course limits, of sense and morality, to how far an agent can thus remove his attention and intention from aspects of his action). But he still intends the prisoner's death.

Imagine now a system in which officials set up the mechanism for the execution and a citizen is then chosen by lot to press the switch which activates that mechanism: could that citizen deny that he intends the prisoner's death? 'My sole job is to press the switch: I am not concerned, as an executioner is, with the effect of this. If something goes wrong and the prisoner is not killed, I have not failed in my allotted and intended task; even if I know in advance that the mechanism will fail it is not for me to report
this. I just press the switch: I know that I am ordered to do this so that the prisoner will die; but that is no concern of mine.’

He might portray his action thus, specifying the order he obeys with no reference to death as what he is ordered to bring about: this distinguishes him from the executioner. But this does not yet show either that he should not be held responsible for the prisoner’s death (as a significant effect of his action which should concern him), or that he does not intend that death. For we need to know whether he can intelligibly interpret his order simply as ‘Press the switch’; and to know this we need to know what could justify both his obedience to that order and this interpretation of it. If, for instance, he thinks that he must obey the order because he must, as a citizen, play his part in the execution, he must interpret the order in the light of that reason for obedience—as an order not just to press a switch but to assist in the execution; and since what he does activates the mechanism which kills the prisoner, it would then be hard to deny that he intends the prisoner’s death.

In Socrates’ case too one could specify an order which he obeyed which made no reference to his death: ‘Drink from this cup’. But since what justified and required his obedience to this order was his duty as a citizen, we must ask whether any intelligible account of that duty could justify the claim that the order should be interpreted thus: that he should not or need not direct his attention or intention towards the reasons why he was ordered to do this, or the contents of the cup, or the effects of drinking them; that even had he known that its contents were, through some mistake, harmless he would have fulfilled his duty by drinking them without warning anyone of this fact.

Could this interpretation be justified by the claim that a citizen has an absolute duty to obey (blindly) any official state order? But he must be able to identify a legitimate order: for an official could issue unauthorised orders, which the citizen would then have no duty to obey. So what makes the order ‘Drink this’ legitimate? If it is the fact that it is issued in accordance with the death sentence ordered by the court, a reference to that sentence must enter into Socrates’ reasons for obeying the order, and thus into his intention. And Socrates anyway recognised no such absolute duty to obey the state: had he been ordered to act unjustly, or to stop philosophising, he would have felt compelled
to disobey; for to obey would be disobey the gods to whom he owed his ultimate allegiance.

He could of course obey an order (e.g., to engage in some hazardous military duty) which he knows will probably lead to his death, without thereby intending his own death: and he might in such a case deny that this further effect is any concern of his—that it provides a reason either for or against obeying that order. But in this case we suppose there to be a justification for the order other than that it will bring about his death, which thus allows him to interpret the order as something other than an order to bring about his own death. This is true even if he knows that the person who issued the order did so with the hope or intention that he would be killed (as when a jealous king sends his rival into the front line of battle): for he still has reasons for obeying the order which do not refer to his own death; and the order may still be legitimate even if he who issues it is abusing his position in doing so.

Socrates saw the citizen, not simply as the servant of the state, bound blindly to obey any order issued to him, but as a participant in the state’s lawful activities. He took the hemlock, not just because he was ordered to drink it, but because this was the mode of execution ordained by the state for those duly condemned by its courts; because he was required to play this part in his execution. The same point can be made from the state’s side: the rationale for such a system of execution was presumably that the condemned man was to express his acceptance of the court’s authority by participating in his execution; so the order issued to him was not just ‘Drink this’, but ‘Play this part in your execution’.

The sense of Socrates’ intended action thus involves an essential reference to the fact that it was part of a judicial execution: he drank the hemlock because this was the proper way of carrying out the sentence of the court; had he not been duly sentenced he would not have felt bound to drink it. So what he intended was not simply to drink from the cup, but to assist in his own execution; to drink the hemlock because it would kill him. And whereas one who walks to the scaffold where others will hang him can deny that he intends his own death, I do not see how Socrates could deny this: for the part he is required, and intends, to play in his execution is to execute himself.
VI

So Socrates intended his own death (legitimately, if he acted in obedience to a ‘compulsion’ sent by God). But could we still deny that he was a suicide, by denying that all intended self-killings are suicides? The executioner’s killing of the condemned man is transformed from murder (perhaps even from homicide) into a judicial execution by its institutional context: so may not the institutional context transform Socrates’ act from suicide into a judicial execution?

The point here does not just concern the action’s *rightness*: to show that a killing is justified is to show that it is not a murder: but we can allow that a self-killing is justified without denying that it is a suicide (and one could condemn capital punishment without calling an executioner a murderer). It rather concerns the effect which an agent’s institutional role may have on our description and understanding of his actions and intentions: the suggestion would be that, while Socrates admittedly intends his own death, the institutional context of that intention makes it so different from other intentions to cause one’s own death that we should not count his action as suicide.

An intention to cause one’s own death can figure in a wide variety of contexts, with a wide variety of meanings. To decide whether all, or which, intended self-killings should count as suicides we must give an account of the character of suicide as a moral category: for to count an action as suicide is to locate it within a particular moral category; and our understanding of that category will determine not only how far *beyond* the category of intended self-killings we extend the concept of suicide, but which kinds of action *within* that category we count as suicides. This is not to say that we will count as suicides only those self-killings which we think are wrong: one who sees suicide as an *absolute* sin must count any suicide as wrong (though it is wrong *because* it is a suicide, not a suicide because it is wrong); but others may recognise justified suicides. It is rather to say that to see an action as a suicide is to see it as having a particular moral character, as raising a particular kind of moral question; our understanding of that character and that question will determine what we count as suicide.

A Utilitarian, for instance, must see the moral significance of
suicide as lying in the fact that it causes death (death being an
effect which is normally evil): he should then take the relevant
moral category to include any action which the agent intends or
expects to cause his own death; the fact that such a definition
may diverge from that implicit in ordinary language shows only
that we are not Utilitarians. But can we give an account of the
moral significance of suicide which would allow us to deny that
all intended self-kilings are suicides?

We may say that suicide is essentially an act of self-assertion: it
is wrong if and because it involves taking on myself a decision
about my life or death which does not properly belong to me,
thus arrogantly or ungratefully asserting my will against the
state, or God, to whom I owe my life, and to whom that decision
properly belongs. If the wrongness of suicide consists in such an
offence against the state, we may still recognise some suicides as
justified: an agent (like the spy) may decide for himself that
the state will benefit from his death; and we may approve his
decision and call him a justified suicide. But we may also withhold
the term 'suicide' from some intended self-kilings, like self-
executions of the Socratic kind: not just because we see them as
justified (they may not be, if the execution is unjust), but because
the state is now acting through the man who kills himself; his
action is no longer any kind of self-assertion.

If we thus allow that some suicides are justified, we do not
need to take a determinate view on whether such actions are not
('really') suicides or are justified suicides. To take the former
view is to emphasise the difference in character between these
actions, as acts of obedience to the state, and other self-kilings
which involve the kind of self-assertion which is morally
doubtful: but while we must count as suicide any intended self-
killing which has the personal character of an assertion of the
agent's own will, our concept of suicide need not be so
determinate as to give a clear answer to the question of whether
and which other kinds of intended self-killing should count as
suicides.

But one who believes that suicide is an absolute sin must
determine more precisely which actions are or are not suicides;
and that determination will depend on the precise account he
gives of the kind of absolute sin which suicide is. If it is (as I think
on this view it must be) a sin of self-assertion, arrogance or
ingratitude against the God who gave me life, we must ask what kinds of action manifest such self-assertion: in particular whether it is manifest in every intention to cause one's own death; or whether some such intentions, like that involved in a formal self-execution, need not manifest it. To answer this question we need an account of the proper rights and functions of the state; of the propriety of capital punishment (if capital punishment is itself wrong, as taking on ourselves decisions about life and death, guilt and punishment, which properly belong to God, then one who takes part in an execution is guilty of that sin; and if his participation involves executing himself, he must surely be counted a suicide); and of the legitimate modes of participation in executions.

I do not have such an account to offer here; nor, therefore, a determinate answer to the question of whether Socrates committed suicide. I hope I have shown, however, that he did intend his own death; that the character of this intention was nonetheless very different from that of one who takes it on himself to decide he will die; and that the question of whether that intention makes him a suicide depends on the moral account we give of the nature of suicide. I hope too to have shown some of the complexities of the concepts of suicide and of intention; in particular some of the problems connected with the notion of intention in the context of obedience to orders.

NOTES

1 See, recently, R. G. Frey, 'Did Socrates Commit Suicide?', Philosophy 1978, 106; and replies by M. Smith and H. Lesser in Philosophy 1980, 253 and 255.
2 Plato, Phaedo 62c.
3 R. F. Holland, 'Suicide', in Holland, Against Empiricism (Blackwell, 1980), p. 146: the size of my debt to this paper should be clear to anyone who knows it.
5 Holland, 'Good and Evil in Action', in Against Empiricism, p. 122; though this comment occurs in a different context, I think it may indicate something of what Holland means in his discussion of Socrates.