

From “mors pro summo munere desideretur” to “occidere se ipsum”:

An overall approach to Augustine on suicide

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Abstract: This article aims to offer an overview of the problem of suicide in Augustine of Hippo, from the anti-Manichean texts of the late 380s CE to *De ciuitate dei* and the rejoinder to Gaudentium (*Contra Gaudentium*). A transversal analysis of the evolution of the concept of voluntary death throughout the work of Augustine allows us to identify up to four different conceptions of suicide, each of them corresponding to a rather well-defined chronological period: a philosophical conception, that we find in *De libero arbitrio*; a moral one, that we can excerpt from *De mendacio*; a polemical approach in the context of controversy against Donatism, which we can retrace in a set of writings from 400 to 412 CE, and especially in *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*; and, finally, the conception of suicide as homicide, that appears in *De ciuitate dei* and that will define the decisive and most widespread doctrine of Augustine in this matter. In this way, this paper aims to enrich, from a transversal and chronological perspective, the studies that have been carried out over the last decades on suicide in Augustine.

1. Introduction*

Almost 100 years have passed since Bernard Roland-Gosselin attempted a first approach to the problem of voluntary death in Augustine of Hippo.¹ And almost 50 years since Jacques Bels wrote his classic contribution to the issue.² Over these nearly five decades, scholarship around the Augustinian doctrine of suicide has proliferated along with a growing interest in the question of suicide more generally among

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¹ Bernard Roland-Gosselin, *La morale de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1925), 150-155.

² Jacques Bels, “La mort volontaire dans l’œuvre de saint Augustin,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 187, 2 (1975): 147-180.

historians, sociologists, and philosophers.³ Today several texts help us to understand better the authentic Copernican turn of Augustine's position on suicide in relation to classical tradition, both Greek and Roman, that in turn had an enormous cultural significance. Together with the argument provided 800 years later by Thomas Aquinas, it will become one of the pillars of the Western Culture position on this issue, and therefore the majority social position until at least the 19th century.

Despite the relative abundance of studies on Augustine and suicide, most have framed the issue in terms of the diatribe between Augustine and the Donatist Gaudentius as found in a very late text, *Contra Gaudentium* (c. *Gaud.*), overlooking all the texts he wrote during the first decade of the 5th century that raised the same question

³ The bibliography in most of these fields begins much earlier than the one on Augustine, and it is impossible here to offer an exhaustive bibliographic relationship in each of these directions. We only record a selection of some of the titles that we consider particularly relevant in each of the areas mentioned and which, especially in the case of historical studies, help to frame Augustinian casuistry in a more general context. For the study of suicide among the ancients, it is worth mentioning, at least concerning Greece, the work of Elise P. Garrison, "Attitudes toward Suicide in Ancient Greece," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974- 2014), 121 (1991): 1-34, and concerning Rome that of Yolande Gris , *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* (Montr al-Paris: Bellarmin-Les Belles Lettres, 1982). The latter also contains (299-308) a very complete bibliography of that specific period. Due to the pre-eminent position occupied by the question of suicide among the Stoics, to which Augustin responds explicitly (see, especially, *ciu.* 1.23-24 in response to Cato the Younger's suicide), this has been the subject of monographic works that we can trace back to the middle of the 19th century, with the voluminous foundational work by Maria Mattaeus von Baumhauer, *Περι της εϋλογου  ξαγωγης. Veterum philosophorum praecipue Stoicorum doctrina de morte voluntaria* (Trajecti ad Rhenum [Utrecht]: N. van der Monde, 1842), as well as the somewhat more recent monograph by Ernst Benz, *Das Todesproblem in der stoischen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1929). In a Christian context, the relationship between the Pauline doctrine and the Greek tradition is studied by Arthur J. Droge, "Mori lucrum : Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide," *Novum Testamentum* 30:3 (1988): 263-286. To approach the question of suicide during the Middle Ages, it is still useful to read Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Le suicide au Moyen  ge," *Annales. Economies, societ es, civilizations*, 31:1 (1976): 3-28, and specially the two volumes of Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). If we are interested in the 16th to 19th centuries, we can mention R is n Healy's "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," *The Historical Journal*, 49:3 (2006): 903-919, and, still, that of M. T. Brancaccio, E.J. Engstrom, and D. Lederer, "The Politics of Suicide: Historical Perspectives on Suicidology before Durkheim. An Introduction," *Journal of Social History*, 46:3 (2013). For a study of the 18th – 20th centuries, Ursula Baumann's book, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Die Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (K ln: B hlau, 2001). For a purely philosophical approach to the problem, we can mention the two classic volumes of Charles Moore, *A Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide* (London: Rivington, 1790), and several of Michael Cholbi's recent works, specially *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2011) and *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016). Likewise, Cholbi's article "What is Wrong with 'What is Wrong with Rational Suicide'," *Philosophy* 40:2 (2011): 285-293, in response to the work of Avital Pilpel and Lawrence Amsel, "What is Wrong with Rational Suicide," *Philosophia* 39 (2011): 111-123.

from another point of view.⁴ Moreover, these studies have also given justified, but ultimately exclusive, prevalence for the arguments developed a few years earlier in *De ciuitate dei (ciu.)* 1.17-27.⁵ Very few studies have analyzed the Augustinian doctrine on suicide from other texts⁶ and only one has addressed the problem not only from *ciu.* and *c. Gaud.* but also from an analysis of other works relevant to the question, such as the *Epistulae (epp.)* 85, 173, and 204, the treatise *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus (Io. eu. tr.)*, the *De patientia (pat.)*, or the *De libero arbitrio (lib. arb.)*.⁷ Absent, however, is a work that highlights the transversal character that the question of suicide acquires in Augustine, with a focus on the evolution and nuances of his position over more than thirty years (388-420 CE) in writings of a very diverse nature. Thus, an overview of voluntary death in Augustine should not neglect, beyond the works already mentioned above, at least *De mendacio (mend.)*, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani (c. ep. Parm.)*, *Contra litteras Petiliani (c. litt. Pet.)*, *Ad Cresconium grammaticum partis Donati (Cresc.)*, *epp.* 89 and 185, and *Sermones (ss.)* 53A, 285, 313E, 328, 331 and 335G. With

⁴ This approach is followed by Jean-Michel Girard, *La mort chez Saint Augustin. Grandes lignes de l'évolution de sa pensée, telle qu'elle apparaît dans ses traités* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1992), 110-114; also by Carles Buenacasa, "Why Suicides instead of Martyrs? Augustine and the Persecution of Donatists," *SP* 97 (2017): 315-325; and by Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. chap. 16, "Divine winds", 721-770.

⁵ Some works that should be mentioned in this line: Pieter Willem van der Horst, "A Pagan Platonist and a Christian Platonist on Suicide," *VigChr* 25 (1971): 282-288, which compares the position defended by Augustine in *ciu.* with that of Macrobius in the *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*; that of Makiko Sato, "The Prohibition of Suicide for Affirmation of Human Beings by Augustine," *Scrinium* 11 (2015): 135-142; that of Karsten Lehmkuhler, "Le suicide dans l'histoire de la théologie: d'Augustin à Bonhoeffer," *Études sur la Mort* 150 (2016): 63-78; or Melanie Webb, "Abraham, Samson, and 'Certain Holy Women': Suicide and Exemplarity in Augustine's *De civitate dei* 1.26," in David Vincent Meconi (ed.), *Sacred Scripture and Secular Struggles* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 63-78.

⁶ Kolawole Chabi, "Augustine on Temptation to suicide: A Reading of his *Letter 244* to Chrisimus," *Mayeutica* 46:101 (2020): 19-32; or Theo Boer, "Remembering St. Augustine on suicide," in Markus Matthias, Riemer Roukema, and Gert van Klinken (ed.), *Erinnern und vergessen – Remembering and forgetting. Essays über zwei theologische Grundvollzüge (Festschrift voor Hans-Martin Kirn)* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 41-44, which, despite focusing on *ciu.*, unusually deploys its reflection from 19.4.

⁷ Patrick Baudet, "L'opinion de Saint Augustin sur le suicide," in Patric Ranson (ed.), *Saint Augustin* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1988), 125-152. Baudet's text represents, by far, the most serious and transversal approach to the question of suicide, and he devotes practically half of his article (136-142) to the fundamental question of Augustinian positioning vis-à-vis the Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrine of the soul-body relationship.

this article, we offer, in a synthetic way, this overall vision and show how, far from constituting a homogeneous and compact doctrine, Augustine's vision of suicide changes parallel to both his intellectual evolution and the historical circumstances to which he is forced to respond as bishop of Hippo.

It is possible to identify up to at least four different positions about suicide in Augustine. We call the first *philosophical*; it belongs to the first stage and has *lib. arb.* as its reference text. The second position is *moral* and is a reflection on action and responsibility, which we locate in *mend.* The third is a position that we call *polemical*, given that it appears in the writings against Donatism prior to *ciu.*, that is, between 400 and 412 CE: *c. ep. Parm.*, *c. litt. Pet.*, *ep.* 89 and 173, *Cresc.*, and *s.* 313E. As we will see, the main objective of the texts supporting this position and written during this first decade of the 5th century is to discriminate between martyrdom and suicide (the repeated doctrine of *non faciat martyrem poena sed causa* will arise)⁸ – that is, to base the prohibition of suicide on the Bible (without resorting, yet, to *non occides*) and to establish the link between death by suicide and the impossibility of salvation, which is a purely Augustinian doctrine without any biblical basis to support it. Finally, we will see how *ciu.* represents a turning point, even terminological, and initiates a position that we call *homicide*. That is to say, Augustine develops the theory, already announced before by Clement of Alexandria⁹ and Lactantius,¹⁰ of suicide as murder. This same position will be maintained in both *c. Gaud.* and in the later *ep.* 204.

⁸ See below, n.45; for a rhetorical analysis of this formula by Augustine see Adam Ployd, “*Non poena sed causa*: Augustine's Anti-Donatist Rhetoric of Martyrdom,” *AugStud* 49, no. 1 (2018): 25-44.

⁹ Cf. *Stromata* 4.10.77.1: “εἰ δὲ ὁ ἀναιρῶν ἄνθρωπον θεοῦ εἰς θεὸν ἁμαρτάνει, καὶ τοῦ ἀποκτειννόντος αὐτὸν ἔνοχος καθίσταται ὁ ἑαυτὸν προσάγων τῷ δικαστηρίῳ· οὗτος δ' ἂν εἴη ὁ μὴ περιστελλόμενος τὸν διωγμὸν, ἀλώσιμον διὰ θράσος παρέχων ἑαυτὸν”. *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte, Clemens Alexandrinus, Zweiter Band.* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1939), 282.

¹⁰ Cf. Lactantius *Divinae Institutiones* 3.18 (PL 6: 407-408): “nam si homicida nefarius est, quia hominis extincor est, eidem sceleri obstrictus est, qui se necat, quia hominem necat.... homicidae igitur illi omnes philosophi et ipse romanae sapientiae princeps Cato qui antequam se occideret, perlegisse Platonis librum

2. Suicide from a philosophical point of view

It would certainly be an exaggeration to say that, at some point in his early works, Augustine defended the legitimacy of suicide. However, in his early writings, it is not entirely unusual to find passages in which his dualistic thinking leads him to consider death as a release from the body, and partially desirable. Thus, in the final line of *De animae quantitate* (*an. quant.*), written in 388 CE while still in Rome, he describes the Neoplatonic-inspired ascent of the soul in seven steps. Augustine concludes that access *ad summam illam causam, uel summum auctorem, uel summum principium rerum omnium*¹¹ involves the desire for death.¹² Indeed, the text neither prescribes nor recommends – but neither does it forbid – sages to abandon the body once they reach the seventh and last step of elevation of the soul. Nevertheless, this *ab hoc corpore omnimoda fuga et elapsio* seems to be, *a priori*, perfectly compatible with voluntary death. Similarly, prior to his return to Africa in contemporary writing such as *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manicheorum* (*mor.*), Augustine describes the body as a *grauissimum uinculum*¹³ that disturbs the soul with fear of fatigue, pain and death. Christians, however, will learn that they must not fear death but desire it because after death the soul will completely dominate the body.¹⁴ In this way, Augustine is still echoing what was a commonplace of Neoplatonism, of which we also find traces in Paul:¹⁵ the *fuga corporis*. A few years later, it would be challenging to imagine Augustine expressing himself in terms that could easily be understood as a

dicitur, qui est scriptus de aeternitate animarum, et ad summum nefas philosophi auctoritate compulsus est”.

¹¹ *An. quant.* 33.76 (PL 32: 1077).

¹² *An. quant.* 33.76 (PL 32: 1078): “et quo minus impediatur anima toti tota inhaerere ueritati, mors quae antea metuebatur, id est ab hoc corpore omnimoda fuga et elapsio, pro summo munere desideretur.”

¹³ *Mor.* 22.40 (PL 32, 1328).

¹⁴ *Mor.* 22.40 (PL 32: 1328-1329): “sed cum se hoc amore tota in Deum conuerterit, his cognitis mortem non modo contemnet, uerum etiam desiderabit.”

¹⁵ Cf. Phil. 1:23-24 and Rom. 7:24.

legitimization of suicide. In *retr.* he would correct¹⁶ the phrase (written just a year before the two examples given above) *penitus esse ista sensibilia fugienda* (*sol.* 1.14.4), with obvious Porphyrian resonances.¹⁷ In order to ascertain how Augustine’s position on the body-soul relationship evolves from this Neoplatonic concept of a spiritual soul to a Christian concept of a spiritual body (*corpus spiritualium*), it will be enough to evoke the last two sections of the later *s.* 242 (around 400-412 CE). Here, the corporeal nature of resurrected bodies is emphasized by an ingenious comparison between the weight (*pondus*) and lightness (*leuitas*) of earthly bodies: if the healthiest and heaviest bodies are those that move most easily, why should we think that our bodily nature in the afterlife should represent any kind of burden?¹⁸ The context of these first writings, however, is still far from his complaint about Donatists, that we will address in the fourth section of this article. Augustine’s main concern is two-fold: to make the Platonic conceptual background compatible with Christianity without, therefore, subjugating the latter to the former; and to refute not the Donatist position but the Manichean one. It is therefore not strange that the new Christian dualism, in which Augustine opposes both Platonism and Manichaeism, sometimes exaggerates the undervaluation of the body and emphasizes hope in the future life, to the point of turning this hope into *desiderium mortis*.

¹⁶ *Retr.* 4.3 (CCSL 57: 15): “Penitus esse ista sensibilia fugienda, cauendum fuit, ne putaremur illam Porphyrii falsi philosophi tenere sententiam, qua dixit omne corpus esse fugiendum.”

¹⁷ Cf. *Πρὸς Μαρκέλλαν* 34 in *Opuscula graecorum veterum sententiosa et moralia* (Lipsiae, 1829), 512: “μεγάλη οὖν παιδεία ἄρχειν τοῦ σώματα. πολλάκις κόπτουσι τινα πράτης ἐπὶ σωτηρία· τῆς δὲ ψυχῆς ἕνεκα ἔτοιμος ἔσο τὸ ὅλον σῶμα ἀποκόπτειν. ὧν γὰρ ἕνεκα ζῆν ἐθέλεις, τούτων χάριν καὶ ἀποθανεῖν μὴ κατόκνει. ἡγείσθω τοίνυν πάσης ὀρμῆς ὁ λόγος ἐξορίζων τοὺς δεινοὺς δεσπότας καὶ ἀθέους ἀφ’ ἡμῶν.” Although the fragment of *sol.* does not speak of the body or of death but, generically, of fleeing from *sensibilia*, Porphyry’s text from which Augustine will want to disassociate himself in *retr.* clearly does, as we can see, and very explicitly.

¹⁸ *s.* 242.7-8 (PL 38: 1142-1143): “si hoc ualet sanitas, immortalitas quid ualebit?”

Shortly thereafter (between 388-395 CE), in *lib. arb.*,¹⁹ we find the first explicit reflection on the meaning of voluntary death. Augustine tries to convince his interlocutor (Evodius) that anyone who decides to take his own life makes a mistake whether guided by his *opinio* (which leads him to think that death means nothing) or guided by his *sensus* (which leads him to associate death with rest). Augustine's argument starts from the observation that *opinio* and *sensus* are often at odds: we rationally know that a certain thing suits us (*opinio*) but we are sensorially pleased to do the opposite (*sensus*). Augustine does not grant epistemological superiority to knowledge obtained by *opinio*. Sometimes belief is presumed rational, but ill-founded evidence leads us to think that a certain action will be harmful to us and, for this reason, we stop doing it even though it would be pleasing to the senses, and indeed would not harm us at all. Nevertheless, the exact opposite can also happen: even though the *opinio* is well founded, we still act to satisfy our senses. Neither *opinio* nor *sensus*, then, are a guarantee of infallible knowledge or are even superior one to the other. However, reason has the advantage of a particular strength that allows it to impose itself on feeling: *tanta uis est in dominatu et principatu rationis*. In this manner, when someone is convinced to end their own life, arguing that they do not want to be anymore (*non sit futurus*), in reality, an erroneous *opinio* is imposed on their senses, and what they are chasing is not non-existence, but tranquility, stillness, to stop suffering. Indeed, the suicidal one who wishes to die driven by unbearable suffering does not want to stop being but rather to stop suffering. Reason, nevertheless, pushes him to convince himself that ceasing to be is equivalent to ceasing to suffer. However, here there is an inconsistency between the desire expressed by senses and the response provided by reason. The stillness that the senses long for is not a desire not to be, but rather to be

¹⁹ *Lib. arb.* 3.8.22 (CCSL 29: 288).

better, given that the state of rest represents a better, more perfect state than the state of variation and uncertainty to which life subjects us. Moreover, not being is not at all compatible with being better. Whoever expresses, therefore, a will not to be is deceiving himself. And for at least two reasons: 1) not to be is not Christianly possible since the soul will endure in any case; and 2) it is not to stop living that the suicidal one truly desires, but to stop suffering, and this is not obtained by ceasing to live but by living better. It is worth remembering, in any case, that the relationship between suffering and rest will necessarily have to be modified by Augustine in an eschatological context in which suffering has disappeared and, therefore, this tension no longer makes sense. Thus, in the Neoplatonic conception of rest in God, Augustine will oppose the idea of an active joy that comes from the vision of God (*uisio dei*), as Ryan Coyne has remarked, commenting on the influence of Augustine's thought on Heidegger: "The notion of enjoyment is formed by assigning a positive meaning to the privation of rest, finding in restlessness or *Unruheigkeit* the principle of mobility."²⁰

In the previous section (*lib. arb.* 3.8.22), Augustine has stretched the argument to the point of affirming that whoever chooses to commit suicide is not choosing anything because someone who would answer "nothing" to the question "what do you want?" acknowledges that she is not choosing anything.²¹ Augustine's way of putting it is fallacious, of course, because he is proposing the same kind of linguistic joke that we find in the famous passage of Ulysses and Polyphemus with the pronoun *nobody*.²² Beyond that joke, however, Augustine presents what is probably the most crucial

²⁰ Ryan Coyne, *Heidegger's Confessions: The Remains of Saint Augustine in Being and Time and Beyond* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 66. For an extensive development of Augustine's *uisio dei*, see the letter of consolation *ep.* 92 (CSEL 34/2: 436-444).

²¹ *Lib. arb.* 3.7.22 (CSEL 74: 109): "quomodo enim sequar eligentem, a quo si quaeram quid eligat, respondebit, nihil? nam qui eligit non esse, profecto se nihil eligere, etiamsi hoc nolit respondere, conuincitur."

²² Homer, *Odysseia* 9.408: "Οὐτίς με κτείνει δόλω οὐδὲ βίηφιν".

problem posed by suicide from a philosophical perspective and will have to wait for Wittgenstein to be taken seriously.²³ The *choice* that involves being or not being is radically different from any other choice, because it is not the same to choose between one thing and another (between drinking or not drinking coffee, for example) as it is to choose between being or not being, given that the second option supposes the definitive annulment of any other subsequent option. *Choosing* not to be is equivalent to deciding never to choose anything again, which is something very similar to choosing not to choose (anymore), not in the sense of giving up making any decision but of making one that irreversibly annuls the possibility to choose.

Augustine's first philosophical approach to suicide will be overshadowed by his doctrinal position, developed in later stages, as we will soon see. However, recovering the argument presented in *lib. arb.* and analyzing its validity, implications, and even possibilities of application in policies to prevent suicidal desire would undoubtedly be beneficial.

3. The moral position

The second Augustinian approach to suicide is found in *mend.* 9.12-16, a text written around 395 CE. Augustine's real purpose is to raise the question of the *lesser evil* concerning lying; that is, if it is lawful to lie (to sin) to avoid a worse evil. Augustine reasons in the following way: (i) I do not intend to sin in any sense; (ii) someone wants to commit an evil against another or myself; (iii) I could avoid both the sin of this someone and the harm that I or a third party would suffer if I sinned; (iv) the fact of suffering an evil (even an important evil) cannot be compared to the fact of

²³ "Wenn der Selbstmord erlaubt ist, ist alles erlaubt", Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Geheime Tagebücher: 1914-1916* (Wien: Turia & Kant, 1992): Annotation of 17 January 1917.

committing it; (v) therefore, under no circumstances will my sin (lying, for example) be acceptable.

From here, Augustine wonders if not doing something that would be within one's power, knowing that not doing it will lead to the commission of evil, could be interpreted in terms of consent (*consensio*) or approval (*approbatio*) of this evil. In other words, is allowing something to happen (without being the agent) equivalent to consenting to it and approving it? His response is that allowing is not synonymous with approving. One can strongly condemn an act and, even so, do nothing to prevent it for the simple reason that to do so would be tantamount to committing another evil that we equally condemn. In addition, if the disjunction is not to suffer an evil that we condemn (at the expense of another) or to carry out an evil ourselves (that we also condemn), then it is preferable to let the other person do the evil, not to carry it out ourselves, which does not mean that we approve of it.

In this context, the problem of letting oneself be killed appears as an example. If whoever renounces doing evil and, for that reason, allows another to do it, is giving consent or approval to that evil, then those who prefer to be killed rather than bear false witness should be considered murderers. According to Augustine, they would be the worst murderers, because they would make an attempt on their own lives.²⁴ Augustine always bases his argument on the opposition between passion and action (*pati/facere, occidi/dicere, hoc in se fieri/facerent*). It cannot be said that the martyrs are suicidal (*quod ipsi se occiderint*) because the only thing they chose is for this to be done to them (*hoc in se fieri*) in order not to have to do what they are forced to do (*ne facerent quod cogebantur*).

²⁴ *Mend.* 9.13 (PL 40: 497): “sed si talis consensio pro facto habenda est, homicidae sunt etiam qui occidi maluerunt quam falsum testimonium dicere; et quod est homicidium grauius, in se ipsos. cur enim hoc pacto non dicatur, quod ipsi se occiderint; quia elegerunt hoc in se fieri, ne facerent quod cogebantur?”

In this argument, the problem of voluntary death is that the most relevant aspect is who carries out the action and who suffers it. Martyrs suffer a death that is not voluntary. They *accept* it insofar as they have no other choice – if running away, for example, were an option, they would have. The only option to avoid *suffering* this death would be *to do* something wrong, and that is why they cannot be considered murderers: they are not actually carrying out any action but are suffering it. If, on the other hand, they were the ones inflicting it on themselves, instead of suffering involuntary death, it is clear that they would be the ones taking action. Therefore, no matter what evil they were trying to avoid through this death, they would be choosing to do evil in order not to suffer an evil, which is unacceptable because there is always the option of adopting a passive attitude. In this respect, suicide would never be acceptable as the only option to avoid another evil, while it would be acceptable to let oneself be killed.

This reasoning does not take into consideration *the arithmetic of evil*. It is not about measuring the severity of evils and committing a lesser one to prevent another person from committing a greater one. Rather, all reasoning rests on agency. If a choice has to be made, then the criterion must be to avoid not the worst evil but the evil committed by oneself.²⁵

The approach is very solid because it is perfectly operative within the framework of an ethical theory in which responsibility, action, and voluntariness are indestructible (I am responsible for any action that I carry out because acting is synonymous with acting voluntarily) in the same way that irresponsibility, passion, and involuntariness are (I cannot be held responsible for an action that I suffered involuntarily and to which I did not consent—even if I did nothing to avoid it—because suffering without having

²⁵ *Mend.* 9.14 (PL 40: 499): “Sed si quaeritur quid horum potius debuit euitare, qui utrumque non potuit, sed alterutrum potuit: respondebo, suum peccatum potius quam alienum; et leuius potius quod suum, quam grauius quod alienum.”

given consent is synonymous with acting involuntarily). It has been criticized²⁶—probably, in part, rightly—that in *ciu.*, Augustine makes Lucretia bear the responsibility of having murdered a presumably chaste and innocent woman (herself) in order not to consent to rape, instead of placing the responsibility on her aggressors. In that sense, Augustine would be an ally for whom, once again, would put the focus on what the victim has done or failed to do, rather than on what the aggressor has done. If we had to express it in present-day terms, we would say that Augustine revictimizes Lucretia. To be completely fair to Augustine, however, we would need to contrast his allegations in *ciu.* with what we have just exposed because the approach we have in *mend.* constitutes the basis on which Augustine imputes moral responsibility to Lucretia for her suicide, but fully exonerates her from any kind of responsibility in the event that the rape had been perpetrated. The rigor with which we too often scrutinize victims of a sexual assault to decide whether their inaction (“what did they do to avoid it?”) is synonymous with consent would have no place in an approach like Augustine’s. *Consentio* and *approbatio* are terms that do not belong to the scope of non-collaborative victims who suffer aggression even if they had a way to avoid it by doing something that would entail the assumption of moral responsibility. Instead, responsibility rests entirely on whoever carried out the action without the acquiescence of the victim. And the lack of acquiescence is manifested in the lack of collaboration with aggressors, regardless of the options they propose.

²⁶ Jennifer J. Thompson, “Accept this two-fold consolation, you fainthearted”: St. Augustine and contemporary definitions of rape,” *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 4.3 (2004): 1-17; Roberta Franchi, “Lucrezia, Agostino e i retori,” *Latomus* 71. 4 (2012): 1088-1101; Melanie Webb, “On Lucretia who slew herself: Rape and Consolation in Augustine’s *De ciuitate dei*,” *AugStud* 44:1 (2013): 37-58; Jennifer Barry, “So Easy to Forget: Augustine’s Treatment of the Sexually Violated in the *City of God*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88.1 (2020): 235-253.

4. Suicide in controversial contexts

We call *polemical* the third approach to characterize Augustine's position in relation to the normalization of suicidal behavior by Donatist Christians, who intended, in this way, to achieve martyrdom.

The first thing to highlight about the set of writings from *c. ep. Parm.* until *s. 313E* (that is, roughly between 400 and 412 CE) is what Augustine *does not* do: link suicide and murder. Indeed, the doctrine of equating homicide and suicide will not be consolidated until *ciu.*, and in Augustine's first attack against the martyrological pretensions of the Donatists, he never equates them. Could he have? Without doubt. The doctrine was not new and, in fact, Augustine himself had hinted at it, *en passant*, in the fragment of *mend. 9.13* that we have analyzed. Not only does he not link suicide and murder, but a careful analysis of the vocabulary used by Augustine leads us to think that he deliberately avoids this association.

Jacques Bels²⁷ had already recorded seven different ways in which Augustine designates suicide. But his lexical observations were limited to *c. Gaud.*, which does not provide a diachronic perspective to determine whether the terminology used over time by Augustine is homogeneous or changing. Read as a whole, it is very notable that Augustine only very rarely uses the verb *occido* with the corresponding pronominal construction (*se, se ipsum, semetipsum...*) before 412 CE. We find it only once in *conf.*,²⁸ in a well-known passage in which a lyrically repentant Augustine compares the *material suicide* of a fictional character with his own *spiritual suicide* caused by alienation from God. It also appears in *mend. 9.13* (which we have already analyzed), but in the framework of a *reductio ad absurdum*, and aims to show the reader, precisely,

²⁷ Jacques Bels, "La mort volontaire," 165 (n.2).

²⁸ *Conf. 1.13.20* (CCSL 27: 11): "[Dido] se occidit ab amore."

that it would make no sense to think that martyrs kill themselves only because they prefer to suffer death rather than abjure their religion.

If he does not use the verb *occido*, then how does Augustine refer to the act of committing suicide? In some cases, he uses a verb that is synonymous but has a broader meaning, such as *neco*,²⁹ *interimo*,³⁰ *perimo*,³¹ or *interficio*.³² In most cases, however, Augustine avoids directly using a verb that involves the action of killing and uses verbs that accept the noun *mors* as an object, especially *inferre* or *ingero*.³³ Still, on other occasions, he designates suicide indirectly, through actions that lead to voluntary death, specially jumping from heights³⁴ and hanging.³⁵ As we will see in the next section, this broad range of terminology is drastically replaced, in *ciu.*, by the omnipresence of the verb *occido*, in accordance with the centrality of the biblical commandment *non occides*.

Why does Augustine not oppose the suicidal drift of the Donatists, right from the start, accusing them of murder? This was not an easy position to maintain, in view of a long tradition, both theoretical and practical, and hardly susceptible to being heretical, that naturalized and even encouraged Christians to embrace suicide, especially in a

²⁹ *Lib. arb.* 3.8.23 (CCSL 29: 288): “nemo mihi uidetur cum seipsum necat.”

³⁰ *Lib. arb.* 3.8.22 (CCSL 29: 288): “qui urgente miseria sese interemerunt”; *c. litt. Pet.* 114 (PL 43: 199): “qui se ipsos interimunt.”

³¹ *Pat.* 13.10 (CSEL 41: 674): “[Job] se ipse perimeret.”

³² *Ibid.*: “se interficiendo”, “se interficerent”, although in this same passage of *pat.*, written around 415-417 CE, “qui se occidit” already appears there once.

³³ *Mend.* 4.4 (PL 40: 490): “qui sibi mortem intulissent”; *c. litt. Pet.* 2.49.114 (PL 43: 199): “spontaneas enim mortes ab uno magistro utriusque didicerunt”; *ep.* 173.4 (PL 33: 755): “[mortem] tibi tu ipse inferre uoluisti”; *pat.* 13, 10 (CSEL 41: 674): “sibi impatienter mortem inferre”; *ep.* 173.5 (PL 33: 755): “ut sibi quisque inferat mortem”; *Cresc.* 3.49.54 (PL 43: 526): “uoluntarias mortes, quas ipsi [circumcelliones] sibi ingerunt”; *pat.* 13.10 (CSEL 41: 674): “qui sibi ingerunt mortem.”

³⁴ *C. litt. Pet.* 2.49.114 (PL 43: 199): “quando se ipsos praecipitant”; *c. litt. Pet.* 2.87.193 (PL 43: 319): “se praecipitent”; *c. litt. Pet.* 2.20.46 (PL 43: 274): “se ipsi se praecipitauerint”; *c. ep. Parm.* 2.3.6 (PL 43: 53): “se ipsos praecipitandi”; *Cresc.* 3.49.54 (PL 43: 526): “se ipse praecipitauerit”; *ep. Io. tr.* 6.2 (PL 35, 2020): “seipsos praecipitent.”

³⁵ *C. litt. Pet.* 2.49.114 (PL 43: 199): “qui sibi collum ligauerunt”; *s.* 313E.4 (=s. Guelf. 28; MA 1: 538): “suspendium laquei”; “[Iudas] laqueo se suspendit”; *s. dom. m.* 1.22.74 (CCSL 35: 84): “[Iudas] cucurrit ad laquem”; *c. litt. Pet.*, 2.49.114 (PL 43: 299): “duae sunt maxime uiles atque usitatae mortes eorum qui se ipsos interimunt: laqueus et praecipitium.”

context of persecution. What about the Old Testament suicides of Eleazar (1 Macc. 6:32-47), Samson (Judg. 16:23-31), and Razis (2 Macc. 14:37-46)? What about the reproaches made by Tertullian against those who fled from persecution?³⁶ What about Jerome's exception to the prohibition of suicide in order to avoid sexual assault?³⁷ What about the exhortations to martyrdom by Ambrose of Milan,³⁸ which never excluded the possibility of inflicting death upon oneself? What about the faithful who the Church revered as martyrs and who had unmistakably died by suicide? Saint Pelagia of Antioch jumped from a window to avoid falling into the hands of the Roman soldiers and losing her virginity (a case, therefore, like that of Lucretia) and she was praised by Ambrose.³⁹ Saint Secunda threw herself down to reject an arranged marriage and *to marry* alone to God.⁴⁰ And Saint Apollonia, threatened with being burned alive if she did not blaspheme, threw herself into the flames.⁴¹

The main objective of Augustine's writings against Donatists written during the first decade of the 5th century is not the definition or the condemnation of voluntary

³⁶ Tertullian denies that the evangelical precept of Matt. 10:23 ("fugite de ciuitate in ciuitatem") is applicable beyond the specific case of the apostles. Cf. *De fuga in persecutione* 6.2 (PL 2: 109): "hoc in personas proprie Apostolorum et in tempora et in causas eorum pertinere defendimus."

³⁷ Jerome, *In Jonam prophetam* (CSEL 76, 390): "non est enim nostrum mortem arripere, sed illatam libenter accipere. unde et a persecutionibus non licet propria manu perire, absque ubi castitas periclitantur."

³⁸ Ambrose, *de uirginibus* 3.13 (PL 16: 269): "et potest esse patientia sacerdotum, ut non uel morte oblata, si ita necesse est, integritatis sacrificium uindicetur?" Ambrose also praises the martyr Saint Agnes, martyred 12 years old, who asked her executioner to hurry up in order to meet God. Cf. *de uirginibus* 2.9 (PL 16: 191): "quid, percussor, moraris? pereat corpus quod amari potest oculis quibus nolo".

³⁹ Ambrose, *de uirginibus* 3.7.33 (PL 16: 230): "moriatur si licet, uel si nolunt licere, moriamur. deus remedio non offenditur, et facinus fides ableuat. certe si uim ipsam nominis cogitemus, et quae uis uoluntaria? Illa magis est uis, mori uelle, nec posse...possumus mori nostris armis, possumus mori sine carnificis et beneficio matris in gremio."

⁴⁰ *Passio sanctarum Maximae, Secundae et Donatillae*, 4 (Biblioteca Hagiografica Latina 5809 = J. L. Maier, *Le dossier du donatisme*, 1, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1987,100): "erat ibi quaedam puella, nomine Secunda, annorum circiter duodecim, cui multae condiciones sponsales euenerant et omnes contempserat quia unum tantum dilibegat deum. cumque eas proficisci uideret per maenianum domus suae nimis excelsum respiciens, exinde se praecipitauit nullum habens ante oculos intuitum diuitiarum parentum."

⁴¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.41.7: "ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν θαυμασιωτάτην τότε παρθένον πρεσβῦτιν Ἀπολλωνίαν διαλαβόντες, ... πῦρὰν δὲ νήσαντες πρὸ τῆς πόλεως ζῶσαν ἠπέιλουν κατακαύσειν, εἰ μὴ συνεκφωνήσειεν αὐτοῖς τὰ τῆς ἀσεβείας κηρύγματα." Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 102.

death. Rather, it is the neutralization of the Donatist split, the refutation of the theses supported by their leaders and the conversion to Catholicism of its followers. Instead of criminalizing suicide, Augustine is interested in showing that Donatists have strayed from the right path and, therefore, everything they do (including committing suicide) demonstrates that error. The main objective, then, will be to discriminate between martyrdom and suicide rather than to condemn suicide *per se*.

To achieve this goal, Augustine must refute the Donatists' constant accusations of persecution. If there is no persecution, there can be no martyrdom. He deploys three arguments. First, he is skeptical about alleged imperial persecution.⁴² Second, because the Donatists provide constant examples of suicide, Augustine can easily deny that the Empire is responsible for these deaths because imperial laws do not usually force anyone to end their life, while Donatists commit suicide habitually.⁴³ Third, even if it were true that imperial agents murdered Donatists, they had separated from the Catholic Church to such an extent that they were like chaff separated from the wheat, destined to be burned (Matt. 3:12). Therefore, in no case could these deaths be considered to bear witness to the Christian faith. In addition, appealing to 1John 3:15 ("*qui odit fratrem suum, homicida est*"), Augustine can attribute the Donatist schism to homicidal intent, and then ask what right they, murderers, have to accuse the Romans of murder. It is particularly significant that Augustine does not base the accusation of homicide on the fact that they are in the habit of killing themselves – as would be expected in view of his later writings – but on their separation from the Church. We find the same idea, also

⁴² *C. litt. Pet.* 2.20.46 (PL 43: 274): "nullam quidem legem ab imperatoribus datam ut occideremini recolo."

⁴³ *Ibid.*: "si enim incredibile est magistros Circumcellionum solitas mortes sibimet intulisse, quanto incredibilius potestates Romanas insolita supplicia iubere potuisse?"

based in Matthew 3:12, in *c. ep. Parm.*, when the fallacy of the Donatist suicide, aimed at obtaining the recognition of a false martyrdom, is considered *insania* by Augustine.⁴⁴

The objective of clearly discriminating between (Catholic) martyrdom and (Donatist) suicide is also evident in Augustine's biblically based strategy to combat the suicidal practice of the schismatics. Augustine combines three biblical passages: the temptation of Christ (Matt. 4:6, Luke 4:9), the suicide of Judas (Matt. 27:5) and the crucifixion of two thieves next to Jesus (John 19:18, Matt. 27:38, Mark 15:27 and Luke 23:32). The first passage turns the Donatists into followers of the devil (who urged Christ to throw himself down from the temple) and not of Jesus (who rejects the proposal).⁴⁵ The argument is taken up in *s. 313E* when Augustine states that the Donatists cannot be considered Christians because they listen to the devil's teachings, not Jesus's reply.⁴⁶

Combining the temptation of Christ with Judas's suicide makes it possible to relativize *the way* of committing suicide and to put all the emphasis on *the fact* of committing suicide. The Donatists avoided hanging themselves so as not to emulate, in this way, the traitor's death. Augustine shows there is no difference between a rope and a precipice because both are teachings of the same devil, who had tempted Jesus with the precipice and Judas with the rope.⁴⁷ More explicitly, he points out that Donatists

⁴⁴ *C. ep. Parm.* 2.3.6 (PL 43: 53): "ut inde insaniam quotidianam non solum alios insectandi, sed etiam se ipsos praecipitandi concipiant... istis non fiunt tenebrae, dum sustinent lumen in falso martyrio?"

⁴⁵ *C. litt. Pet.* 2.49.114 (PL 43: 299): "confessores illi uestri, quando se ipsos praecipitant, cui ducunt martyrium? utrum Christo qui talia suggerentem diabolum repulit, an potius ipsi diabolo, qui talia Christo facienda suggestit?"

⁴⁶ *S.* 313E.4 (=s. Guelf. 28; MA 1: 538): "donatistae enim non falsi Christiani, sed omnino Christiani non sunt, qui quod suggestum est a diabolo audiunt, quod responsum est a Christo non audiunt".

⁴⁷ *C. litt. Pet.* 2.49.114 (PL 43: 299): "quid enim, nisi inimici Christi, amici autem diaboli; discipuli seductoris, condiscipuli traditoris? spontaneas enim mortes ab uno magistro utrique didicerunt; ille laqueum, isti praecipitium."

avoid following the action of Judas, who was inspired by the devil, to follow another one, also inspired by the devil.⁴⁸

The passage about the crucifixions of Jesus and the two thieves allows Augustine to undo the fallacy of affirming the consequent (whenever there is martyrdom, there is suffering, but suffering does not imply martyrdom) and, again by analogy, to associate Catholicism with Christ and the Donatists with the thieves. Indeed, it would be nonsense to consider that any suffering is an immediate indication of martyrdom. We can consider some suffering fair, so it is not the suffering, but rather what has caused it that allows us to determine martyrdom. From this will emerge the doctrine – almost formulaic due to the number of times it will be used by Augustine – according to which *martyrem non faciat poena sed causa*.⁴⁹

This initial attack by Augustine against Donatist suicide concludes with him equating death by suicide and eternal death, a doctrine that finds no biblical support and which, again, Augustine can only sustain by appealing to the extra-ecclesial position of the Donatists. Between 411 and 414 CE, he addressed a letter to the priest Donatus. In it, he praises those who, against Donatus' will, removed him from a well where he had thrown himself. Augustine decrees that if Donatus had succeeded, it would have led to both his temporary and his eternal death. Augustine does not provide a justification of

⁴⁸ S. 313E.4 (=s. Guelf. 28; MA 1: 538): “respondent [Donatistae]: absit a nobis, anathema sit laqueus; Iudas enim traditor laqueo se suspendit. o miseri et infelices, quae est ista dementia, nolle facere quod traditor fecit, et facere quod magister traditoris diabolus eos docuit?”

⁴⁹ Indeed, with minimal variations, we find it ten times in writings from 405 CE onwards: *ep.* 89.2 (PL 33: 310): “ignorantes caecitate mirabili, uel animositate damnabili se scire dissimulantes, quod martyres ueros non faciat poena, sed causa”; *ep.* 204.4 (PL 33: 940): “cum martyrem non faciat poena, sed causa”; *en. Ps.* 34(2).13 (CCSL 38: 320): “nam poena similis est bonis et malis. itaque martyres non facit poena, sed causa”; *s.* 285.2 (PL 38: 1293): “semper cogitare debetis, quod martyrem dei non facit poena, sed causa”; *s.* 325 (PL 38: 1448): “inter duos latrones passus est dominus: poena non discernebat, sed causa discernebat”; *s.* 327.1 (PL 38: 1451): “non facit martyrem poenam, sed causa”; *s.* 328.4 (*Revue Bénédictine* 51 (1939): 17): “ergo homo dei prius sibi eligat causam, et securus accedat ad poenam”; *s.* 328.7 (*Revue Bénédictine* 51 (1939): 18): “non enim facit martyrem poena sed causa”; *s.* 331.2 (PL 38: 1460): “propterea martyrem non facit poena, sed causa”; *s.* 53A.13 (*s. Morin* 11: 634): “martyrem non facit poena, sed causa: prius eligat causam, et securus sufferat poenam”; *s.* 335G.2 (*s. Lambot* 15): “martyres ergo non facit poena sed causa. noli exaggerare poenam tuam, proba prius iustitiam tuam”; *Cresc.* 3.47.51 (PL 43: 525): “Christi martyrem non facit poena sed causa.”

such a harsh conclusion; using the same argument found in *mend.* 9.13, he attempts to establish that Donatus would not have had to kill himself even if he was forced to carry out an evil action and highlights, with obvious rhetorical intention,⁵⁰ that with this action Donatus could not possibly be giving witness of Christian faith. As mentioned earlier, no biblical text is able to support a link between death by suicide and eternal damnation, so at this point Augustine can only evoke the episode from Dn. 3:8-30 where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up and they are thrown into a blazing furnace. This text does not contain any prohibition of suicide, but a clear opposition between those who are on the *ecclesial* side (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) and who is not (Nebuchadnezzar). In other words, Augustine condemns suicide because Donatists carry it out, and he does not condemn Donatists because they commit suicide. Suicide among Donatists is merely a proof of their doctrinal dissidence and therefore also *per se* a proof of their damnation. Linking death by suicide and eternal death, in that case, is nearly redundant. Donatists are already eternally death because they are out of the Church.

None of the texts of this period contains either general theorizing about suicide or general condemnation of this practice. If the question appears, it is only relative to the Donatist practice. Augustine focuses his efforts on showing that no martyrdom can come from Donatism. Consequently, their suicides can never be interpreted in terms of martyrdom. Rather, it as an insane practice (*insania, dementia*), which can only come from the devil because the Donatists are not followers of Christ.

⁵⁰ *Ep.* 173.4 (PL 33: 755): “quamquam in ista morte quam tibi tu ipse inferre uoluisti, non solum ad tempus, sed etiam in aeternum moreris; quia etsi non ad salutem, non ad ecclesiae pacem, non ad Christi corporis unitatem, non ad sanctam et indiuiduam caritatem, sed ad mala aliqua cogereris, nec sic tibi ipse mortem inferre debuisti.”

5. Suicide as homicide

The issue of suicide reappears with full force in *ciu*. However, here Augustine no longer examines it in a context of controversy, or at least not explicitly. His most extended text on suicide does not contain a single mention of the Donatists. It is not difficult to imagine that the new tensions between Donatists and Catholics that appeared from 410 CE onwards⁵¹ constitute the background of the position adopted by Augustine when, in 412 CE, he began writing *ciu*. However, his approach to the question completely exceeds the limits of the Donatist complaint. Finally, Augustine does what he tried to avoid doing in the previously commented texts: resoundingly and without (almost any) exception condemn suicide and equate it with murder. He no longer fears previous opinions or examples that could compromise his position. It is not what has been done that we should pay attention to, but rather what should have been done.⁵² The only case in which suicide could be considered a real martyrdom would be that in which it comes from a divine indisputable order, by similarity to the command given to Abraham to kill his son.⁵³ The problem, of course, lies in the fact that only the one who receives the command can know for sure that it contains nothing uncertain (*nullo incerto*) and, therefore, from the outside it is impossible to judge the irrevocable character of this order. Therefore, the exception proposed by Augustine (at the very end of his condemnation of voluntary death in *ciu*.) gives the impression of being insurance that is only valid for those cases of suicide venerated by tradition. The resoluteness with

⁵¹ Augustine had referred to a law that restored freedom of worship to the Donatists in a letter addressed to Macrobius at the end of 409 or the beginning of 410 CE: *ep.* 108.6.18 (CSEL 34/2: 632): “*istam legem, qua gaudetis uobis redditam libertatem.*” This measure would again be repealed by Honorius in the summer of 410 CE and would cause a significant increase in tension between Catholics and Donatists in North Africa. The two reference works that study the issue are: Louis Leschi, “Le dernier proconsul païen de la province d’Afrique (410 apr. J.-C.),” *II Congrès national des Sciences historiques* (Algiers: 1930), 253-260 and Albert C. de Veer, “A measure of tolerance of the emperor Honorius,” *Revue des études byzantines* 24 (1966): 189-195.

⁵² *Ciu.* 1.22 (CCSL 47: 24): “*non modo quaerimus utrum sit factum, sed utrum fuerit faciendum.*”

⁵³ *Ciu.* 1.26 (CCSL 47: 26): “*qui ergo audit non licere se occidere, faciat, si iussit cuius non licet iussa contemnere; tantummodo uideat utrum diuina iussio nullo nutet incerto.*”

which Augustine opposes suicide from *ciu.* supports analysis from a sociological⁵⁴ or historical⁵⁵ point of view and is ultimately part of his project of radically reconstructing the philosophy of history in a Christian way. If the παρουσία was not to be immediate – as was beginning to be evident, already three centuries after the death of Jesus – and the persecutions of Catholics had ceased just a century earlier (313 CE), then the aim had to be looking for meaning in the present life, without losing sight of the final goal of our *peregrinatio*, and not encouraging Christians to commit suicide.

Augustine’s argument, both in *ciu.* and in later sermons and letters, and especially in *c. Gaud.*, has already attracted the close attention of several scholars, as we highlighted in the introduction. Repeating it here would be superfluous, but it would not be utterly useless to provide a synthetic analysis of terminological frequencies to corroborate the extent to which *ciu.* represents a real turning point vis-à-vis the texts we have seen previously.

The almost testimonial frequency with which Augustine uses the verb *occido* in writings prior to *ciu.* contrasts enormously with the profusion and absolute preeminence that this verb acquires in the first book of his *magnum opus*. Given the extensive (ten chapters of book I: 17-27) and almost monographic treatment that Augustine devotes to the matter, *occido* occurs with other, similar verbs. However, they occur in much smaller proportions and none of them with the same frequency.⁵⁶ Alongside these verbs

⁵⁴ Lieven Vandekerckhove, *On Punishment: The Confrontation of Suicide in Old-Europe* (Universitaire Pers Leuven: 2000), 32-33 considers that Augustine’s prohibition of suicide represents “a reflex of self-preservation that served to defuse a potentially destructive cultural situation.”

⁵⁵ George Minois, *History of Suicide* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 29 associates “Augustine’s uncompromising prohibition of suicide” with the economic and demographic crisis of the Empire between 4th and 5th centuries, “transformed into a totalitarian system in which individuals lost all right to dispose of their own persons.”

⁵⁶ *Ciu.* 1.17 (CCSL 47: 18): “se ipsum interficiendo hominem interficiat innocentem”; *ciu.* 1.18 (CCSL 47: 19): “in se morte spontanea puniat”; *ciu.* 1.19 (CCSL 47: 20): “se peremit”; *ciu.* 1.19 (CCSL 47: 21): “qui sibi letum insontes peperere manu” (literal quotation from *Aeneid* 6.435); *ciu.* 1.20 (CCSL 47: 22): “nobismet ipsis necem inferamus”; *ciu.* 1.22. (CCSL 47: 23): “hoc in se ipsis perpetraverunt”, “se ipse interemerit”, “sibi homo ingerit mortem”; *ciu.* 1.22 (CCSL 47: 24): “multi se interemerunt”, “sibi manus

to mean the ending of one's life, in the same passage of *ciu.* we find the verb *occido*, with corresponding reflexive pronouns, up to 19 times, a frequency not comparable to that of any of the other verbs.⁵⁷ In the same fragment, the verb *occido* appears 24 more times with a direct object, explicit or implicit. This is also the case with the biblical commandment *non occides*, which, from *ciu.* 1.20, becomes a true leitmotif of the Augustinian argument and is repeated six times in a few lines. Not to mention the appearance of the noun *homicidium* and the adjective *homicida*, which appear ten times in the same passage. We are faced with a deliberate, almost exaggerated, terminological deployment: 43 appearances of the verb *occido*, with both reflexive and transitive value, implying an unquestionable link between suicide and murder.

We find this preference for the verb *occido* fully consolidated in *s.* 313E, where Augustine no longer uses any other way of referring to committing suicide⁵⁸ and where the transitive uses of the verb proliferate,⁵⁹ and *homicidium* and *homicida* appear several times.⁶⁰ This terminological preference, which places *s.* 313E closer to *ciu.* than, for example, *s.* 173 (411-414 CE), inclines us to date this sermon sometime in the 410s CE

inferrent", "ex hac uita emigrarent"; *ciu.* 1.24 (CCSL 47: 25): "[Job] illata sibi morte", "sibi necem inferre", "se ipse perimere"; *ciu.* 1.26 (CCSL 47: 27): "spontaneam mortem sibi inferre"; *ciu.* 1.27 (CCSL 47: 27-28): "ut se quisque interficiat", "se potius interimere", "illata sibi nece", "si se quisque interimere debet", "mortem sibi que ingerendam", "interfice te."

⁵⁷ *Ciu.* 1.17 (CCSL 47: 18): "quae se occiderunt", "qui se ipsum occidit", "se occiderit", "se occidendum", "se occidit"; *ciu.* 1.19 (CCSL 47: 21): "se occidere", "se occidit"; *ciu.* 1.19 (CCSL 47: 21): "se ipsam ... occidit"; *ciu.* 1.20 (CCSL 47: 22-23): "se ipsum occidere", "qui se occidit"; *ciu.* 1.21 (CCSL 47: 23): "se ipsum uel quemlibet occiderit"; *ciu.* 1.23 (CCSL 47: 24): "[Cato] se occidit"; *ciu.* 1.24 (CCSL 47: 25-26): "[Cato] a se ipso elegit occidi", "se occidere", "se occidat"; *ciu.* 1.25 (CCSL 47: 26): "se debet occidere", "se ipsum hominem occidere"; *ciu.* 1.26 (CCSL 47: 27): "non licere se occidere"; *ciu.* 1.27 (CCSL 47: 28): "se occidere."

⁵⁸ *S.* 313E.4 (=s. Guelf. 28; MA 1: 538): "si mors uoluntaria uos delectat, et pulchrum putatis ... occidente sponte mori"; *s.* 313E.5 (MA 1: 539): "[Donatista] qui te uis occidere."

⁵⁹ *S.* 313E.4 (MA 1: 538): "Iudas uendidit Christum occidendum, Iudaei emerunt Christum occidendum"; *s.* 313E.5 (MA 1: 540): "[donatistae] dicunt: occidete nos. Illi dicunt: non uos occidimus", "[donatistae] ad homines ueniant, et eos in se arment, et terrendo occidere cogant."

⁶⁰ *S.* 313E.5 (MA 1: 539): "illi sunt homicidae ampliores"; *s.* 313E.5 (MA 1: 540): "et homicidium non facerent", used separately or simultaneously to reveal the murderous character in any case (whether they are killed or if they kill themselves) of the Donatists: "martyrem te esse ideo dicturus es, ut facias aut homicidium aut homicidam."

after Augustine began writing *ciu.* (412 CE). For the same reason, we could consider *s.* 173 prior to *ciu.*

The question of suicide reappears in *ep.* 185 (= *De correctione Donatistarum; correct.*) written 417 CE, and here too the use of *occido* plus pronoun to refer to suicide is systematically maintained.⁶¹ In the same letter, alternative verbs to *occido*, always in the passive voice, are reserved for indirect suicide, that is to say, those actions by which the Donatists did not commit suicide but provoked the pagans to kill them.⁶²

Even more obviously, in *c. Gaud.*, beyond a testimonial *uos ipsos necatis* (1.22.25), the use of *occido* plus pronoun is ubiquitous, appearing up to 22 times.⁶³ In the same first book, the verb *occido* with transitive value appears up to 37 times, raising the frequency to 59 appearances.

Henceforth, the association between suicide and homicide will be established for centuries to come. Thomas Aquinas will assume it fully and frame it in a scheme of triple sin: against nature, against society, and against God (*Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 64, a. 5). There is no doubt that the contributions of Augustine and Aquinas on this subject will constitute the most influential basis for the moral evaluation of voluntary death in Western culture. Retracing the way Augustine consolidated this doctrine seems

⁶¹ *Correct.* 3.12 (PL 33: 798): “seipsos occidere”, “per abrupta praecipitia, per aquas et flammam occidere seipsos”; *correct.* 3.14 (PL 33: 798): “si autem seipsos occidere uoluerint.”

⁶² *Correct.* 3.12 (PL 33: 798): “ut interficerentur a cultoribus idolorum”, “sed ad hoc solum ueniebant, ut integris idolis ipsi perimerentur”, “quidam etiam se trucidandos armatis uiatoribus ingerebant, percussuros eos se, nisi ab eis perimerentur, terribiliter comminantes”, “a carnificibus uel ab officio ferientur.”

⁶³ *C. Gaud.* 1.13.14 (PL 43: 711): “quare te occidis?”, “nolumus occidaris”, “quare innocentem occidis et te ipsum?”, “te occides”, “te ipsum innocentem occidendo”, “me occido”, “me occidere”, “in te occidendo”, “a se ipso nullus innocens occiditur”, “occidere se ipse”, “se occidit”, “te occidere”, “te occideris”; *c. Gaud.* 1.23.26 (PL 43: 721): “non utique uos ipsi occideretis”; *c. Gaud.* 1.23.26 (PL 43: 722): “cum itaque uos ipsis occiditis”; *c. Gaud.* 1.26.29 (PL 43: 723): “cum uos ipsos uelitis occidere”, “occisi a uobis ipsis”, “uos occiditis”; *c. Gaud.* 1.27.31 (PL 43: 724): “se ipsos occidunt”; *c. Gaud.* 1.30.35 (PL 43: 727): “se ipsum occidere”, “ut ipse se occideret”; *c. Gaud.* 1.32.41 (PL 43: 731): “se ipsos uestri occiderent”; *c. Gaud.* 1.36.46 (PL 43: 735): “isto modo posse, quo uos occiditis, expiari”; *c. Gaud.* 1.37.49 (PL 43: 736): “semetipsos occidere.”

important enough, not only to understand it properly but also to be able to make a critical reading of it from the present.

6. Conclusions

That the argument assumed by Augustine in *c. Gaud.* and in other anti-Donatist writings after 412 CE is due to *ciu.* does not allow us to retroactively project this argument onto the set of texts in which Augustine opposes Donatist suicide. As we have seen, all texts prior to *ciu.*, and in which Augustine must deal with the issue of suicide, avoid using the verb *occido* and linking suicide to murder. This can only be interpreted as deliberate, given that Augustine had already used the doctrine of Lactantius – even if anecdotally – in *mend.* 9.13. Similarly, the historical preponderance of the argument found in *ciu.* should not prevent us from placing it adequately in the entirety of his work and giving due value to the interest generated by the arguments that we have described as *philosophical* and *moral*.

The enormous magnitude of Augustine's work makes it particularly difficult to absorb it as a whole. It lends itself easily to the synecdoche of confusing those texts to which history has given greater preeminence with the most significant of the author's thoughts or, even, with the most relevant ones to illuminate our present. The synoptic approach that we have tried to take to examine Augustine's treatment of suicide could lay the groundwork for a larger research project to understand in a more specific and detailed way the various implications that a subject like this had for the ancients and it still has for us.