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## The Consolatory Function of Conceptions of the Afterlife: Perspectives from the History of Ideas

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**Abstract**

What is the consolatory function of conceptions of the afterlife? In order to counteract widespread misperceptions about consolation, which is negatively associated with religion and played out against philosophy, I examine the interface between ancient philosophical consolation and early Christian consolation. I suggest that both modes of consolation are closely related, sharing important characteristics, *inter alia* by setting the idea of a fulfilled life against the threat of death and by describing the fulfilled life in terms of a revisionist, virtue-centred account of human flourishing. I argue that conceptions of the afterlife are an optional component of ancient consolations. Instead of shifting the focus away from worldly life (as has frequently been claimed), they help to ‘intensify’ it. Their main thrust is to dignify fundamental life-choices and thus to facilitate biographical closure.

**Introduction**

And that is the source of comfort a conception of the afterlife brings. One may fear the ceaseless agony of an eternal afterlife in hell, but one is at least assured that there will be a life: one’s own life, the core of who one is. One’s joys may end, but one’s life will not. And so a conception of the afterlife brings with it some comfort, no matter how fearsome its consequences may be. (May 2009, 14)

This introductory quotation is typical of today’s philosophical literature on death. Informed by Freudian psychoanalysis and the existentialist pathos of Heidegger and Sartre, a contemptuous attitude towards religion is never far away. Whereas philosophy courageously “confronts death in its finality” (May 2009, 19), religion, particularly Christianity, offers consolation by the simple fact of promising a continued existence after death. In such rough-and-ready analyses, religion, consolation and the afterlife are not only conceptually conjoined but the concepts are employed negatively to indicate an ultimately immature denial of the finality of death.<sup>1</sup> In the present article I seek to contravene such rough-

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<sup>1</sup> In effect, the philosophical literature on death exhibits a surprising disconnection from trends in the field of death studies and lacks crucial conceptual frameworks such as ‘continuing bonds’ (see e.g. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996) and “symbolic immortality” (see below).

and-ready analyses via an historical route. We ought to come to terms with the fact that there was a time in Western culture when consolation was not thought of as a near-synonym for Christianity. The pre-Christian Hellenistic culture saw the inception of a tradition of consolation for death by means of arguments. The tradition was continued in early Christianity, and early Christian modes of consolation show important commonalities with the pre-Christian philosophical literature. These commonalities not only defy clear-cut oppositions between philosophy and religion but they point to more complex perspectives on the consolatory function of the afterlife than rough-and-ready analyses might allow.

I propose, therefore, to re-examine the historical evidence, in particular with respect to consolation up to the first century CE. An examination of the near-contemporaries Seneca and Paul of Tarsus allows us to analyse the overlap between philosophical and early Christian consolation, and thus to come to a more adequate understanding of the consolatory function of the afterlife in that era. Such an improved understanding could in turn stimulate fresh analyses of conceptions of the afterlife in later ages. I begin with a short genealogy of the philosophical consolatory tradition, after which I discuss passages on consolation in the letters of Paul of Tarsus.

Before we can proceed, however, a reflection on terminology is in order. In his recent, much-acclaimed Tanner lectures "Death and the Afterlife", Samuel Scheffler uses the term "afterlife" to designate the existence of a human posterity to one's life (Scheffler and Kolodny 2013). "Afterlife" in Scheffler's sense thus covers an aspect of what Robert Jay Lifton – well-known in the field of death studies, but not in philosophy – called "symbolic immortality" and which he distinguished from immortality understood in a "literal" way (Lifton 1974; Lifton 1976). Such "literal" or "real" immortality is frequently discussed by philosophers and theologians as "personal immortality". Its defining characteristic is that death does not completely extinguish the human person: there is a central aspect of the human being that persists through death *and will never cease to exist*. Owing to the course that Western culture has taken over the past 2000 years, we tend to equivocate the "afterlife" with "personal immortality". In spite of the extent to which it has become a cultural orthodoxy, I do not want to follow this equivocation. I draw attention to ancient texts that do not share – at least not as a matter of course – the idea that if an aspect of the human person survives death, it will go on *forever*. The understanding of the afterlife presupposed in this article will thus avoid the italicized phrases. "Afterlife" denotes no more than that death does not completely extinguish the human person and that there is a central aspect of the human being which persists after death.

### **Presenting the Ancient Philosophical Consolatory Tradition**

The ancient philosophical consolatory tradition has its undisputed endpoint – as well as an important bridgehead to the medieval consolation literature – in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>2</sup> More controversial are the beginnings of the ancient consolatory tradition. Premised on the assumption that a (now lost) consolatory letter or treatise *On Grief* written by Crantor (ca. 335–275 BCE), a member of Plato's academy, was the first significant written work of consolation,<sup>3</sup> much attention has been devoted to its reconstruction (e.g. Johann 1968; Baltussen 2013, xv). However, this starting-point is not convincing. It ought to be acknowledged (1) that the consolatory tradition has deep roots in (funerary)

<sup>2</sup> Edition and translation, e.g. Boethius 1973.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Scourfield 1996. For the remains of Crantor's literary output, see Mette 1984.

oratory that predate Crantor's text,<sup>4</sup> and (2) that the tradition extends far beyond texts which allude to grief management in their titles. The classicist J. H. D. Scourfield (2013) has rightly emphasized the difficulties of identifying a sharply-delineated genre of "the consolation", and has suggested viewing consolatory writings as a continuum ranging from the "delivery of consolation to specific individuals in specific circumstances" to texts that reflect on conceptual issues at stake in the provision of consolation and which might therefore rightly be called "reflective-mode" or "metaconsolatory" texts. (Scourfield 2013, 20) Building on Scourfield's work, I have suggested elsewhere (Jedan 2014b) that we leave the question of genre behind and rather focus on texts which provide *consolatory arguments* – persuasive speech acts aimed at showing why grief and despair ought not to have the last word. From this perspective, we can distinguish a continuing consolatory tradition that transcends the boundaries of theology and philosophy and extends from Antiquity until the present day (Jedan 2014a).

Plato's *Phaedo*, written about a century before Crantor's *On Grief*, is a case in point. The text purports to render the discussions between Socrates and his friends just before the philosopher's death. While the text might be read at a superficial level as an analysis of arguments for an immortal soul, it also contrasts Socrates' calm resolve in the face of death with the disconsolation of his friends and thus points to philosophical arguments as key ingredients of consolation. The *Phaedo* has been suggested as the *Urtext* of philosophical consolations (Boys-Stones 2013), but that would be to overstate its importance in the consolatory tradition. The *Apology*, a text that Plato composed considerably earlier than the *Phaedo*, was far more of a reference-point for the subsequent tradition. I suggest that the *Apology* was the iconic text defining what philosophical consolation was to be about, since it contains the famous "Socratic alternative" – that is the argument that death is no evil regardless of whether it is an annihilation of the self or the transition to a supremely attractive afterlife – which defined consolatory discussions for the following centuries (Jedan forthcoming; Jedan 2014b). There is more on the "Socratic alternative" below. For our present purposes we may assume that the ancient consolatory tradition can be traced back at least to Plato's *Apology*, that is the early fourth century BCE, and that it has roots extending even more deeply into (funerary) oratory. The ancient tradition reaches forward to Boethius' early sixth-century CE *Consolations of Philosophy*.

To retain the focus on Plato's *Apology* for a little longer, this text not only informs the later consolatory tradition but it is immediately relevant to our inquiry. The historical setting of the *Apology* is as follows: Socrates, whose public questioning was felt to be a nuisance by members of the old elite and many of the new democrats alike, was accused of impiety and subversion at the beginning of the fourth century BCE. In a public trial he was sentenced to death by a majority vote. Plato represents Socrates as comforting his supporters. Socrates makes it clear that he is not harmed by the sentence of death and proposes his famous "Socratic alternative", the argument that death is no evil, whichever of two scenarios might be true (40C–40E, trans. Tredennick, repr. in Plato 1961):

Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or, as we are told, it is really a change – a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain. [...] If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this, gentlemen? Put it in this way. How much would one of you give to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die ten times over if this account is true. [...] And above all I should like to spend my time there, as here, in examining and searching people's minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is. What would one not give, gentlemen, to be able to question the leader of that great host against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or the thousands of other men and women whom one could mention, to talk and mix and argue with whom would be unimaginable

<sup>4</sup> The fifth-century orator Antiphon is credited in ps.-Plutarch, *Vitae Decem Oratorum* 833C, with having invented and marketed a technique of grief management (*technê alupias*). Even if this is *ben trovato*, it goes towards showing that in later Antiquity the deep roots of argumentative grief management and its connection to oratory were appreciated.

happiness? At any rate I presume that they do not put one to death there for such conduct, because apart from the other happiness in which their world surpasses ours, they are now immortal for the rest of time, if what we are told is true.

The text continues with Socrates' exhortation to his audience, emphasizing the underpinnings of the Socratic alternative (41A–41D, trans. Tredennick, repr. in Plato 1961, my italics):

You too, gentlemen of the jury, must look forward to death with confidence, and fix your minds on this one belief, which is certain – that *nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death*, and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods. [...] When my sons grow up, gentlemen, *if you think that they are putting money or anything else before goodness, take your revenge by plaguing them as I plagued you*; and if they fancy themselves for no reason, you must scold them just as I scolded you, for neglecting the important things and thinking that they are good for something when they are good for nothing. If you do this, I shall have had justice at your hands, both I myself and my children.

Four points merit our particular attention in the *Apology* 40C–41D. First, it is striking that the afterlife is not embraced as a certainty; instead, Socrates formulates an alternative, without favouring any one of the available options: death results either in non-existence, which Socrates likens to a deep, dreamless sleep, or it is the beginning of something new, travelling to a wonderful place, where Socrates will meet heroes of the past. But – and this is the crucial point – whichever of the two death might be, it is *not* an evil; both scenarios are extremely attractive. So the afterlife is invoked as a possibility, an optional benefit, but its existence or non-existence does not touch or add to the value and meaning of the life lived. (Cf. e.g. Weyhofen 1983, 119)

Second, if there is an afterlife, it is valued, not on account of its providing a mere continuation of existence (as May and many others claim), but because it *dignifies* fundamental life-choices. If there is an afterlife, it should repeat and thus confirm the supreme worth of Socrates' activity in this life. As Socrates ironically states, he will surely continue his dialogues and “test” the virtue of the other inhabitants of the netherworld – to him this is “unimaginable happiness”. With this characterization the Socratic afterlife is cast in terms of a cognitive fulfilment.

Third, Socrates' invulnerability to death is premised on his view of a fulfilled life. It is the well-lived life that is as it were at any point complete and thus is not tragically interrupted by death.

Fourth, Socrates states emphatically that death cannot harm “a good man”. This places the focus upon the virtues: for someone who has lived virtuously, death is no evil. The same message is conveyed when Socrates implores his audience to challenge his sons with questions about their virtue. The emphasis on virtue shifts the focus from *what* someone has achieved – a list of plans, attachments or projects and an assessment of his or her “welfare level” – to *how* someone has gone about the task of living. This is a clever move indeed: a list of plans, attachments and projects, wishes for personal welfare – which we all in our “normal mode” find highly significant – is in principle endless, and death would always curtail something important. So, for consolation to be possible, one has to change one's perspective. Virtue is exemplified in whatever one does; virtue brings about biographical closure. With this, Socrates' consolation is an exhortation for the living to rethink what is truly important in life. His addressees should undergo a cognitive transformation and adopt his highly revisionary account of human flourishing – it is virtue that counts, not non-moral goods such as the achievement of projects.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Socratic exhortation thus cuts across distinctions between “objective” accounts of the quality of life, and “subjective”, first person accounts.

I suggest that this Socratic consolation defines the intellectual space for later consolations. Despite all minor variations, these four characteristics continue to serve as a template. (1) Even where later consolations favour one option in the Socratic alternative above the other, they feel bound to react to the other; (2) where they do affirm an afterlife, this serves a specific function beyond the mere continuation of human existence; the afterlife dignifies fundamental life-choices and is cast in terms of a cognitive fulfilment; (3) they set the idea of a fulfilled life against the threat of death; and (4) in order to describe the fulfilled life, they provide a revisionist, virtue-centred account of human flourishing.

The defining role of Socratic consolation for the later tradition also shows in Epicureanism, a school apparently remote from the mainstream of ancient consolation.<sup>6</sup> Epicureanism has received much attention for its explicit denial of the afterlife, contending that death is the annihilation of the sentient human being, and since only things that can be experienced have an impact on well-being, death ought to be considered a matter for indifference.<sup>7</sup> However, Epicureanism remains within the Socratic consolatory framework not only because it chooses the first option in the Socratic alternative and defends it explicitly against the second one but also because, crucially, it theorizes how life can be completed. Contrary to many modern interpretations playing out Epicurean hedonism against virtue, the available evidence shows that Epicurus and his followers did look to virtue as completing life.<sup>8</sup>

Let us now fast-forward to the first century CE. Seneca's consolatory letter addressed to Marcia, a Roman noblewoman, is the earliest extant large-scale consolatory letter in Latin. Writing in the year 40 CE or thereabouts, Seneca tries to assuage Marcia's grief over her accumulated losses. First, her father, historian Cremudius Cordus, had been forced to commit suicide; more than a decade later, her beloved second son Metilius died. I shall show that Seneca's letter displays the four characteristics identified above.

First, the Socratic alternative defines the structure of Seneca's letter. Seneca begins with the first option in the Socratic alternative. Death might be no more than the termination of life, but this state of non-existence is a peaceful one, "a release from all suffering", to be compared to the state before we were born. (Seneca, *Ad Marciam* 19.5–6; trans. Basore = Seneca 1935) A little later, however, he develops the second option in the Socratic alternative, the scenario of a supremely fulfilling afterlife. I quote the key passage in translation (*Ad Marciam* 25.1–3):

He is complete – leaving nothing of himself behind, he has fled away and wholly departed from earth [...]. A saintly band (*coetus sacer*) gave him welcome – the Scipios and the Catos and, joined with those who scorned life and through a draught of poison found freedom, your father, Marcia. Although there all are akin with all, he keeps his grandson near him, and, while your son rejoices in the new-found light, he instructs him in the movement of the neighbouring stars, and gladly initiates him into Nature's secrets, not by guesswork but by experience, having true knowledge of them all; and just as a stranger is grateful for a guide through an unknown city, so your son, as he searches into the causes of celestial things, is grateful for a kinsman as his instructor. He bids him also turn his gaze upon the things of earth far below; for it is a pleasure to look back upon all that has been left behind.

Nevertheless, Seneca adds a significant twist to the Socratic alternative. Whereas Socrates is prepared to understand the afterlife in terms of unspecified traditional sayings as a never-ending existence, Seneca follows Stoic doctrine: the history of the cosmos is cyclical; at certain intervals, the world as we know it is consumed by fire and is created anew. From the scarce evidence we have in early Stoic teaching, virtue seems to have carried with it the benefit of more lasting prospects for the soul: the virtuous soul persists until the next conflagration and will then be broken down into its elements. (See

<sup>6</sup> The school was founded by Epicurus (341–270 BCE) around 300 BCE.

<sup>7</sup> For the outpouring of treatments in the 20th century, see Fischer 1993.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Epicurus' *Letter to Menoikeus* 127–32 and *Vatican Sayings* 17, both reproduced in Long and Sedley 1987, 21B and 21F.

Jedan 2009, ch. 1) Metilius' afterlife and that of his saintly companions is not infinite in duration: it lasts as long as the cosmos and is ended only by the unfolding of an eschatological scene. Metilius' soul and those of his companions will be dispersed into their elements; the only point of stability in this grand cosmic spectacle is the Divine element ("God"). Consistent with Stoic doctrine, Seneca offers an afterlife as consolation, but this afterlife falls short of a literal or real immortality, that is an existence without end. What does not end is the divine author of the world process (*Ad Marciam* 26.6–7):

[At some point in the future] all the fiery matter of the world that now shines in orderly array will blaze up in a common conflagration. Then also the souls of the blest, who have partaken of immortality, when it shall seem best to God to create the universe anew – we, too, amid the falling universe, shall be added as a tiny fraction to this mighty destruction, and shall be changed again into our former elements.

Happy, Marcia, is your son, who already knows these mysteries!

Clearly, this is an instance of what we can describe with Lifton as "symbolic" immortality. Full continuity does not lie with the individual but with the Divine element steering the cyclical development of the world. Metilius and his companions take pride in being part of this grand process, and so should Marcia. In effect, Seneca revisits the first option in the Socratic alternative and thus brings both options closer together. Interestingly, the fact that in the Stoic world-view cosmic cycles will repeat themselves, so that there will be recurrences of Metilius' existence as well as that of his saintly companions, is not used as a consolatory argument. There is no knowing why this option is not considered. Perhaps the Epicureans' scathing critiques of ideas about re-incarnation and recurrence had made it difficult to sustain.<sup>9</sup> All this shows that rough-and-ready analyses of consolation being the result of mere continuity are an oversimplification. In the ancient consolations, images of the afterlife are not primarily about the continuance of individual human life; in the *Ad Marciam*, the image of the afterlife celebrates the prospect of the divine element taking complete control of the cosmos, at the expense of individual human life.

With regard to the second characteristic, it is notable that Seneca *extends* the Socratic afterlife scenario: for Plato's Socrates, the afterlife is a place to meet other presumably virtuous men, the saints and heroes of Greek literature. This is also the case here, but in addition there is the personal tone of the afterlife reuniting the deceased Metilius with a loved one, his grandfather, who "keeps his grandson near him". But this personal touch notwithstanding, just as in the Socratic afterlife, the afterlife awaiting Metilius vindicates and dignifies fundamental life-choices. Metilius is allowed to join a "saintly band" of those who prioritized virtue above non-moral goods, even their own lives. And the afterlife enjoyed by the saintly band is cast in terms of cognitive fulfilment: Metilius "rejoices in the new-found light" and will be initiated by his grandfather "into Nature's secrets" (*Ad Marciam* 25.1–3).

In respect of characteristics (3) and (4), the turn of phrase "he is complete" evokes two senses of completion: (a) his soul, the true core of Metilius, enjoys the afterlife; and (b) a sense of biographical closure, since death has not harmed Metilius by leaving important projects tragically unfinished or by thwarting important desires. The biographical closure needed for this invulnerability to death is produced by emphasizing virtue as key to human flourishing, just as in Socrates'

<sup>9</sup> As demonstrated by Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (Lucretius Carus 1975, trans. Rouse, rev. Smith). In *De rerum natura* 3.670–869 Lucretius first offers the Epicurean rebuttal of an immortal pre-existing soul that is incarnated at birth: there is no memory of earlier incarnations, and there is no continuity between different incarnations, in the sense that children have to learn the world anew. He then considers a rejoinder that comes at least close to the Stoic view: even if Lucretius' arguments point to the materiality of the soul and show that there is no pre-existing immortal soul which could exist in separation from the body, material constellations (including material souls) might recur in cosmic cycles, so that the same individual might exist a number of times. Lucretius' answer points to the necessity of mental continuity between the different recurrences that would be needed for identity across those recurrences. Since this mental continuity must be lacking, cyclical recurrence cannot secure a sense of continuity.

consolation. The emphasis on virtue is perceptible in the passage quoted above, associating Metilius with the virtuous “saintly band”, but Metilius’ virtues are also extolled earlier on in the letter. As would be expected in the context, Seneca places particular emphasis on the credentials of Metilius as an excellent son (e.g. *Ad Marciam* 24.2–3).

We can thus see that Seneca’s *Ad Marciam* follows the template of Socratic consolation in the *Apology* by incorporating the four characteristics: Seneca explores both options in the Socratic alternative, attributes to the afterlife the function of dignifying fundamental life choices, and sets against the terror of death a revisionist idea of biographical closure based on virtue.

### **Christian Consolation: Paul**

Let us now turn to the early Christian movement. I focus here on the earliest Christian writings, the letters of Paul of Tarsus. There is scholarly debate about the authenticity of some letters attributed to Paul, but this need not concern us here since I focus on epistles that are generally acknowledged to be authentic: *1 Thessalonians*, *Philippians*, *1 Corinthians* and *Romans*. The epistles were most probably written between ca. 51 and ca. 58 CE, in remarkable historical proximity to Seneca’s letter to Marcia (see for more information e.g. Ehrman 2004).

The undisputed Pauline epistles, I suggest, offer consolatory strategies that are surprisingly similar to those found in Plato’s *Apology* and Seneca’s *Ad Marciam*. In terms of the four characteristics outlined above, we find first that the Socratic alternative structures Pauline consolation, in the sense that although Paul defends the afterlife he reacts to the alternative option that death is the radical end of human life. This alternative option was not only generally available in the background culture but it must have also been affirmed even by affiliates of the new-founded Pauline communities; otherwise, we should be unable to understand why Paul engages with it in some detail in *1 Corinthians* and *1 Thessalonians* in a clear attempt to negotiate the doctrinal contours of his churches. So far as Paul is concerned, belief in an afterlife is not a merely optional benefit; it is at the heart of Christian consolation (*1 Thessalonians* 4:13–14 Revised English Bible (REB)):

We wish you not to remain in ignorance, friends, about those who sleep in death; you should not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again; so too will God bring those who died as Christians to be with Jesus.

Belief in the resurrection of Christ is all-important in this context, since Christ’s resurrection ensures the truth of his role in salvation. Thus Paul battles ferociously against the position that death might be the end (*1 Corinthians* 15:12–19 REB):

Now if this is what we proclaim, that Christ was raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so too is your faith; and we turn out to have given false evidence about God, because we bore witness that he raised Christ to life, whereas, if the dead are not raised, he did not raise him. For if the dead are not raised, it follows that Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, your faith has nothing to it and you are still in your old state of sin. It follows also that those who have died within Christ’s fellowship are utterly lost. If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all people are most to be pitied.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In the context of this article, I have to demote an interesting complication to do with Paul’s ideas on resurrection. The imagery of resurrection is suggestive of a new creation of the human being, which would pose problems for the continuity of the human being across death; however, talk of resurrection is conjoined with language that evokes continuity despite the new creation (cf. e.g. *1*



As to the second characteristic, in Paul too the afterlife is more than a mere continuation of a person's existence. It is the *specific shape* of this existence that counts: being (re-)united with Christ is the primary consolatory motif.<sup>11</sup> (Re-)union with Christ also has the import of dignifying the believers' fundamental life-choice for Christ as saviour. As in Seneca, so it is that Paul's conception of the afterlife combines the social aspect of union with a community of saints and the aspect of cognitive fulfilment, expressed in the following optical metaphor (*1 Corinthians* 13:12–13 REB):

At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but one day we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me.

Concerning the third characteristic, as for Plato and Seneca, so for Paul the well-lived life is at any point complete. This is evocatively expressed with the simile "the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night", but the followers of Jesus will not be wrong-footed (*1 Thessalonians* 5:1–4 REB). From this perspective, Paul can view the length of his own life, and the question of whether it is preferable to live or die, with a degree of detachment comparable to the detachment exhibited by Stoic philosophers (*Philippians* 2:20–4): Whether or not he will continue to live is for Paul himself a matter of indifference; only for the sake of the Philippians might it be preferable.

Regarding the fourth characteristic, biographical closure is provided by a revisionist, virtue-centred account of human flourishing. This is confirmed, for instance, by *1 Thessalonians* 5, where Paul assures the Thessalonians that they will not be caught unawares by the day of the Lord since they are all "children of light, children of day", used here to evoke their virtues. Moreover, the sequel to the above-quoted passage in *1 Corinthians* confirms the importance of the virtues for the well-lived life. Paul emphasizes the virtues of faith, hope and love (*1 Corinthians* 13:13 REB): "There are three things that last for ever: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of the three is love." The fact that the three theological virtues structure the afterlife, too, is yet another way in which Paul's conception of the afterlife dignifies fundamental life choices.

## Conclusion

This analysis of exemplars of consolatory literature up to the first century CE has shown that historiographies which oppose "philosophical" and "theological" ways of dealing with death do not fit the evidence. Striking commonalities extend far beyond the use of religious vocabulary in both philosophical and theological consolation literature. I have argued that the conceptual framework visible in Plato's *Apology* structured both philosophical and theological consolations for centuries to come.

Ancient consolations aim at cognitive transformation. Their audience is asked to rethink what it finds important in life and what brings the necessary biographical closure. The ancient consolations steer away from a list-perspective over plans, attachments and projects. Such a list could in principle be endless, since death would always tragically interrupt something important. Instead, ancient consolations emphasize the importance of virtue. Virtue makes a life complete, so that death does not tragically interrupt and destroy what was important in life. From this perspective, ancient consolations argue that death is at no point an evil for a well-lived life.

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*Corinthians* 15:35–8), comparable to the soul-based continuity in the second option of the Socratic alternative. (For a recent theological discussion, cf. Wright 2010.)

<sup>11</sup> *1 Thessalonians* 4:17–18 REB: "we shall always be with the Lord. Console one another, then, with these words."

The personal afterlife is an *optional component* of this common conceptual framework, and it functions in a markedly different way from that posited by commentators such as May. Indeed, May criticized conceptions of the afterlife for conjuring up a continuity which compromised the finality of death and the due importance of worldly existence. Ancient consolations, however, do not place emphasis on mere continuity: not only is the afterlife an inessential component but it can be temporally delimited, as in the case of Seneca's *Ad Marciam*. What *is* important is that the afterlife confirms and dignifies fundamental life-choices – in particular, the deceased person's commitment to the virtues. The consolatory function of the afterlife in ancient consolations does not so much consist in the deceased being somehow still “there”, but in helping the consol and to see the deceased person's life as complete. Paradoxically, in ancient consolations the afterlife supports biographical closure and helps to attribute due weight to worldly life.<sup>12</sup>

How can these findings inform an analysis of later conceptions of the afterlife and its consolations? If the above analysis is right, it might be worthwhile to look afresh at the rhetoric of biographical closure in later ages – such as might be found, for instance, in today's funerary orations. In the literature, biographical memorialization is highlighted as a crucial element in this oratory (e.g. Bregman 2011, ch. 12) and set against belief in an afterlife (e.g. Davies 2005). What we need, however, is a closer analysis of the subtle interplay of biographical memorialisation and invocations, however tentative, of the afterlife. Much hinges, moreover, on the question of *how* biographical closure is constructed. It makes an important difference whether biographical memorialization is effected by way of repeating the deceased's “bucket list” or by way of narratives that describe the life of the deceased in terms of his or her virtues, as seems to happen frequently. In short, the present findings invite us to explore the manifold ways in which present-day approaches to consolation sustain an ancient tradition.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Davies 2008, “intensive living” (or the “intensification of life”) is not the corollary of modernization and secularization, but it is already an essential ingredient of the ancient consolatory tradition.

<sup>13</sup> My thanks for their helpful suggestions go to two anonymous referees for *Thanatos*.

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**Abstrakti**

*Kuolemanjälkeistä elämää koskevien käsitysten lohduttava tehtävä: näkökulmia aatehistoriasta*

Mikä on kuolemanjälkeistä elämää koskevien käsitysten tehtävä lohdutuksen näkökulmasta tarkasteltuna? Voidakseni kyseenalaistaa laajalle levinneitä harhakäsityksiä lohdutuksesta, joka on kielteisessä mielessä liitetty uskontoon ja jota on pohdittu filosofian valossa, tarkastelen yhtymäkohtia antiikin filosofisen lohdutuksen ja kristillisen lohdutuksen välillä. Esitän, että kummatkin lohdutuksen muodot ovat läheisessä yhteydessä toisiinsa ja jakavat tärkeitä erityispiirteitä, muun muassa sijoittaessaan kuoleman uhkaa vastaan ajatuksen täysimääräisestä elämästä ja kuvatessaan täysimääräistä elämää revisionistisesti, tehden selkoa yksilön kukoistuksesta tämän hyveisiin keskittyen. Väitän, että kuolemanjälkeistä elämää koskevat käsitykset ovat vaihtoehtoinen osatekijä antiikin lohdutuksissa. Sen sijaan, että nämä käsitykset siirtäisivät huomion pois maallisesta elämästä (kuten on usein väitetty), ne auttavat tekemään siitä ”intensiivisempää”. Niiden päätarkoituksena on tehdä perustavanlaatuisista elämänvalinnoista arvokkaita ja näin ollen helpottaa elämänkaaren päättymistä.