LIFE AND DEATH, ADIAPORA, 
AND PAUL’S RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

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1. Introduction

Now the virtues and everything that shares in them are good, while vices ... are evil, and what falls in between these, namely, wealth, health, life, death, pleasures, pain, are indifferent (Epict. Diss. 2.19.13).1

The passage above reflects a wide consensus in the philosophical tradition that evaluates life and death as ἄδιάφορα, that is, things which make no contribution to either happiness or ill fortune. Hellenistic philosophers and Greco-Roman moralists offered a wide variety of opinions about the goal of life and the nature of post-mortem existence, but they all agreed that death and life could not affect the sumnum bonum. Life and death are ubiquitous components of catalogues of ἄδιάφορα that illustrate, by contrast, the eudaemonistic goal.2 The pair circumscribes the continuum along

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1 Unless indicated otherwise all translations of ancient texts come from the LCL. NT texts are according to the RSV.

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which everything lies that can be evaluated as ἀδιάφορα. Unlike virtue and vice respectively, death and life—conventionally regarded as bad or good—do not contribute to happiness.⁵ Death no more contributes to eudaimonia than the number of hairs on one’s head (Diog. Laert. 7.104). According to Chrysippus “life itself is ... a thing indifferent” (apud Diog. Laert. 7.189).

Epicurus regards death as an ἀδιάφορον because “the dead are only as they were before they were before they were born.”⁶ The Cynics rebuked those who considered death the worst of evils and were prepared to advance suicide for what appear to be rather trivial reasons.⁷ For the Stoics death loses its terror when individuals accept its natural inevitability and regard themselves from birth as in the process of dying.⁸ If virtue is not threatened by

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3 Stob. Ecl. 2.79,18-80,13 (SVF 3.140).
6 Sen. Ep. 1.2. The assessment is probably of Socratic-Platonic origin, see Pl. Ap. 38E-39B, 40D-E; Phd. 67E, 80E; Prot. 358B-36. For Stoic characterizations of death as an ἀδιάφορον see Gal. Plac. 7.2 (SVF 3.256); Sen. Marc. 19.5; Ep. 73.17; 104.10; 123.16; Const. 8.3; B.V. 7.3; QNat. 6.32.1-12; Mar. Ant. Med. 2.12.17; 4.5; 9.25; 11.20; Mus. Ruf. 17 (in Musonius Rufus: “The Roman Socrates” [ed. C.E. Lutz; Yale Classical Studies 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947] 107,20-111,27); Epictr. Diss. 1.9.13; 2.1.14,17,60; 5.14; 6.8; 19.13; 33.22.33; 26.4; 4.7.15. See also E. Benz, Das Todesproblem in der stoischen Philosophie (Tübingen Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 7; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1929) 54-59, 86-90. The Cynics and Stoics repudiated death as an ἀδιάφορον and ridiculed those who feared it. See J. Dalten, Formgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den Selbstbetrachtungen Marc Aurels (Ph.D. diss.; München, 1967) 175-203; H. Niehues-Probsting, Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1979) 140-49; S. Vollenweider, Freiheit als neue Schöpfung. Eine Untersuchung zur Eleutheria bei Paulus und in seiner Umwelt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht,