In his Commentary on the Dream of Scipio Macrobius devotes a chapter (I,13) to the problem of suicide. In the first book of the De Civitate Dei Augustine devotes eleven chapters to the same subject (I,17–27). It seems worth while to compare both passages and to see what they have in common in their argumentation and where they differ from each other. Both authors were heavily influenced by Platonism, both were men of a high cultural standard, and both wrote in the beginning of the fifth century. But Augustine, unlike Macrobius, was a Christian.

It is a well-known fact that suicide was a frequently debated subject (suicide was frequent!) in antiquity. We ask, “did a Christian base his
condemnation of suicide on the same grounds as a heathen?” It is the conclusion of the present writer that the notion of sin plays a prominent part in Augustine’s exposition, whereas this is absent in Macrobius.

Let us begin with a summary of their respective positions. The immediate occasion of Augustine’s writing was the sack of Rome in 410 A.D. whereby many Christian virgins, after having been violated or to avoid atrocious misuse, committed suicide.4

Civ. Dei I,17: Suicide is a sin for suicide is the killing of a human being, namely oneself. When Judas hanged himself, he increased rather than expiated the guilt of his betrayal, since he left himself no place for saving repentance. How much more should the guiltless (remember the virgins) refrain from committing suicide!

18: Purity, as a virtue of the soul, is not lost when the body is violated. As long as the soul’s resolve remains constant, the violence of another’s lust does not deprive even the body of its holiness.5 The intactness of the hymen is not at issue for the virgin in “spirit”. It is better to be violated than to commit suicide.6

19: In regard to the much praised Lucretia, who committed suicide after being raped (Livy I,57f.), it is strange that she was highly praised seeing that she murdered an innocent and chaste woman, namely herself. She is now in the netherworld among those qui sibi letum / insontes peperere manu lucemquei peros / proiecere animas (Vergil, Aen. VI,434ff.).7

20: Holy Scripture forbids suicide. It is explicitly forbidden in the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”. This commandment does not add “thy neighbour” as does the commandment prohibiting false witnessing. “Thou shalt not kill” does not apply to animals because they do not share with us the faculty of reason; it only applies to man. And he who kills himself kills a man.

4 In this paraphrase I used the translation of G. E. McCracken in The Loeb Classical Library (1957). See also B. Roland-Gosselin, La morale de Saint-Augustin (Paris 1925) pp. 150ff., who mentions also some other passages of minor importance.

5 ... ita non amitti corporis sanctitatem manente animi sanctitate etiam corpore oppresso, sicut amittitur et corporis sanctitas violata animi sanctitate etiam corpore intacto.

6 In this respect Augustine differs from earlier church fathers like Eusebius, Chrysostomus, Hieronymus and Ambrosius. Cf. M. M. den Hertog, op. cit., pp. 38f.

7 On this passage of Vergil Hirzel says p. 95, note 3(439): “Von einer Bestrafung der Selbstmörder ... ist bei Vergil nichts zu finden.” “Der Ort der Strafe und der Qualen der Unterwelt ist nicht da wo die Selbstmörder weilen, sondern wird erst 542ff. geschildert.” That Augustine’s quotation of Vergil is unjustified, also appears from the fact that he himself objects to Vergil’s insontes.