

## **In the Steps of the Moralists: Paul’s Rhetorical Argumentation in Philippians 4**

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Paul may be viewed through a series of lenses or frames. Three of the more compelling are Paul the Jewish apocalypticist, Paul the Greco-Roman rhetorician, and Paul the Hellenistic moralist. According to NT scholarship, such lenses are appropriate both for constructing a view of Paul as an historical individual and for making interpretive judgments concerning his written letters.<sup>1</sup> As a complex individual, Paul is properly described as eclectic in his employment of persuasive methods – whether as an apocalypticist, a rhetorician, or a moralist.

Paul appears capable of a variety of “registers” – deep-seated roles occurring in performance arenas which being socially defined have specific speech styles.<sup>2</sup> “Registers” provide another helpful way of thinking about how Paul performs in specific situations and in response to certain exigencies. Paul may wear the hat of the rhetorician at one time, possibly the hat of the apocalypticist or moralist at another time – just as I

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<sup>1</sup> Among others, see Calvin Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace & Community* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000); Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of “registers” in the context of orally performed speech, see Richard A. Horsley, “Recent Studies of Oral-derived Literature and Q” in *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q*, Richard A. Horsley with Jonathan A. Draper (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999), 164-66.

might wear the hat of the academician now, but the hat of the seminary teacher or father to my children tomorrow. I, like Paul, may make a conscious choice of registers according to the commonality of traditions shared with my audience, the intended effect I desire, or the intended relationship I seek to cultivate. I, like Paul, may switch registers, combine registers, or lean more heavily upon one register or another depending upon circumstances or type of audience.

Philippians has been outlined adequately in terms of the *dispositio* or arrangement pattern of Greco-Roman rhetoric: *exordium*, *narratio*, *probatio*, and *peroratio*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the success of this method for most of the undisputed Pauline letters<sup>4</sup> indicates that at a deep level Paul was inclined to argue out of a general *dispositio* framework: identify with the audience, establish terms and background, argue the case, and conclude strongly for a decision to be made in his (Paul's) favor.

Paul's message in Philippians portrays a shared apocalyptic worldview and its imagery. Key passages include the reference to "the day of Christ" in the letter's thanksgiving/prayer (1:10); the reference to Jesus' present reign and coming in judgment in the Christ hymn (2:9-11); the role of believers as children of God shining amidst a perverse and crooked generation (2:14-16); and each believer's anticipation of the resurrection of the body (3:10-11; 20-21).

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Dwayne F. Watson, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Philippians and Its Implications for the Unity Question," *NovT* 30 (1988): 57-88.

<sup>4</sup> An extensive listing is provided by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

Given these brief summary observations concerning the rhetorical and apocalyptic aspects for Philippians, I do not want to deny their existence or their usefulness. I do want, however, to suggest that the “weight” of Paul’s argumentation – in this particular letter, Philippians – is best guided by attention to the moralist traditions of the first century. Paul’s stance as a moralist is the primary frame through which we should view this letter.

Hellenistic philosophic thought in its varied forms found fertile acceptance in the Roman world at the turn of the eras. Emphasis was upon moral formation of the human soul – “each person’s task was the shaping of the self.”<sup>5</sup> Meeks provides questions useful in clarifying the various forms of this endeavor: “What is the world of meaning within which the virtuous person lives out his or her life? What is the character of the good person? How are the two connected?”<sup>6</sup> Teachers of moral formation – we shall call them “moralists” – included such figures as Cicero, Epictetus, Musonius Rufus, Plutarch, and Seneca, among others.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For more complete listings, along with pertinent date, social, and other background information, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 17-21 and Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 511-15.

Three recent perspectives broaden our understanding of how moralist traditions interact with the NT writings.<sup>8</sup> First, notice is being given to the political stance of the moralists: namely, “not living according to social convention.”<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is the converse of “living according to nature,” the well-known starting point for each of the Hellenistic philosophies. How did moralists counsel a person to withstand the political realities that might cause suffering and disturbance in the soul?

Second, due attention is being given to the moralist concern for psychagogy – those techniques that provide a therapy for excessive desire in the soul.<sup>10</sup> Moral

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<sup>8</sup> Much has been done in studying the moralists and their bearing on the NT material during the last two decades. The work of Abraham J. Malherbe (and subsequently his Yale students) has been pivotal. A variety of Malherbe’s work is collected in his volume, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Most notable for our task is his work, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) and “Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament” in *ANRW* 2.26.1, 267-333. The latter volume evaluates a full range of modern scholarship pertaining to the moralists. Within the Society of Biblical Literature, the Hellenistic Moral Philosophy and Early Christianity Group provides an ongoing forum for this area of study.

<sup>9</sup> See entries for Hellenistic philosophic groups and individuals in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 401-584. Also in more summary form, Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 11-12; 40; 502-7.

<sup>10</sup> Psychagogy concerns areas we today would equate with “spiritual exercises, psychotherapy, and psychological and pastoral counseling.” See Malherbe, “Hellenistic Moralists,” 301-4. An important investigation of Epicurean psychagogical practices in relation to the Apostle Paul is Clarence E. Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

formation and progress will occur where correct knowledge and thinking patterns are maintained and erroneous perceptions are corrected – thereby dispensing with illness in the soul.<sup>11</sup>

Third, due consideration is being given to specific patterns of rhetoric among moralist speeches or written works. What use of words, what patterns of reasoning, and what type of arrangement of moralist materials brought persuasion to their positions or contributed to the motivation of students?<sup>12</sup> Recently, Wuellner has reminded us that rhetorical *dispositio*, arrangement, is strongly influenced by the social setting and aspirations of various groups.<sup>13</sup> The moralists were one of the prominent groups: “[Rhetoric fused together with] psychagogics, that is, personal and spiritual development. [This was not surprising] given rhetoric’s traditional interest in the emotions, [the] imagination, and the will, motivation or disposition to action – something which philosophers as well as teachers of religion were equally interested in.”<sup>14</sup>

In this paper, I suggest that the Apostle Paul consciously takes up the stance of a moralist in his relationship and writing to the Philippian community. First, I indicate how Paul, in Philippians 1-3, telegraphs his moralist concerns by technical terms, a pattern of

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<sup>11</sup> M. Nussbaum, “Therapeutic Arguments” in *Therapy of Desire*, 13-47.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in Glad, *Paul and Philodemus*, 45-52; 58-65.

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm Wuellner, “Arrangement” in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period: 330 B.C. – A.D 400*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 53-55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

moral growth and discernment, and his use of exemplary argumentation. Second, I consider how Paul postulates the Philippian community as an entity distinct from the dominant political order and its social conventions. Finally, I demonstrate how Paul uses specific moralist conventions in Philippians 4 to under gird and reinforce the communal and internal ordering of the lives of his adherents, who must continue to exist, testify, and suffer under the present political system in Philippi.

### **Paul – Strengthening Friends in a Moralist Context**

Philippians has been described, rightly, as a letter of friendship.<sup>15</sup> One social function for the friendly letter was written guidance from a moral teacher to students (e.g., the letters of Plato, Epicurus, Seneca).<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the letter, Paul uses strong and intimate relational language in speaking to the Philippians. Notable are the

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<sup>15</sup> See L Michael White, “Morality Between Two Worlds: A Paradigm of Friendship in Philippians,” in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 211-15; Stanley K. Stowers, “Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven,” in *Pauline Theology, Volume I: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (ed. Jouette M. Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 105-21; Fee, *Philippians*, 12-13, 20; Ben Witherington III, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994), 118-21.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 39-40.

phrases, “[being] thankful for your partnership in the gospel,” “I hold you in my heart,” and “I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:5-8).<sup>17</sup>

Paul’s friendly intention is to reinforce moral instruction. This is evident by the following prayer in 1:9-10 and the four key moralist terms contained therein: *epign\_sis*, *aesth\_sis*, *dokimazein*, and *diapheron*.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge (*epign\_sei*) and all discernment (*aisth\_sei*), so that you may approve (*dokimazein*) what is excellent (*ta diapheronta*), and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

*Epign\_sis* indicates a full or innate recognition of what is proper or true, not simply “knowledge about.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, *aesth\_sis* is the “experience” which confirms moral insight.<sup>19</sup> *Dokimazein* (“testing, proving, approving”), and *diapheron* (“that which truly matters”) work in tandem so that believers can identify and implement what is good practice before God.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) unless indicated otherwise. I have adjusted some translations to account for inclusive language at points.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 100.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> J. Paul Sampley, *Walking Between the Times: Paul’s Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 62-65.

Hence, in terminology and structure, Paul's prayer forecasts his desire to frame this letter in the language and pattern of ongoing moral advancement<sup>21</sup>: Friends move to the goal of doing God's will by abounding in acts of love, confirmed by moral recognition and experience. This is the ongoing context out of which to discern the approved and important things that lead to moral progress and growth.

Having prayed and encouraged the Philippians to make proper moral decisions (1:9-10), Paul offers his own personal example as a model of discernment in 1:12-26. Here in a context of moral deliberation, Paul considers seriously<sup>22</sup> the moral topos of life and death, a common topic among the moralists. Life and death are *adiaphora* (indifferents) for Paul, but discernment based on love indicates that his remaining to serve the Philippians is "a thing that matters."<sup>23</sup> Paul's remaining in the flesh to serve the

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<sup>21</sup> So Sampley states, "Paul's prayer for them gathers up, in what is tantamount to technical terms of moral discourse, much of what he thinks believers should do." See *ibid*, 82. Compare the remarks of Fee, *Philippians*, 101-2.

<sup>22</sup> *Kai ti hair\_somai ou gn\_riz\_* ("Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell") and *Sunechomai de ek t\_n duo* (I am hard pressed between the two") should not be taken lightly. Paul intends to give the impression of an intense moral deliberation.

<sup>23</sup> Paul does not use the term *adiaphora*, but it is this type of reasoning that determines what is *diapheron* ("that which truly does matter" – *diapheron* being the opposite of *adiaphoron*). See also footnote #25 below.

Philippians contributes to their *prokop\_n* or “moral progress” (1:25).<sup>24</sup> That Paul’s example is applicable to all is evident from the maxim left ringing in their ears, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21).<sup>25</sup>

Paul’s personal example demonstrates the conduct of a worthy citizen of the gospel – mindful of the interests and progress of others (1:27a; 2:4). The structure of chapters 2-3, provides further exemplification of this worthy conduct: a series of examples by Jesus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and once again Paul.<sup>26</sup> The role of exemplification here is in the moralist mode – it is personal exemplification loosely built on the teacher/student model: Paul with opening and closing examples; Jesus presented as exemplar par excellence; Timothy as “co-writer” and Paul’s double; Epaphroditus as the Philippian community’s “apostle.”<sup>27</sup> Paul forthrightly makes his goal clear, “Brothers and

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<sup>24</sup> For *prokop\_n* as a favorite term among Stoic moralists, see G. Stählin, “*prokop\_n*” in *TDNT*, Vol. 6, 706-7.

<sup>25</sup> For a full discussion of Paul’s maxim and how it contributes to the structuring of the letter as a whole, as well as the moral framework and argument of Paul’s example in 1:12-16 (including *adiaphora*), see Rollin A. Ramsaran, “Living and Dying, Living is Dying (Phil 1:21): Paul’s Maxim and Exemplary Argumentation in Philippians” in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts*, ed. Anders Eriksson, Tom H. Olbricht, and Walter Überlacker. Harrisburg: Trinity, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Ramsaran, “Living and Dying,” pp.

<sup>27</sup> The strength of Paul’s endorsement of Epaphroditus (2:25-30) may possibly betray some sense of disappointment on the part of the Philippians. Whatever the case, Paul makes use of the situation to shape Epaphroditus’s misfortune as exemplary (“honor such men”; 2:29b).

sisters, join in imitating me, and *mark those who so live as you have an example in us*" (3:17; emphasis mine).

Clearly, then, the evidence shows that Paul telegraphs his stance as a moralist in Philippians 1-3 through his use of moralist technical terms, his putting forth of a pattern of moral growth and discernment, and his mode of exemplary argumentation.

### **"Defacing the Currency"**

As a moralist, Paul does not advocate, in Philippians, a philosophic system of argument upon which his moral exhortation is reasoned. This is consistent with Paul's letters as a whole<sup>28</sup> – the action of love takes precedence over ways of conceiving knowledge or the constructs of moral freedom built upon knowledge ("Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" – 1 Cor 8:1b; cf. Gal 5:13-15; Rom 13:8-10). In the Philippian letter, Paul's standard for love is the example of Christ and the narrative history of his exemplary followers (Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus).

Cynic moralists intentionally rejected the moral "systems" of their hellenistic counterparts, preferring the consistency of actions based on commonsense natural observation to reasoned discourse.<sup>29</sup> The Cynic "philosophy" was based on "defacing the

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace & Community*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000), 103-14, esp. 13.

<sup>29</sup> R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, "Introduction" in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, eds. R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 21-27.

currency” – “to ‘deface’ the false values of the dominant culture.”<sup>30</sup> Cynic reflection on proper actions was primarily carried along in narrative fashion through the sayings and chreia of its memorable teachers.<sup>31</sup>

While the Cynics made little use of philosophic reasoning proper, they did, like other moralists, define themselves with respect to the political order.<sup>32</sup> Cynics were the citizens of no “polis” – indeed they could pun their freedom from societal bounds by designating themselves as citizens of the “cosmopolis” (“the whole universe”).<sup>33</sup> Their stance is countercultural – defining themselves away from the dominant culture and anticipating its transformation by their missionary work.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>31</sup> R. Bracht Branham, “Defacing the Currency: Diogenes’ Rhetoric and the *Invention of Cynicism*” in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, eds. R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 87-104.

<sup>32</sup> On this subject, now see John Moles, “The Cynics” in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, eds. C. J. Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 415-34.

<sup>33</sup> Branham and Goulet-Cazé, “Introduction,” 24.

<sup>34</sup> L. Gregory Bloomquist, “Methodological Considerations in the Determination of the Social Context of Cynic Rhetorical Practice: Implications for Our Present Studies of the Jesus Traditions” in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture: Essays from the 1995 London Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (JSNTSS 146; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997), 216-17.

Paul also portrays the Philippian community with countercultural political and military images.<sup>35</sup> They are told to conduct themselves as citizens<sup>36</sup> and take direction from a different order,<sup>37</sup> all the while continuing to engage the culture in which they found themselves<sup>38</sup> – indeed, awaiting the transformation of the culture as a whole (Phil 2:9-11 – “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow”). The strong Roman context of Philippi, particularly its governing structure, adds bite to Paul’s Cynic-like satire. His rhetoric “defaces” key cultural terms and symbols related to the dominant order’s political territory. Believers in Philippi are to stand side by side (*st\_kete*) as a united

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<sup>35</sup> See Timothy C. Geoffrion, *The Rhetorical Purpose and the Political and Military Character of Philippians: A Call to Stand Firm* (Lewiston, NY: Mellon, 1993), 35-82.

<sup>36</sup> Philippians 1:27 – “conduct yourselves as worthy citizens (*politeuesthe*) of the gospel of Christ” (my trans.).

<sup>37</sup> Philippians 3:23 – “but our commonwealth (*politeuma*) is directed from heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (my trans.).

<sup>38</sup> Philippians 2:15-16 – “that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding **forth** the word of life...” (my trans. based on NRSV). For my rationale of translating *epechontes* as “holding forth” rather than simply “holding fast,” compare the discussion in Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 297-98 and Fee, *Philippians*, 246-48.

army against every threat<sup>39</sup> (Phil 1:27-30), they function as a political body (*politeuesthe*; 1:27)<sup>40</sup> with an identifiable constitution/commonwealth (*politeuma*, 3:20)<sup>41</sup> that stands apart from that of the dominant order embedded in the imperial system of the city, and they proclaim true rule is embodied in the resurrected and presently exalted Jesus who rightly holds the imperial/Caesarean titles of “Lord” and “Savior” (*Kurios* and *Sot\_r*, 3:20).<sup>42</sup>

Our knowledge of the Cynic ideal political system or “state” can only be reconstructed from a couple of passages in Diogenes Laertius (D.L. VI.63 and VI.72). Moles evaluates the evidence in this way: “[S]ince rejection of the city promotes Cynic freedom and virtue, by another re-evaluation of conventional terms, Cynics use the *patris*, *polis*, *politeia* and so on as metaphors for the Cynic way of life itself (D.L. VI.93,

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<sup>39</sup> Geoffrion, *Political and Military Character*, 54-62.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrion, *Political and Military Character*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 97-101.

<sup>42</sup> See the seminal observations by Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 72-78. Now with much more detail, Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129-74 and Mikael Tellbe, *Paul Between Synagogue and State: Christians, Jews, and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philippians* (CBNTS 34; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 238-259.

Epict *Diss.* III.22.84-5)...[T]he Cynic *politeia*, the Cynic ‘state’, is nothing other than the ‘state’ of being a Cynic, which is at once a material or social state and a moral state (Cynic moral virtue being dependent on rejection of conventional social and political values).”<sup>43</sup>

Despite both his and the Philippian community’s suffering at the hands of the Roman governmental system, Paul makes no attempt to sketch out an alternative political system or state. Yet, Paul’s “re-evaluation of conventional terms” such as *politeuesthe* and *politeuma* as metaphors for the believer’s way of life, may be grounded in an idea of the believer’s *politeia*, the believer’s “state” as nothing other than “living Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Living this life and proclaiming this life to outsiders is a significant means of societal (and therefore, political) transformation – it results in an alternative community.

#### **Reasoning Like a Moralist – Philippians 4**

Throughout Philippians, Paul’s apocalyptic language highlights an apprehension of God’s in-breaking power that provides believers with present control as they await the “not yet” but imminent victory of God. The “not yet” is crucial – Pauline believers still fall victim to contingencies connected to a world run under Rome’s regime. The key question to be asked in Philippians 4, then, is how do community members find a firm stance and proper detachment from a conventional world marked by hardships?

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<sup>43</sup> Moles, “The Cynics,” 426-27.

<sup>44</sup> “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21).

Awaiting the final triumph of God, how does one maintain moral consistency, inward calm, and control in a world subjected to imperial control? Paul's rhetoric in chapter 4 engages this perspective and his stance is that of the moralist putting forth his personal example as a guide to followers.

Paul's argumentation in Philippians 4 acknowledges the context of "partnership" between the believers in Philippi and Paul. It is the partnership of maturing students and their moral teacher – as is evident in the moral cast of this letter as a whole. Paul and the Philippians, while sharing different localities, still share a common context of imperial conflict (Phil 1:30 – "engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine"). Both Paul and the Philippians must "stand firm" in one spirit / in the Lord (1:27; 4:1) amidst the contingencies of imperial control.

As a moralist, Paul would have had need to consider his internal response to the political factors and the imperial system that had imprisoned him at the time of his writing. Moralists believed that making right choices amidst the contingencies of convention led to true freedom and "happiness." The prevailing political structure made up a significant element of convention and was much discussed among moralists.<sup>45</sup> To avoid despair and discouragement (excessive "passions"), Paul, as prisoner, would have been interested in moralist perspectives and techniques that strengthened the soul and promoted courage and joy rather than fear. (Paul's ultimate goals, of course, are more outwardly directed than those of Hellenistic philosophies in general – to fearlessly

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<sup>45</sup> See footnote #9 above.

proclaim the gospel; to receive the upward calling of God both for himself and for his community members.)

In what follows, I argue that Paul, in Philippians 4, draws upon Stoic-like<sup>46</sup> *meditatio* (i.e., meditation/contemplation patterns) for the strengthening of the soul. This provides foundation material from which Paul constructs his psychagogic exhortation to the Philippians.

### **Stoic *Meditatio* as Background**

The Stoa was well known for its use of *meditatio* or contemplation.<sup>47</sup> The constant exercise (often daily) of *meditatio* was intended to strengthen the soul:

The *meditatio* cannot appeal only to the intellect; the whole person must change, and, therefore, the emotions, which are more difficult to overcome since they are not dependent on reason, must be the primary target of meditation. The constant and rigorous application of particular phrases and images helps to work on these emotions; they interiorize the *meditatio* by driving its considerations deep into the soul.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> I assume that Paul found Stoic patterns of reasoning useful and that his Philippian audience understood such usage. While this may be a controversial assumption, it has been quite capably defended by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster, 2000), 33-130.

<sup>47</sup> Robert J. Newman, “*Cotidie meditare*. The Theory and Practice of the *Meditatio* in Imperial Stoicism” in *ANRW* 2.36.3, 1473-1517.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 1475.

Through meditation, one achieves “a state of preparedness” and “the soul can endure (*indura* Sen., Ep. 4.7).”<sup>49</sup> Paul’s endurance in any situation, his inner contentment, and his confident approach to the future in Philippians 4:11-13 are matters that will engage us below.

The background of Stoic meditation is inextricably bound up with the Stoic pattern of moral reasoning:

The Stoic *meditatio* does not look forward to possible evils. Its principle, instead, rests on the teaching that virtue is the highest good, vice the only evil, and that everything else which is normally considered good or evil is actually an *adiaphoron* or indifferent, i.e. without moral value. Virtue, in turn, was defined as maintaining a correct judgment or opinion concerning the *adiaphora*. Since virtue is correct judgment, a person must be brought to virtue by means of persuasion, and this persuasion is the *meditatio*. Thus, the Stoic *meditatio* does not concern itself with the possible approach of some evil, but attempts to show that whatever befalls us is outside our control and indifferent.<sup>50</sup>

Paul’s understanding of *adiaphora* and his ability to reason out what is of true importance from them has become better known in recent scholarship.<sup>51</sup> A notable discussion of life and death as *adiaphora* occurred, as we saw, in Philippians 1:19-26.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 1476.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 1478.

<sup>51</sup> See Sampley, *Walking Between the Times*, 77-83; James L. Jaquette, *Discerning What Counts: The Function of the Adiaophora Topos in Paul’s Letters* (SBLDS 146; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995); Rollin A. Ramsaran, “Getting to the Point: Maxims in Paul’s Moral Reasoning” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg: Trinity, forthcoming).

As a means to acquire and continue “virtue,” *meditatio* is by nature rhetorical – it is designed to persuade. “Its ability to counteract ingrained false opinion” is heightened by the effectiveness of “paradoxes, *sententiae*, metaphors, and other devices.”<sup>52</sup> “Since those still striving toward virtue (*proficientes*) are always in danger of slipping, the *meditatio* must be repeated constantly.”<sup>53</sup> Hence, repetition and reminders always reinforce the rhetoric of its moral exhortation. It is evident from the Imperial Stoics (Epicurus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius) that meditation was practiced both in the schoolroom and through literary production. “Even where the resemblance to the *meditatio* is not immediately obvious [in literary writings], the author probably intended his words to be considered and perhaps even committed to memory, i.e. to be part of *meditatio*.”<sup>54</sup> I suggest this may very well be the case with Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 4.

One basic form of the *meditatio* is internal dialogue. “Sometimes the interlocutors are specifically designated and dramatize the fiction of a division between the soul, which proposes some fear, and the self, which corrects the fear.”<sup>55</sup> Again, preparation is emphasized. Epictetus in 2.1.37 says one should “practice how to die, how

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<sup>52</sup> Newman, “*Cotidie meditare*,” 1479.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 1478.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 1479.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 1480.

to be enchained, how to be racked and how to be exiled.”<sup>56</sup> In reflecting on the letter to the Philippians, one is immediately struck by Paul’s internal dialogue concerning living and dying in chapter 1. In addition, the theme of life in “chains” or exile (both factors related to conflict with political authorities) is apropos for both Paul and the alternative ekklesia in Philippi, as articulated throughout the letter (1:13-14, 17, 30; 2:12-17; 3:8-9; 4:11-12).

It is, however, a second basic form of *meditatio* called “free meditation” that best illuminates Paul’s argumentation in Philippians 4:

Free meditation is the positive side of the internal dialogue. Instead of revealing the true nature of the *adiaphora*, the free meditation allows the soul to look at the positive side of virtue and confirms the soul in its already correct perception of indifferents. The free meditation can take two forms: [1] actual meditation on some topic which will delight the soul; and, [2] an address to god or Fortune by which the soul encourages itself to follow the divine leadership to virtue or to oppose Fortune’s fury. The free meditation strengthens the soul in its quest for virtue by exhortations, and not by attacking particular fears. This type of meditation reinforces the correct attitude toward the *adiaphora* by showing the ruling faculty that it is in conformity with the divine will or that it is a soldier in battle against Fortune.<sup>57</sup>

Paul’s discourse in Philippians 4 seems to correspond to a free mediation in the form of address to and about God. Notable markers of free meditation in Philippians 4 are the theme of prayer to God (4:6-7) and the conclusion of the section as a prayer (4:20); the emphasis on joy (4:1,4); the continued appropriation of a positive contemplation pattern (4:8-9); and the confident statement of sufficiency (4:11). Indeed, it is important to see

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1481.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 1481-82.

that Paul is not debating an issue or issues in chapter 4. Rather, he is reinforcing the “right choices” he and the Philippians have made with respect to “gift-giving.”<sup>58</sup>

Paul appears *to be sharing* his meditation with the Philippians. This, too, is a well-attested practice among the moralists, particularly as an instructive methodology for use with students.<sup>59</sup> In addition, Paul’s discourse is shaped by psychagogic instruction in which community members are taught and encouraged to meet the pastoral and psychological needs of each other.<sup>60</sup> Paul’s *meditatio* forms the content of what he encourages community members to adapt and practice together.

#### **Paul’s Argumentation in Philippians 4**

Paul’s rhetoric in Philippians 4 is rhetoric for the strengthening of the soul. Paul’s *meditatio* is an exercise in training and reminding the soul concerning the making of proper choices amidst the contingencies and externals of life. What factors led to, what previous examples attest to, and what resultant good comes from the making of right

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<sup>58</sup> Hence, I am moving counter to a “thankless thanks” interpretive perspective known from the nineteenth century and recently revived in, e.g., G. W. Peterman, *Paul’s Gift From Philippi: Conventions of Gift-Exchange and Christian Giving* (SNTSMS 92; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 121-61. For a review of the literature and substantial critique of the “thankless thanks” position, see Fee, *Philippians*, 422-26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1482.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. the discussion in Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 78-94.

choices? Elements of Paul's *meditatio* are shared with the Philippians at this conclusion of the letter so that both Paul and the Philippians, through the exercises, might be strengthened in their inner persons.<sup>61</sup>

According to Paul, what is internal to believers, what is within their control and is therefore the proper moral good, is the response of love and service to others which marks a new people of God brought about through Jesus' lordship. This is the firm stance of believers that calls them into an alternative community and to an alternative confession with respect to the present contingencies and power structures (Phil 3:20-21). Externals, other than vice, which should be avoided entirely, are largely indifferent and may be preferred or dispreferred according to whether they promote that which is deemed internal to the individual (i.e., the good). Among Stoics, true moral discernment or virtue, revolved largely around proper appropriation of preferred indifferents. Paul knows this model of discernment, for in his contemplation of life and death in chapter 1, Paul chooses life as a preferred *adiaphoron* because it means ongoing love and service to the Philippians, God's new people in Philippi.

In chapter 4, philophroneic language and moral reminders mark Paul's rhetoric of moral exhortation. The exhortation, "Stand fast in the Lord," is surrounded by a strong affirmation of friendship: "brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, ... my beloved." Paul's reminder echoes his previous "stand firm in one spirit"

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<sup>61</sup> One might compare my "rhetoric of the moralists" perspective to a more handbook-based rhetorical analysis like A. H. Snyman, "Persuasion in Philippians 4:1-20" in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (JSNTSS 90; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 325-37. The two approaches should not be considered incompatible.

which is found in the letter's theme statement of 1:27-30. Paul continues his close relational language with *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters") at 4:8 and the intensified descriptor, *humeis Philippesioi* ("you Philippians") in 4:15. The language marks a community of learners as friends, who as "second selves" to each other promote moral growth and progress under the guidance and example of their moral teacher, Paul.

In a philosophic community of learners and friends, Paul can call upon some members to take responsibility in a group setting for dealing patiently with the moral setbacks experienced by other members. Verses 2 and 3 indicate a rift between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Paul's brief attention to the issue and his use of direct personal names show that he thinks reconciliation is likely. This context of psychagogy<sup>62</sup> is marked by the appeal to their common mind and the mediation to be expected from the "true yokefellow" (and implicitly the community at large). The phrase *to auto phronein* ("think the same thing") both looks back to the model of Christ's mindset (love, service, and concern for the interests of others; Phil 2:1-11) and it looks forward to the focusing of the mind through virtuous contemplation (4:8-9). Hence, a reminder of proper thinking initiated by a compassionate and caring community may be sufficient to heal the relationship between these two women.<sup>63</sup>

Anticipating the "right choices" to be made and the eventual reconciliation of Euodia and Syntyche, Paul employs an emphatic reminder in 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice." The rhetoric of reminder and repetition is integral to

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<sup>62</sup> See note #10.

<sup>63</sup> Similar conclusions are reached by Fee, *Philippians*, 397.

the *meditatio* – contemplation is held before the soul until true change and adaptation is present. Hence, Paul’s contemplation of “rejoicing” in 4:4 must be examined carefully. Paul shares joy with the Philippians and “joy” (*chara*) and “rejoicing” (*chair\_*) are terms employed by Paul throughout the letter. The two main semantic contexts for these terms are (1) Paul’s or the Philippians’ ability to proclaim the gospel (1:18; 2:16-18) and (2) the moral advancement and unity of the Philippians as evidenced by living according to Christ’s mindset (1:25; 2:2; 2:19; 2:28-30; 3:1; 4:1; 4:4; 4:10). Joy is more than momentary happiness. Rejoicing is a contemplative practice of Paul’s -- all hardship (actual or potential) is reframed in light of this focus on joy. Indeed, joy forms the context and means from which prayer functions as practice (see 1:3; 4:4-6).<sup>64</sup>

The Stoic concept of joy is illuminating when we consider Paul among the moralists. Stoic virtue derives from living according to nature, passionless with respect to the externals. Yet among externals are matters of indifference that may have a determining factor in obtaining the “good” leading to virtue. The Stoics recognized three impulses or “good emotions” (*eupatheiai*), not passions, which promoted the motivation

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<sup>64</sup> Compare Paul A. Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategy* (SNTSMS 112; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 148-55. My essay was substantially written prior to encountering Holloway’s above-cited work. I was aware of his previous article, “Notes and Observations *Bona Cogitare*: An Epicurean Consolation in Phil 4:8-9,” *HTR* 91 (1998): 89-96. My Stoic *meditatio* approach to Philippians 4 has allowed me to emphasize Paul’s role as a moralist who teaches his students to reinforce their inward selves so that they might make good moral choices in a variety of situations (Phil 1:9-11), including that of suffering.

to make correct choices between indifferents.<sup>65</sup> First, “prudent caution” (*eulabeia*), while not ascribing value to externals, can be approved to avoid negative possibilities through the avoidance of dispreferred indifferents such as death or hunger. Second, “rational wish” (*boul\_sis*) as the opposite of prudent caution motivates the soul by focusing on the appropriate preferreds such as life or lack of want with respect to food. “[F]inally, if the good externals should arrive as one wishes, ... [one] is permitted to have a certain sort of joy (*chara*), namely the sort that is defined as ‘rational uplift’ (*eulogos eparsis*)”<sup>66</sup> of good emotion. *Chara* or joy provides a motivation that strengthens the soul for endurance against the passions.

Within the contingencies of life, Paul exhorts the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord” – to recognize and celebrate the rational uplift that comes from the Lord’s provision of the preferred indifferents (i.e., externals that promote the good). Paul counsels the Philippians not to be anxious about anything, but to pray and depend upon God for those things that lead to the moral good (4:6). In this framework, prayer corresponds to the *boul\_sis*, “the rational wish.” Paul does not promise specifics; he only assures them of inward tranquility of the whole person and their common life together (“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your thoughts [*no\_mata*] in Christ Jesus”; 4:7; my trans. based on RSV).

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<sup>65</sup> In this paragraph I am following the model provided by Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 398-401.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 399.

If prayer represents for Paul the impulse of “rational wish,” then 4:8-9 seem to bring an exercise of *meditatio* strongly into that context. Paul encourages the Philippians, “Moreover, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any virtue (*aret\_*) and if there is anything worthy of praise, consider, contemplate, mediate on these things.”<sup>67</sup> Paul’s *bona cogitare* (“reflecting on good things”) appears as a means to focus prayer – for a correct “rational wish” is served by considering what indifferents share in the “good.” Paul’s counsel here mirrors his own practice in chapter 1. There we find Paul constantly praying in the context of joy (1:3) and making supplication (“rational wish”) for the Philippians based on the power of the gospel to bring about God’s plan and purposes (= the good; 1:3-10).

Paul’s *bona cogitare*<sup>68</sup> (“reflecting on good things”) is closely followed by a call to reflect on Paul’s own examples – which have been interspersed throughout the letter. The *imitatio* formula in 4:9 shows a marked expansion compared to other Pauline *imitatio* texts (cf. Phil 3:17; 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6). It invites contemplation, reflection, possibly even discussion among community members: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do.” Paul has shown himself to be one who advances the gospel, one who thinks of the interest of others, one who lays aside

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<sup>67</sup> My expanded translation based on the RSV.

<sup>68</sup> See Holloway, “*Bona Cogitare*,” 91-95 for a discussion of this technique among the moralists. Its application was not uniform because moral reasoning patterns among moralists differed. Holloway offers that Paul “employs Epicurus’s *bona cogitare* (*tauta logizesthe*), but in its Academic (Ciceronian) version” (94).

status markers for God's call, and one who lives life joyfully. The refrain (4:7 with 4:9) of inner tranquility provided by God marks 4:4-9 as a section, but more importantly it encourages the inner person to endure hardship and resist anxiety.

The *imitatio* formula in 4:9 provides an interlacement between the sections 4:4-9 and 4:10-20. In the latter section, Paul uses the occasion of gift giving to speak of both his and the Philippians' proper example with respect to an *adiaphoron* (an indifferent), namely, that of material support. The context is again one of joy, because the providing God (4:13, 19) has supplied a preferred indifferent/ a good external (i.e., material support) in response to a rational wish among partners. The two examples are interwoven together. I will start with Paul's example.

The rhetoric of the *meditatio* is marked by *exempla* and *sententiae* (maxims). Philippians 4:10-13 demonstrates this point. After acknowledging the reciprocity of friendship and joy inherent in the Philippians' choice to send material support – a topic Paul will pick up again at verse 14, Paul offers his own example with respect to combating anxiety – or as we may define it: being ruled by externals in such a way as to excite the passions. Paul says that even though he can experience “joy” (*chara*) at the coming about of this “rational wish” of a preferred indifferent (material support), he guards against overdue emphasis on externals through a type of non-expectation, coupled with an acceptance of God's will as the best course. Here, Paul appears to be picking up on the Stoic idea of “wanting with reservation.”<sup>69</sup> One may want something, particularly

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<sup>69</sup> See Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53-54.

preferred indifferents, if it be the will of God (cf. Epictetus *Discourses* 2.6.9-10; Seneca *De beneficiis* 4.34).<sup>70</sup> In this framework, the will of God always carries the weight.

Should the wish not come about, it was not God's will – no loss, the best has come about regardless.

Paul has learned to be content or sufficient (*autark\_s*) in all circumstances (4:11), for the world is such that it not only has provided in the past, but it may take away in the present. This is well known to Paul and the Philippians in their present suffering. Yet the ground of Paul's contentment, his ability to share in the "good" that matters most, is not the Stoic sense of the impassive, impregnable soul aligned with cosmic reason. Paul's contentment (*autark\_s*) is grounded in the strong belief in God's revealed apocalyptic/eschatological purpose working out in the present (Phil 1:6; 2:5-11; 3:20-21). Regardless of externals, God provides what is necessary for Paul to proclaim the gospel, to live a life in conformity to that of Christ, and to bring about the fruit of moral competency within his new communities through their proper discernment and right choices. This constitutes the true moral good, what truly matters for Paul. He believes the same is so for the Philippians. Therefore, he leaves a maxim ringing in their ears, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me!" (4:13).<sup>71</sup>

It is quite fitting that in 4:14-20 Paul continues the contemplation and philophrontic strengthening of relationship between himself and the Philippians by

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<sup>70</sup> Citations are from *ibid*, 53.

<sup>71</sup> So Paul argues for "God-sufficiency" rather than "self-sufficiency." Or "Christ-sufficiency," based on the weight of the whole letter rather than this specific section. So Fee, *Philippians*, 426-36. On the analysis of 4:13 as a maxim, see Ramsaran, "Living and Dying," pp.

pointing to *their* own example of right choice. Their discernment in sending the recent gift has brought about the good – and hence “joy” (*chara*) is experienced and shared between Paul and themselves (4:10). The Philippians continue to share in the advancement of the gospel; they have thought of the interests of another (here, namely Paul); they have, through a commission, enabled the good example set by Epaphroditus. While Paul still shows reservation (“Not that I seek the gift...”), he also emphasizes the virtuous inner response of the Philippians first, prior to the acknowledgement of the gift per se (4:10 and 14 prior to 4:15-18). The gift has brought its joy (to Paul and to God!; 4:18-19), but contemplation of that continuing inner impulse to do the good on the part of the Philippians should encourage their souls and Paul’s together. This “fruit” that Paul speaks of here in 4:17 is part of the “fruits of righteousness, which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (1:11). As the Philippians continue to discern ways of doing the moral good, God will supply the requisite preferred indifferents. The will of God can be counted on to accomplish the good of the gospel despite all hardship – Amen – Paul can offer that much by 4:20.

Epictetus said (*Discourses* 3.24.83-85; 103):

If it is good, it is the source of no evil; if it is evil, I have nothing to do with it. I am born for the things that are good and belong to me, not for things evil. What, then, is the proper discipline for this? In the first place, the highest and principal discipline, and one that stands at the very gates of the subject, is this: Whenever you grow attached to something, do not act as though it were one of those things that cannot be taken away, but as though it were something like a jar or a crystal goblet, so that when it breaks you will remember what it was like, and not be troubled. So too in life; if you kiss your child, your brother, your friend, never allow your fancy free rein, nor your exuberant spirits to go as far as they like, but hold back, stop them, just like those who stand behind generals when they ride in triumph, and keep reminding them that they are mortal...Have thoughts like these ready at hand by night and by day; write them, read them, make

your conversation about them, communing with yourself, or saying to another, “Can you give me some help in this matter?”

As Paul reflected deeply about the good to be found in the gospel of God, I suggest he wrote some of it down to share with his friends at Philippi. Paul’s *meditatio* employs philophroneic language, joy, prayer, *bona cogitare*, a maxim, “wanting with reservation,” and *many* reminders to seek the good while making proper choices. In this way, Paul’s rhetoric sought to strengthen the souls of those whose trust resides with God.

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