Prohairesis in Aristotle and Epictetus: The Early History of the Concept of Free Will

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Prohairesis (προαίρεσις) was a term coined by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the fourth century BCE that later resurfaced in late Stoic philosopher Epictetus' *Discourses*. In both, it is often translated as "choice", sometimes also "decision" in the former, and is thus frequently misinterpreted as denoting some faculty of a free will. However, such a faculty as we conceive of it today was wholly absent in ancient thought. In Aristotle, *prohairesis* denotes a special type of deliberative rational desire, or *boulēsis* (βούλησις). In Epictetus, by contrast, it represents a certain innate God-given ability of rational adult humans to make use of their impressions and is regarded as the true self, being the only thing free from external constraint and hindrance (*Disc*. 1.17.21). I intend to demonstrate that *neither* Aristotelian nor Epictetan *prohairesis* should be understood as denoting a faculty we currently understand as a free will, namely, an innate prime mover of the soul that chooses between alternative courses of action. Rather, Aristotelian psychology consists of a tripartite soul, each component of which is capable of fully motivating action, which has no need for any further step made by a will or willing faculty. Likewise, though the Stoic notion of assent seems the first notion of a willing, Epictetan *prohairesis* is still not comparable to the modern concept of a free will, for, as I will explore, it seems to fall short of a full faculty of an agential will as we understand it today.

This question of whether Epictetan *prohairesis* can be regarded as the first notion of a free will is extremely significant; many now think that the first notions of a free will as we understand it emerged well after Epictetus in late antiquity after the middle Platonists and Alexander's *On Fate*.[1] Clearly, *prohairesis* in Epictetus is not a concept of a free will like that we have in mind today, arising later in the medieval period as the *liberum arbitrium* or *libera*

[1] This does seem to be a likely candidate for the birth of the free will problem as we understand it today, but this discussion, though incredibly interesting, is not too important for our discussion. For more information, see Susanne Bobzien, "The Inadvertent Conception and Late Birth of the Free-Will Problem," Phronesis 43 no. 2 (1998)

voluntas, according to which we have freedom to do otherwise. However, I suspect that *prohairesis* in Epictetus does denote an early free *proto*-will, it is just not free in the sense we would recognize today. I believe Epictetus conceives of freedom the Stoic Sage has as freedom from constraint of our *prohairetic* ability, which, as I will explain later, is "un-predetermined" freedom. This, of course, does not mean our will is free in the sense that our actions are completely undetermined, because Epictetus, as an orthodox Stoic, is committed to hard determinism, and hence holds that all actions are fated. Rather, it seems correct use of our *prohairetic* ability in Epictetus allows one to be free both from enslavement to our humanly desires which we falsely believe to be good and also from manipulation by God to follow his natural plan. If true, then the first steppingstone to a notion of a free will can be attributed to Epictetus, though this notion may look foreign to us now.

Origins of the Will

To see why neither Aristotelian nor Epictetan *prohairesis* are comparable to modern notions of a free will, we need to say what a modern concept of a will entails. Robert Pasnau argues that a will, at least as we understand it today, has an important aspect that emerged with medieval thinkers, which is what he calls the agential will.[2] According to this notion, the will itself "must become the agent or subject of rational choice", i.e., it is the will itself that controls our choices.[3] An agential will, then, as the thing that controls our choices, must not itself be subject to choice; there is no more essential self that can choose whether or not to do what the

[2] I would like to thank Professor Robert Pasnau for allowing me access to a portion of his unpublished manuscript entitled *Medieval Voluntarism and Moral Agency*, which was immensely useful for this project.
[3] CF. Robert Pasnau, Chapter 3: "The Agential Will", *Medieval Voluntarism and Moral Agency*. (Unpublished manuscript)

agential will itself decides to do. A will, thus understood, is an innate prime chooser to which all of our actions can be attributed.

What kind of freedom does such a will possess, then? The type of freedom associated with common notions of a free will is indeterminist freedom. Indeterminist freedom has two criteria: 1) that the outcome of decision is not causally pre-determined, and 2) the agent may freely choose what action to do. Let us distinguish between different types of indeterminist freedom, namely, (i) freedom to do otherwise, (ii) freedom of decision, and, most importantly, (iii) freedom of the will. (i) consists of the ability of an agent to act in a way that is "not fully causally determined", so, given they have the same disposition under the same circumstances, it is possible for the agent to make different choices.[4] For example, if someone places a donut in front of me, if I possess (i), it is not fully causally determined whether I do or do not eat the donut, such that even if I *do* take the donut, I was free to do otherwise. Closely related is (ii), which is a species of (i) that consists of the ability to decide to act in different ways, given the same disposition under the same circumstances, where the outcome of the decision is not fully causally determined.[5] This differs only slightly from (i); (i) entails only that it is possible for an agent to *do* or *not do* a certain action, but (ii) entails they are free to *deliberate* about different alternatives of action and *decide* differently than they do; it is not just that I may eat or not eat the donut, but I also may choose to throw it against the wall or tear it into little pieces. (iii) is a species of (ii) which requires possession of a specific faculty of a will that serves as the decision maker between different actions, where, like (ii), the outcome of the decision is not itself fully causally determined.[6] So, returning to our donut analogy, (iii) entails that there is some internal

[4]Bobzien, "Inadvertent Conception" 133
[5] Ibid. 133
[6] Ibid. 134.

faculty responsible for decision making, and it is this faculty that chooses how to make use of the donut. None of these conceptions of freedom are commonly found in antiquity, and they are not found in Aristotle or Epictetus.

It is important to note that this is only an account of freedom of the will and moral responsibility *as we conceive of it today*. As I intend to illustrate, though this particular notion of a free will is absent in both Epictetus and Aristotle, in Epictetus we find perhaps the first notion of a "will" that is free in a different way. In Epictetus, we do not find any notion of indeterminist freedom, i.e., possibility to do otherwise. Instead, we find an account of un-predeterministic freedom, to use Susane Bobzien's termonology. As she puts it, un-predeterministic freedom, like indeterminist freedom, supposes that the outcome of decision is not causally pre-determined. However, un-predetermined freedom does not suggest that an agent can freely choose between different courses of action. Instead, one is un-predeterminsitically free if, even though the outcome of the choice may not be pre-determined, when one is placed under the same circumstance with the same character, they will always choose to do the same thing. Hence, the agent's choice is determined by their character, but not pre-determined by external causal factors. For now, the difference may seem unimportant, but the significance of the distinction will become clear in later discussion.

An Introduction to Aristotelian Moral Psychology

Let us begin by giving a sketch of Aristotle's moral psychology. The concept of a tripartite soul comes from Plato who, in Book IV of the *Republic*, proposes that there must be three distinct components of the soul responsible for conflicting desires that arise in us: a rational element responsible for our rational desires indicative of being human, a nutritive element

responsible for all of our primal desires for food, sex, etc., and a spirited element from which arise desires of passion or emotion (Rep. IV 439a-441d). Aristotle, as a follower of Plato, is a proponent of the concept of a tripartite soul.[7] Aristotle proposes that desires of the soul can be divided into rational and irrational. The irrational can be further divided in two, as "of the irrational element one division seems to be widely distributed, and vegetative in its nature" (*NE* I.13 1102a28-29), while the other "shares in reason", being the faculty responsible for emotions (*NE* I.13 1102b14)[8]. There are, then, three parts of the soul: the appetitive, the rational, and the quasi-rational component that experiences emotions, or *pathē*.[9]

Aristotle, like Plato, distinguishes the appetitive and emotional components from the rational one, but neither has any concept of a will as some sort of mental faculty that weighs desires from each portion of the mind and chooses between them. Aristotle has a concept of rational desire, understood as *boulēsis* (βούλησις), a willing or a desire, or *boulesthai* (βούλεσθαι), to wish or will for oneself.[10] Such a willing is better understood as a rational desire

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[7] Some take Aristotle to have a theory of a bipartite soul, consisting of a rational and irrational element, the latter of which is further divided into the appetitive and nutritive. There is scholarly discourse about both the similarity and differences between Plato's tripartite soul and Aristotle's, but this is unimportant for my discussion. See Hendrik Lorenz's *The Brute Within: Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006).

[8] For the English translations of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, I will be using *The Nicomachean Ethics* translated by Ross. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). In these passages, occasionally I will insert the original Greek text to make clear when exactly Aristotle is making use of the term *prohairesis*, which has been gathered from the Loeb Classical Library publication of *The Nicomachean Ethics* translated by H. Rackham. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

[9] The obvious question, then, is whether Aristotle's tripartite soul is supposed to denote three distinct faculties of the soul or merely three types of desire. I believe it is more appropriate to interpret Aristotle as proposing a theory of motivation, as it makes more sense to believe reason, appetite, and nutrition denote different faculties of our mind as opposed to three separate competing bodies constituting one mind. If he is proposing a theory of motivation, the tripartite soul does not necessarily denote three discreet faculties that exist separately and independently from one another. Instead, we can understand the tripartite soul to be a theory pertaining to the different types of desires we feel. Though, Aristotle himself does not seem to provide a concrete answer in the Nicomachean Ethics, so he may not have understood this distinction to be important to the functioning of his theory, instead writing "whether these are separated as parts of the body or of anything divisible are, or are distinct by definition but by nature inseparable, like convex and concave in the circumference of a circle, does not affect the present question" (NE I.13, 1102a30-33). For further discussion, see John Cooper, "Some Remarks on Aristotle's Moral Psychology," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* Vol. XXVII (1988): 25-42.

[10] On the inclusion of "for oneself" - Though the *-esthai* (-εσθαι) ending of a Greek verb is indicative of a middle/passive present infinitive, the verb βούλομαι itself is a *passive* deponent, denoting a mental action that is

which is chosen because it is thought to be good.[11] Reason, therefore, will recognize certain paths that are advantageous to attaining that end, and likewise wish to actualize such a path.[12]

There is certainly something special about the rational faculty in Aristotle, for the rational component *can* recognize and evaluate the desires of the other parts of the soul and make "all things considered" judgements on account of them. But just because the rational element forms a desire does not mean it automatically wins out over other desires *qua* being rational. So, in a tripartite system, it *is* possible for the vegetative and appetitive parts of the soul to override the considerations and desires of the rational, resulting in *akrasia* (ἀκρασιά)[13], often translated as incontinence, understood here (perhaps misleadingly) as weakness of will.[14] Akratic behavior is easily understood in Aristotle – in such cases the appetitive or spirited desires are merely stronger than an opposing rational desire, *boulēsis,* that may be arising simultaneously. For example, if I am experiencing both an appetitive desire to eat a snack and a rational desire to

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active in translation. Though both middle and passive deponents are translated into English actively, I suspect the reason that passive deponents disproportionately denote mental activity potentially lends itself to the Greek conception of impression, broadly; this may suggest their language had modeled around the notion that mental states are themselves something that happen to an agent, or are somehow resultant of something imposing itself onto the agent, making a person a sort of passive recipient of such mental states, but such a theory I have yet to fully investigate. Thus, I am not taking *boulesthai* to have some sort of middle connotation as opposed to active by including the phrase "will for oneself" – I am merely signifying that Aristotelian psychology lends itself to such a conception of willing.

[11] Notably, this is not to say that a *boulēsis* is generated by reason, but rather that it is *recognized* by reason, as we see Aristotle explain such desires may be incorrectly recognized as good by the faculty of reason, writing "In most things the error seems to be due to pleasure; for this *appears* a good when it is not." (NE III.4, 1113a34-35, emphasis added).

[12] Michael Frede, *A Free Will – Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, ed. A. Long (University of California Press, 2011), 22.

[13] *Akrasia* (ἀκρασιά) is formed from the combination of the Greek noun (here, nominative) *kratos* (κράτος), meaning power or strength, and an alpha privative, used to transform a word into its negation, as the addition of an alpha privative changes death, *thanatos* (θάνατος), to *un*dying, *athanatos* (αθάνατος), or worthy, *axios* (ἄξιος), to *un*worthy, *anaxios* (*ἀν*άξιος). Interestingly, in later discussion about Epictetus, you will see the alpha privative pop up again, where he contrasts those things in our control, *prohairetikon* (προηαιρετικόν), with those that are not, *aprohaireton* (ἀπροαίρετον).

[14] Interestingly, this is seemingly contrary Socratic thought, at least as represented by Plato in his dialogues, with Socrates many times arguing that no one would do that which they do not take to be right [e.g. "it is therefore in pursuit of the good that we walk whenever we walk, thinking it to be better; and the opposite, that we stand still, for the sake of the same thing, the good." [Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. J. Nichols (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998) 468b.]

wait to eat until I have dinner later, on the Aristotelian picture, it is not as though I have some central chooser, a "will", that decides which desire, rational or appetitive, to follow. Rather, Aristotle's account of action is merely a matter of the relative strengths of the desires an agent feels – if my appetitive desire is stronger than my rational desire, my rational desire will be overpowered, and I will therefore eat the snack.

As Michael Frede argues, it is easy to impose our modern concept of a will onto Aristotle's work and assume that in at least some capacity the rational component and its desires function as the deciders of the soul, for "we tend to read Aristotle in this way, because we have a certain conception of the mind which we project onto Aristotle."[15] However, this would be to misunderstand Aristotle's tripartite soul and the motivational powers of different desires. Though the rational component *is* special, as it can reason about and evaluate the other desires, Aristotle understood all three parts of the soul to have equal capacity to be fully motivating for action, so long as their desires are not overridden by stronger desires of a competing faculty. As Frede puts it:

> [Aristotle] could assume [that we sometimes act solely on the basis of a nonrational desire], since he supposed that there are nonrational parts of the soul which generate such nonrational desires and that these *by themselves suffice to motivate us to act*. The crucial assumption is that being hungry may be enough to make you have something to eat and that being angry may be enough to make you take out your anger on the person who made you angry or on someone else.[16]

Therefore, though the rational faculty may have the interesting capacity for reflection pertaining to the other desires, the rational faculty does not act as some supreme decider over the others; the rational desires are fighting the appetitive and spirited on a level playing field and action is thus a battle of relative strength of desires alone.

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[15] Frede, "A Free Will", 22.
[16] Ibid., 31, emphasis added.

Aristotle believes *prohairesis* is a special kind of rational desire. So, let me now turn to *prohairesis*, which he introduces as a subset of the voluntary. Aristotle introduces *prohairesis* soon after he discusses voluntary action, involuntary action, and responsibility in NE III 1-5, where he also justifies praise and blame for actions that are voluntary.[17] That which you can be held responsible for is voluntary, whereas that which you cannot be held responsible for is involuntary. The criteria for voluntary action straddles two distinctions widely recognized in antiquity: witting vs. unwitting action and willing vs. unwilling action, i.e., Aristotle's knowledge and control conditions, respectively. He argues that *both* must be met to constitute voluntary action. Aristotle argues that for an action to be voluntary, the moving cause must be the agent themselves, which satisfies the control condition.[18] For instance, if someone grabs my arm and uses it to strike another person, I cannot be thought of as the moving cause of that action, and it seems therefore inappropriate to deem me morally responsible for it. With the knowledge condition, on the other hand, Aristotle claims that there are certain particulars[19] about their circumstance one must be aware of to consider their action voluntary. If, for example, a friend tells me some information and neglects to inform me that what they are telling me should be kept

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[17] Suzanne Bobzien, "Choice and Moral Responsibility (NE Iii 1–5)" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed Ronald Polansky. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 81.

[18] Here, a brief digression into Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes is appropriate. In the *Physics*, Aristotle proposes four types of causes one may appeal to when explaining cause: material, formal, efficient, and final. The material cause pertains to the product that constitutes the thing, like how bronze may be the constitutive cause of a statue (*Phys*. II. 3. 194b23-26). The formal cause instead pertains to the mere definition of what it is to be such a thing. For instance, the cause of someone being a bachelor is that they are an unmarried male, which is itself the definition what it is to be a bachelor. This appears strikingly Platonic, with the formal cause seeming, to me, to be almost akin to merely appealing to participating in the Platonic form of bachelor-ness (*Phys*. II. 3. 194b26-29). The efficient cause, also understood as the moving cause, is the thing that makes the change in question, like how a human is the efficient cause of action, or a builder the efficient cause of a house (*Phy*s. II. 3. 194b30-32). Finally, the final cause is best understood as a motivational cause, for it is the thing for the sake of which a change is done, as health is the sake for which exercise is done (*Phys*. II. 3. 195a2).

[19] The set of particulars Aristotle deems important to know to meet the knowledge condition is "who [the agent himself] is, what he is doing, what or whom he is acting on, and sometimes also what (e.g. what instrument) he is doing it with, and to what end … and how he is doing it" (NE III.1, 1111a3-6). Aristotle claims that knowledge of some particulars is more important to the question of voluntariness than others, namely, "the most important parts … are thought to be the circumstances of the action and its end" (NE III.1, 1111a17-19), but for the purposes of our discussion this distinction is largely unimportant.

secret, if I then relay that information to someone else, I cannot be accused of *voluntarily* breaking my friends trust by intentionally spilling their secret; I am not morally responsible for telling a friend's secret because I was ignorant that it was a secret in the first place. Actions done that fail to meet either condition, then, are involuntary or nonvoluntary, and therefore, Aristotle believes that we cannot be held morally responsible for them.[20] If both criteria are met, then, they are up to us, as Aristotle claims, "we cannot refer actions to moving principles other than those in ourselves, [so] the acts whose moving principles are in us must themselves also be in our power and voluntary" (*NE* III.5 1113b19-22).

We likewise can only praise or blame those actions which meet both the knowledge and control criteria, and are thus voluntary, as Susan Suavé Meyer writes, "Aristotle investigates voluntariness because he is interested in the causal conditions of praise and blame".[21] This is because voluntary actions are the actions for which we may be held responsible, as is found repeatedly in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the opening lines of *NE* III, Aristotle writes, for example:

> Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary ones praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue, and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honors and punishments. (*NE* III.1 1109b30-34).

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[20] Aristotle makes a clear distinction between actions which are *in*voluntary and those that are *non*voluntary. Any action that violates the control condition, as the moving cause is outside the agent, are involuntary. However, violations of the knowledge condition may either be classified as involuntary or nonvoluntary depending on the consequent knowledge and feelings of the agent – if the agent regrets their actions, they can be said to be acting involuntarily, as it has come to be against what they *would* have chosen had they been educated, but if the agent does not exhibit remorse, they can neither be thought of as acting not voluntarily nor involuntarily, thus classified as *non*voluntary actors. See NE III.1, 1110b18-19, "everything that is done by reason of ignorance is *not* voluntary; it is only what produces pain and regret that is *in*voluntary."

[21] Meyer, Susan Suavé. "Aristotle on the Voluntary", in *The Blackwell Guide to the Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 137-157, pg. 138

Further, about moral responsibility necessarily pertaining only to those actions in our power, he writes:

> The end, then, being what we wish for, the means what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning means must be according to choice[22] [*kata prohairesin*] and voluntary. Now the exercise of virtues is concerned with means. Therefore virtue also is in our power, and so too is vice (*NE* III.5 1113b3-7).[23]

There are two important reasons Aristotle introduces *prohairesis* in the *NE*. First, our *prohaireseis* are particularly revealing of moral character, more so than our actions themselves. Secondly, he defines moral virtue as a state of character in *NE* II.5, so virtues are dispositions to choose, or *prohairein*[24], in the correct way. Aristotle writes "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethikē*) is one formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit)." (*NE* II.1, 1103a16-17). So, since our character is not composed of merely something we do or value once, but it is composed of those things that we do habitually, virtue too is a result of those things we do out of habit. So, if virtue is a function of our dispositional character, we would expect to see in Aristotle some argument saying that whether one is virtuous or vicious is determined by the actions they do out of habit. In fact, we see this repeatedly in *NE* II. For instance, Aristotle questions what it means to say that we become virtuous by performing virtuous actions. It is not that doing an action that just so happens to be just makes you a just person; Aristotle argues there are three criteria that must be met for an action to be done justly or virtuously (meaning it does not just happen to correspond with what the just or virtuous action is in the given situation): "in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose

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[22] I will be using passages from Ross' translation of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, who uses choice to translate *prohairesis*. Though I will use his passages verbatim, including "choice" as his translation for *prohairesis*, I believe a better way to conceive of and translate *prohariesis* is a deliberative life plan, as I will discuss later.

[23] This passage is also extremely illustrative of why voluntary actions done through *prohairesies* are particularly illustrative of moral character. As such, it will be found repeated later in this discussion.

[24] The *-ein* (-ειν) ending is characteristic of present active verbs (for instance *graphein* (γραφειν) means "to write"). So "*prohairein*" means "to choose", or "to form a *prohairesis*".

[*prohairoumenos* (προαιρούμενος)] the acts, and choose [*prohairoumenos* (προαιρούμενος)] them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character" (*NE* II.4, 1105a 31-34). In this passage, Aristotle is claiming that a person performs a virtuous action only if: 1) he knows he is behaving in the correct manner, 2) he does so because it is the virtuous thing to do, and 3) he has developed a character that is habitually virtuous.

Aristotelian Prohairesis

Prohairesis is a term introduced by Aristotle in *NE* III.2; it is a conjunction of *hairēsis* (αἵρησις), meaning choice or that which is chosen, and the familiar suffix *pro* (προ), meaning before. Aristotle himself writes, "Even the name seems to suggest that it is what is chosen before other things", which, as we will explore later, suggest a *prohairesis* is a plan that we form before action. (*NE* III.2.11112a17-20). *Prohairesis* itself is not equivalent to the voluntary; that is, not every action done voluntarily is done from a *prohairesis*. However, Aristotle claims that it is a subset of the voluntary, writing:

> Choice [*prohairesis*], then, seems to be voluntary, but not the same thing as the voluntary; the latter extends more widely. For both children and the lower animals share in voluntary action, but not in choice, and acts done on the spur of the moment we describe as voluntary, but not as chosen (NE III.2 1111b7-10).

Furthermore, it is not an appetite or emotion, as these are things common to irrational beings, whereas *prohaireseis* are not common to them; Aristotle writes "the incontinent [*akratēs* (ἀκρατής)] man acts with appetite but not with choice [*prohairoumenos d'ou* (προαιρούμενος δ'οὐ)]." (*NE* III.2 1111b13-14). It is also not wish, for a myriad of reasons. First, wishing may be for the impossible, as I may wish that I gain the ability to fly, or it may be for something outside of the scope of the voluntary, i.e., it is not for what is in my power, as I may wish that the weather is nice tomorrow. *Prohairesis* differs from wish in another important aspect, as "wish

relates rather to the end, choice [*prohairesis* (προαίρεσις)] to the means; for instance, we wish to be healthy, but we choose [*prohairoumetha* (προαιρούμεθα)] the acts which will make us healthy" (*NE* III.2 1111b27-29). For similar reasons, it is not mere opinion, because opinion can pertain to all sorts of things that are not within the scope of what is up to us. Furthermore, we grade *prohairesis* and opinion according to different merits; whereas we praise opinion for the degree to which it is true, we instead praise choice for the degree to which it coincides with what is right (*NE* III.2 1112a5-7).

If it is not appetite, emotion, wish, or opinion, what is *prohairesis* in Aristotle? First, *prohairesis* is not a faculty. Instead, it is a type of desire that involves reason, and hence is a species of rational desire. *Prohairesis* cannot be about just anything, only those things which are up to us. This is entailed by *prohairesis* not being mere wish, as I cannot deliberate about ends that are not in my power to actualize. For instance, I can speculate about the weather, or think about the way in which my friend should proceed in her given scenario, but I cannot deliberate about the means of either of these things. Further, as Aristotle alluded to earlier in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, cited in the discussion distinguishing *prohairesis* from opinion, it is concerned not with ends but *means*.[25] Aristotle writes:

> Having set the end [one wants to actualize], they consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and best produced, while if it is achieved by one only they consider how it will be achieved by this and by what means this will be achieved till they come to a first cause, which in the order of discovery is last. (*NE* III.3. 1112b15-20)

[25] To say that deliberation is about means and not ends does not mean that we cannot deliberate also about the ends for which we form a *prohairesis*, though. In fact, imagine that end, call it end_1, is itself a mere means to a further end, end_2. Perhaps I have recognized that this end_1 is advantageous to the actualization of the higher end, end_2. In that case, end_1 could itself be a step in a *prohairesis* we have formed to actualize end_2.

It is in this passage that Aristotle most clearly explains *prohairesis*, being a sort of deliberation or plan about means to attain a rationally desired end.

A *prohairesis*, then, is defined as a "deliberative desire of things in our own power"; it is a deliberative plan that one forms by considering alternative means to achieve some end, a perceived good, the last step of which is immediately actualizable, requiring no further deliberation (*NE* III.4.1113a8-10). For example, if I form a *prohairesis* to be a doctor, there will be a series of steps involved to bring about that end; to be a doctor, I will have to get in to medical school, and to get in to medical school, I will have to get good grades and study for the MCAT. To study for the MCAT, I will have to purchase an MCAT prep book, so I need to go out to the bookstore to get the prep book. The last step of a *prohairesis* is something that one can immediately do, like how I can immediately get in my car and drive to the bookstore. *Prohairesis* results in desire to actualize the deliberated plan to attain the set end (*NE* III.4.1113a10-12). Recall again Aristotle writes "Even the name seems to suggest that it is what is chosen before other things" (*NE* III.2.11112a17-20); this suggests *prohairesis* can be understood as a sort of plan or resolution one sets for themselves.[26]

Prohairesis is often misleadingly translated as choice, suggesting that it itself is up to us. However, Aristotle does not entertain the possibility that this is the case. *Prohairesis* is not itself up to us, but rather, it *pertains* to that which is up to us; "the object of choice [*prohairetou* (προαίρετοῦ)] being one of the things in our power which is desired after deliberation, choice [*prohairesis* (προαίρεσις)] will be deliberative desire of things in our own power." (*NE* III.3. 1113a9-11). Aristotle never asks whether our *prohairesis* could itself be up to us.[27]

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[26] Gisela Striker, "Two Kinds of Deliberation: Aristotle and the Stoics," in *From Aristotle to Cicero: Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 145.

[27] See Bobzien, "Inadvertent Conception", 144: "The choice we make [*prohairesis* (προαίρεσις)] is itself not one of the things that depend on us, and the idea that it was would have been quite alien to Aristotle's thinking."

Because *prohairesis* is a plan chosen pertaining to that which is up to us to actualize an end, our *prohaireseis* are revealing of what motivates us. Since Aristotle believes a critical criterion for virtuous action is that it is done *because* it is the virtuous choice, actions done from a *prohairesis* are particularly indicative of moral character. This is clear in *NE* III.2, where Aristotle writes that *prohairesis* "is thought to be most closely bound up with virtue, and to discriminate characters better than actions do" (*NE* III.3 1111b5-6). A *prohairesis* is a deliberative desire, meaning it is not a mere fleeting desire or a whim; it is a desire for something that has been heavily contemplated. *Prohaireseis* are plans of action pertaining to things that are up to us that we are highly motivated to actualize (for if we were not so motivated to actualize them, we would not form a *prohairesis* in the first place). As a type of rational desire (*boulēsis*) accompanied by deliberation, *prohairesis* reflects thoughtful consideration, meaning the agent has extremely motivating reasons both for wanting the end for which they have formed the *prohairesis* and for choosing the specific means to actualize it. For instance, I may form a *prohairesis* to get into medical school, and forming this *prohairesis* highlights both what I find important (getting into medical school) and the means that I am willing to do to actualize that end. If my *prohairesis* includes, hypothetically, sabotaging all the other applicants by ripping up and deleting their applications, that is extremely indicative of my moral character and the lengths to which I am comfortable going to ensure I can achieve my own goals; this *prohairesis*, for example, would signal that I hold my own success to be more important than justice of admissions based on merit. Furthermore, Aristotle believes *prohairesis* to be more illustrative of moral character than mere action because "the same action can result from very different *prohaireseis*".[28] For instance, my neighbor and I might both be volunteering at the local animal

[28] Meyer, Susan Suave. "Aristotle on the Voluntary", pg. 140.

shelter, but if he is doing so to help homeless animals and I am doing so to get a lay of the land to eventually steal money from the cash register, even though the action itself may be exactly the same, there is a difference in the moral value of our actions because they are resultant from *prohareseis* aimed at morally different ends. *Prohairesis* is, then, more illustrative of virtue and vice because the difference in value between these two actions is not in the action itself but in the *prohairesis* motivating it.

It should now be clear why Aristotle conceives of *prohairesis* to be indicative of moral character, and why, in turn, in his chapters defining what moral character entails, he says virtues (aretai, or ἀρεταὶ) are "modes of choice [prohaireseis (προαιρέσεις)] or involve choice [*ē ouk aneu prohaireseōs* (ἢ οὐκ ἄνευ προαιρέσεως)" (*NE* II.5, 1106a3-4) Further in *NE* II.6, he says "virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice [*prohairetikē* (προαιρετική)], lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (*NE* II.6, 1106b36-1107a2). That is, virtue is a disposition that involves *prohairesis*. Not only are our *prohaireseis* particularly indicative of our moral character, but they also reflect how successful we are at practical reasoning, which is represented by the extent to which our *prohairesis* actually helps us achieve our desired end. If, for example, I form a *prohairesis* aimed at the end of traveling the world, but this plan actually only gets me as far as Columbus, Ohio, it is clear that I am not very good at practical reasoning.

So, even though I will come to argue that Aristotelian *prohairesis* is not a notion of a will, this does not mean that it does not serve important purposes we now attribute to the modern will – as illustrated, *prohairesis* in Aristotle is extremely valuable because it is particularly indicative of moral virtue, as he believes that the foundations of virtue lie in an agent's chosen character, i.e., the voluntary actions they do resultant of a *prohairesis*. Returning back to Aristotle's

discussion of the voluntariness of virtue and vice, he writes, “the end, then, being what we wish for, *the means what we deliberate about and choose* [*prohairetōn* (προαίρετῶν)], actions concerning means must be *according to choice* [*kata prohairesin* (κατὰ προαίρεσιν)] and voluntary.” (NE III.5. 1113b3-5, emphasis added).

Why Aristotelian Prohairesis is Not a Notion of A Will

But, why should we assume *prohairesis* in Aristotle doesn’t denote a faculty of a will? First and foremost, recall that *prohairesis* is a type of rational desire, and is thus not a faculty at all. Furthermore, this deliberative desire is not “deliberative” in the sense that it decides between alternate courses of action itself, for you can have a *prohairesis* set and still sometimes act against it if a competing desire is stronger. Rather, a *prohairesis* is a sort of plan pertaining to means we deliberate about to achieve some end; a *prohairesis* is not itself subject to deliberation, as you don’t *decide* to decide. Rather, it is the outcome of deliberation of different means and their capability to bring about the desired end. Furthermore, even if *prohairesis* in Aristotle *did* denote an early faculty of a will, Aristotle never entertains the idea that *prohairesis* itself can be something that is up to us, so it is not a plausible candidate for an early notion of a free will; *prohairesis* is not a faculty, nor is it a decider, and much less can we think of it as free, as it is not illustrated to be up to us at all.

Given the tendency to project a willing faculty to Aristotle’s work, translating *prohairesis* in Aristotle merely as “choice” or “decision” seems misleading. “Choice” fails to accurately represent Aristotelian *prohairesis* in a multitude of ways; most blatantly, “choice” commonly carries with it the connotation of a willing faculty, “decision” even more so. Some easily assume that our choices are up to us, but Aristotle did not believe that *prohairesis* is up to us at all, only

that it *pertains to things* that are up to us. Further, choice does not seem to embody the planning function present in Aristotelian *prohairesis*. Aristotle describes *prohairesis* as an evaluation of means to a perceived end, weighing the ease of alternate routes and necessarily culminating in action, which is a picture that is not readily conveyed by the notion of "choice". I believe the best way to conceive of *prohairesis* in Aristotle is as a type of life plan. Recall, this is represented by Aristotle in book II of the *NE*, which proposes that moral virtues "are modes of choice or involve choice", suggesting that the virtuous person is so because they act on principles they have chosen to adopt (*NE* II.5 106a2-4). Also, as suspected by Gisela Striker, in Aristotle's *Politics*, he calls friendship a *prohairesis* of living together, as if you make a plan, a "chosen policy", of living together with someone, you are friends (*Pol*. III 9, 1280b38).[29] This suggests "desire to actualize a plan formed after deliberation of means as they pertain to the desired end" is a more faithful translation. But this, unfortunately, is quite the mouthful and therefore not very practical, so, though lacking some of the nuance, deliberative desire or deliberative plan is perhaps more appropriate.

A Background of Stoic Thought

There is no record of any previous Stoic before Epictetus making use of *prohairesis*. So, Epictetus' use of *prohairesis* is certainly striking. The Stoics before Epictetus rarely make mention of any Aristotelian writing, suggesting they either had little knowledge of him or potentially little interest in him; F.H. Sandbach writes "It is a matter of dispute how much Epicureans and Stoics knew of [Aristotle], but whether through ignorance or deliberate rejection they seem simply to have disregarded many of his most dearly-held opinions and valuable

[29] Striker, "Two Kinds of Deliberation: Aristotle and the Stoics", 147.

innovations."[30] Certainly the Stoics are more worried than Aristotle about determinism and its implications on moral responsibility, but they do not turn to the concept of a *prohairesis* to rectify. At any rate, the fact that he chose to make central to his ethics a previously strictly Aristotelian term requires examination.

Let us begin, then, with a review of Stoic moral psychology to see why Epictetus' adoption of this Aristotelian term is so radical. The Stoic conception of agency differs notably from the tripartite conception formulated by Plato and adopted by Aristotle. The soul according to the Stoics *is* divided, but unlike Aristotle, the Stoics do not posit that these different parts of the soul produce their own desires equally capable of motivating action. Rather, the soul is divided into 8 separate parts, consisting of the "five senses, procreative part, language part, and ruling part, the *hēgemonikon* [τὸ ἡγεμονικόν]" in place of equal rational, appetitive, and spirited factions, but they are not understood as distinctly different parts of the mind. Rather, they are distinct functional elements composing *one* single rational faculty.[31] Stoic doctrine clearly conceives of the soul as unitary – with these elements coming together to constitute a single rational mind. The Stoics reject the partition of the soul, instead reverting to a Socratic model, according to which we are entirely rational beings. A Stoic account of action, contrary to the Aristotelian picture, is composed entirely of impressions, impulse, and a rational assent, dissent, or suspension of judgement thereto.

Central to the Stoic account of action are impressions, which are alterations of the rational soul in response to perceived stimuli that convey some propositional content. This is clearly represented in reports of Stoic thought, including in Aetius, who reports, "an impression

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[30] F.B. Sandbach, *Aristotle and the Stoics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 55.
[31] Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 239

is an affection occurring in the soul" (Aetius 4.12.1, LS 39B),[32] and Plutarch, who reports that the Stoics believed "an impression is a printing in the soul" (Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions* 1084F-1086A, LS 39F). Though impressions may present themselves to non-human animals, rational[33] impressions are reserved for only those possessing a rational soul, i.e., adult humans. Rational impressions can be further broken down into their actual phenomenological appearance, i.e., the "how it looks" part, and the propositional content they convey, i.e., the *axioma* (pl. *axiomata*)[34]. To make this clearer, take an example provided by Tad Brennan: if you are looking at yourself in the mirror, you can distinguish between the actual phenomenological content of the impression as it appears to you, like how it appears a person is standing in front of you, from the propositional content you interpret from the impression, like how you actually understand this person to just be your reflection.[35]

According to the Stoics, the propositional content of an impression is not something you have to automatically accept. This is because we, as rational animals, are equipped with the ability to assent, dissent, or suspend judgement to the impressions we find ourselves with. This is echoed in Epictetus, who writes, "but first of all, don't allow yourself to be dazed by the rapidity of the impact, but say, 'Wait a while for me, my impression, let me see what you are, and what you're an impression of; let me test you out" (*Disc*. 2.18.24). So, though we find ourselves with

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[32] I will be citing fragments like this from Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Further citations will be noted using only the author and work name and section, if applicable, and the Long and Sedley chapter and section number.

[33] As illustrated by Tad Brennan in "Stoic Moral Psychology", (B. Inwood's *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics)* the term "rational" here serves a dual purpose – rational impressions, broadly understood, are reserved for those that occur in response to propositional content, and human beings are considered rational only in the sense that they receive these types of impressions. These impressions are deemed rational merely in the sense that they exist in response to propositional content and present themselves to the faculty responsible for rational thinking. More specifically, however, impressions are only themselves really *rational*, here meaning that they align with reason or logic, if they are "in accord with the perfected reason of the Stoic Sage or God" (Brennan, 260).

[34] Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology", 260-261.

[35] Ibid. 261.

an impression, we do not have to assent or dissent to its propositional content without evaluating it.

The propositional content an impression presents can be factual, like "I am seeing my reflection in the mirror in front of me" or "it is cold", but it can also convey propositional content that are judgements of value, like "money is good" or "it would be good for me to finish my homework." Assent to, or acceptance of the propositional content of an impression in both rational and nonrational agents results in *belief*. If the impression is an *impulsive* impression, i.e., if it presents propositional content that has some evaluative element, assent to the impression will result in *hormē*, usually translated as "impulse".[36] Impulse is entirely constitutive of action; it is not possible for one to have an impulse, an alteration of the soul, towards action without also immediately desiring the actualization of that impulse;[37] This is because impulse is not mere desire, as Plutarch again reports, "the impulse of man is reason prescribing action to him" (Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-contradictions*, 1037f, LS 53R). In a sense, impulse is a decision about how to make use of an impression, so there is no further decision needed about whether to act on an impression after the impulse. This follows clearly from the Stoic conception of the soul as a unified rational agent – in Aristotle, we get an explanation for *akratic* behavior; I can have two competing desires simultaneously, and therefore, it can be true that I have a rational desire to do something and fail to actualize it if my competing nonrational desires are strong enough. However, if the soul is instead comprised of one single rational element, as proposed by the

[36] This translation can be misleading; Stoic *hormē* is an assent to the *axioma* presented by a certain impression and is not something that one may overpower or merely will to ignore. Such a nuance may be implied in the term "impulse" as it is used in English, as it may be said that I have an impulse to change my hairstyle but instead choose not to. This conception is not the correct connotation of impulse to attribute to Stoic moral psychology.

[37] Importantly, just because you have an impulse does not mean you immediately actualize that impulse, as there could be something that prevents us from being able to do so. So, an "impulse" will always result in the agent *desiring to actualize* it, but it will only actually result in actualization of the impulse if the agent is not externally hindered from doing so.

Stoics, it cannot be both that the rational soul assents to an impression and also abstains from desiring to actualize it, for there are no two distinct faculties of the soul that would facilitate such a contradiction.[38] Because of the unipartite rational soul, the Stoics are committed to accept any desire of an adult human as a rational one, i.e. a *boulēsis*. As Frede explains, this notion of a willing "allows us to say that, when a person does not act by being forced or out of ignorance the person acts voluntarily or willingly."[39] So, Frede argues that perhaps the Stoic notion of assent is, in fact, the first notion of a willing, which provides a necessary steppingstone for Epictetus to introduce *prohairesis*.

Given that the Stoics are hard determinists, it may seem that they must be committed to saying that our assent or dissent to impressions, our *willings*, and consequently our actions, too, are predetermined. If so, reconciling this with moral responsibility may seem difficult. However, early and late Stoic philosophers, Epictetus included, did not need to employ the notion of a free will to incorporate moral responsibility into their philosophical framework. Chrysippus, a Stoic philosopher before Epictetus, famously argues that everything in the universe is fully fated, but that nonetheless we are morally responsible for our actions because they are up to us, *to eph' hemin* (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν), which has to do with our prime rational faculty, the *hegemonikon*. *That*

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[38] Whereas the Platonic or Aristotelian conceptions of the soul contradict Plato's representation of Socrates (see again footnote 14), The Stoics can largely be understood to be reverting back to Socratic thought as presented in various dialogues including the *Protagoras*, as "no one freely goes for bad things or things he believes to be bad; it's not, it seems to me, in human nature to be prepared to go for what you think to be bad un preference to what is good" (Protagoras 358d1-4).
The Stoics, like Socrates, cannot appeal to different parts of the soul to explain why sometimes it appears we act against our better judgement, but they are not then committed to the principle that we cannot ever experience *akrasia*. Rather, the Stoic notion of the mind is merely not suited to explain away *akrasia* by appealing to these differing desires in the same way. Stoic doctrine regards such cases as the single rational faculty failing to choose what is best in each situation. The rational element, therefore, in cases in which an agent is deciding between alternatives, cannot be thought of as having battling constitutive elements, all of which have their own desires, as can be pictured in Aristotle. Instead, this rational element is merely folding over on itself, not being pulled in different directions but rather running in circles, turning around abruptly when deliberating on a plan of action. The rational component, in cases of *akrasia*, just does not have a requisite grasp on what it *really* understands to be good.
[39] Ibid., 41.

which is up to us, *to eph' hemin*, is our action resultant from giving or withholding assent, as I may assent to the proposition that it would be good to cross the street, and thus cross the street, so long as I am not externally impeded. What is up to us, *to eph' hemin*, is merely those things for which we may be held morally responsible, as the agent is whom the action can be attributed to.

Chrysippus utilizes the expression "up to us" or "in our power" (both are common translations of *to eph' hemin)* to reconcile determinism and moral responsibility by arguing that they are up to us (*eph' hemin*) through his cylinder analogy. He compares us to a cylinder and proposes we are responsible for our actions despite their external causes being fated much like how a cylinder is responsible for the way it moves when pushed down a hill. It is fully fated that the cylinder will be brought up the hill and given a push, but there is something special about the shape of the cylinder that determines how it rolls down the hill, whereas the shape of a cone or a box would result in a different pattern of motion given the exact same predetermined push. Hence, the path it takes is "up to it". The push is analogous to how external impressions prompt our assent, but the "character" (i.e., shape) of the cone determines its path down the hill; Cicero explains "these cannot begin to move without a push; but once that has happened, [Chrysippus] holds that it is thereafter through their own nature that the cylinder rolls and the top spins" (Cicero, *On Fate* 39-43, LS 62C). Likewise, Chrysippus can say that even if the circumstances leading up to our action are fully predetermined, there is something special about our individual character that determines how we will act in response to them, just like it is "up to" the box, the cone, and the cylinder how they will move down the hill after the same predetermined push. That is why our actions are up to us or in our power (*eph' hemin*), because the outcome of predetermined stimuli can look very different depending on our individual character. Therefore,

Chrysippus need not preserve the ability to do otherwise to justify moral responsibility; it is enough to say that a certain action comes to be through a certain agent's character that makes that agent morally responsible, as "rationale and necessity of fate sets in motion the actual types of causes and their beginnings, but the deliberative impulses of our minds and our actions are controlled by our own individual will and intellect" (Gellius, 7.2.6-13, LS 62D).

Epictetan Philosophy

Now, we are ready to turn to Epictetus, who, as noted earlier, was the first Stoic to employ use of the Aristotelian term "*prohairesis*".[40] Epictetus, who lived in the first to second centuries CE, comes much later than earlier Stoics like Chrysippus. All the writings we have representing his thoughts were penned by his student, Arrian, who produced two works attributed to Epictetus, the *Enchiridion* and the *Discourses*. While the *Enchiridion* is interesting in its own right, the *Discourses* are of central importance to the discussion of *prohairesis*.

It is important to note that while *prohairesis* is likely best translated in Aristotle as "deliberative plan" rather than mere "choice" or "decision", for translating *prohairesis* in Epictetus, finding a word that adequately represents both the divine nature of *prohairesis* and its role as the true self through which we make use of our impressions is extremely difficult. Choice is the standard translation for *prohairesis* in Epictetus, but other philosophers, including Anthony Long, choose rather to translate it as volition. Although, as will be explored later, Epictetus does have a theory of what it is to be free, the Stoics are hard determinists, so "choice" may be inappropriate as it may imply that a person is free from determinism. So, volition has the advantage of side stepping this contradiction, for "when we characterize persons in terms of their

[40] See Frede, *A Free Will*, 2011.

volitions, we do not thereby adopt a view concerning the undetermined freedom of their will".[41] Admittedly, though, "volition" also lacks the sense of divinity Epictetus bestows on *prohairesis*. According to Epictetus, it is not as though correct or incorrect use of one's *prohairesis* can have any effect on the progression of fated events in the universe, but mastery of how we *choose* to use our impressions and align with the will of God is useful. So, "choice" too has its advantages. At any rate, to remain faithful to the translations used of both Aristotle's *NE* and Epictetus' *Discourses*, as well as for ease of comparison between their respective uses of *prohairesis*, I have chosen to let the translations for both remain as "choice".

Now, we may return to Epictetan philosophy. Epictetus seems largely uninterested in making broad metaphysical arguments otherwise commonly found in the works of other Stoic philosophers like Chrysippus, as he does not acknowledge the problems of reconciling determinism and moral responsibility. As an orthodox Stoic, he likely took these things for granted. It seems rather that Epictetus was concerned with providing practical advice according to which one should lead one's life in order to align themselves with the will of God, experience the true freedom of the wise man, and avoid needless and futile frustration. Epictetus introduces talk of *prohairesis*, then, in order to show us where to focus our mental efforts and desire.

In the *Discourses*, Epictetus shifts his attention from that which is up to us, *to eph hemin*, (which, recall, in Chrysippus represents *action* resulting from assent to impression), to *those things* that are up to us, the plural *ta eph' hemin* (τὰ ἐφ'ἡμῖν). The difference in emphasis is subtle and the focus is easy to confuse, but the difference between Chrysippian *to eph hemin* and Epictetan *ta eph hemin* is extremely important. In Chrysippus, all that is *eph hemin*, i.e., all that is "up to us" and therefore matters for causal responsibility, is *action that results* from one's

[41] Long, A. A. *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 220.

impulse (*hormē*), i.e. one's assent or dissent to an impression. Recall that, according to Chrysippus, impulse forms because you have a character that assented to an impression, and as long as you are not externally hindered, you will act on your impulse, so your action resulting from this impulse is up to you. In Epictetus, however, the expression "*ta eph' hemin"*, i.e. "those things which are up to us" or "those things in our power", is restricted solely to the assent or dissent to impressions because there is always something that could possibly hinder the actualization of your *hormē*. Therefore, actions themselves are not in our power, they are not included in what is *ta eph' hemin*. Your actions are not *really* up to you, for whereas "according to Chrysippus, if I take a walk and nothing hinders me from walking, my walking depends on me", by contrast, "for Epictetus it seems not to depend on me, since in principle something could prevent me from walking, even if in this case nothing does."[42] So, according to Epictetus, even if I have an impulse to walk, my ability to walk is not completely in my power, so even if I *do* walk, it is not up to me.

To make this distinction clearer, let us return to the cylinder analogy. Chrysippus suggests that we are responsible for the *actions* that come about as a result of our assent, i.e., we are responsible for *to eph hemin*, because they are caused by our individual characters that makes us behave like a cylinder as opposed to a cone or a square. However, in Epictetus, this is not the case - imagine halfway down the hill there is a large rock or a sheet of ice which would easily alter the course of the cylinder regardless of the path it *would have taken* if the obstacle were not there. Likewise, in our own lives, there are all sorts of external factors outside of our control that can prohibit our ability to bring about actions we set out to perform because of our impulses. So, actually being able to carry out the actions we believe to be good is not in our control. The only

[42] Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom*, 332

thing that is in our control, then, is that which can never be externally impeded, which is how we make use of our impressions in the first place, i.e., what he calls our *prohairesis*.

Prohairesis in Epictetus, then, is the one thing that cannot be externally hindered, which Epictetus believes is the true self, as is found in numerous passages in the *Discourses*, as he writes:

> You have a power of choice [prohairesin (προαίρεσιν)], man, which is secure by nature from hindrance and compulsion. (Disc. 1.17.21)[43]

> For you yourself are neither flesh nor hair, but *choice* [*prohairesis* (προαίρεσις)], and if you render that beautiful, then you yourself will be beautiful." (*Disc*. 3.1.40, emphasis added).

This passage, *Disc*. 3.1.40, is extremely interesting, as it is here that Epictetus aligns the true self with *prohairesis*, and therefore also aligns the correct, or "beautiful", use of our *prohairesis* with the degree to which *we ourselves* are correct, or "beautiful".[44] Further, he writes:

> Our ruling centre [*hegemonikon* (ἡγεμονικὸν)] is and forever continues to be in accord with nature (*Disc*. 3.9.11)

> And can anyone force you to desire what you don't want?—'No one can.'—And to set an aim for yourself, or make a plan, or in general, to deal with the impressions that come to you?—'Not that either; [75] but when I form a desire, someone can hinder me from achieving that desire.'—*If that desire is directed towards something that is your own*, and isn't subject to hindrance, how can he hinder you?—'There is no way in which he can.' (*Disc*. 4.1.74, emphasis added).

So, according to *Disc*. 4.1.74, our desire should only be focused on that which is in our control, and according to *Disc*. 3.9.11, we should be concerned with aligning it nature, i.e., the will of God.

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[43] All English exerpts pulled from the Discourses are from Hard's translation, but all quotations in the original Greek are pulled from the Loeb Classical Library publication of the *Discourses*, translated by W.A. Oldfather. Any further citations from this publication will be found inserted in quotations pulled from the Hard translation.

[44] This quote has interesting ramifications when, later, we will be discussing the possibility that Epictetan *prohairesis* denotes an early candidate for a (potentially free) will.

There is no way one can be externally hindered if their desire is only focused on that which is actually in their power (*eph hemin*). This concept of *eph hemin* is found repeatedly in the *Discourses*:

> Some things lie within our power [*estin eph' hemin* (ἐστιν ἐφ'ἡμῖν)] while others do not [*ouk eph' hemin* (οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν)]; within our power lie moral choice and all actions that depend on that choice, whereas our body and every part of it are not in our power. (*Disc*. 1.22.9-10)

Also found in the *Discourses* is the first-person singular "up to me", *ep emoi* (ἐπ'ἐμοί), and the second-person singular, "up to you", *epi soi (*ἐπὶ σοὶ), as opposed to the first person plural *eph hemin*, "up to us". *Ep emoi* is found in *Disc*. 2.5.4, "external things are not within my power [*ouk ep' emoi* (οὐκ ἐπ' ἐμοί)]; choice is within my power [*prohairesis ep' emoi* (προαίρεσις ἐπ'ἐμοί)]", and in *Disc*. 2.2.2, we get an instance of *epi soi*:

> if you want to preserve your choice [*prohairesin* (προαίρεσιν)] and keep it in accord with nature, you'll be entirely safe; all will go smoothly; you'll have no trouble. If you want to safeguard those things that lie within your own power [*epi soi*] and are free by nature, and remain satisfied with those, what is left for you to worry about? For who holds power over them; who can take them away from you?

This passage, like Disc. 4.1.74 and 3.9.11, further suggests that what we should concern ourselves with is solely what is in our power and keeping that in accordance with the natural plan.

Hard translates *eph hemin*, *ep emoi*, and *epi soi* often as "within our/my/your power", signaling Epictetus' belief that we bear sole causal responsibility for them. Epictetus himself writes, "the gods have placed in our power [*eph hemin* (ἐφ' ἡμῖν)] only the best faculty of all, the one that rules over all the others, that which enables us to make right use of our impressions, but everything else they haven't placed within our power [*d'alla ouk eph hemin* (δ'ἄλλα οὐκ ἐφ'

ἥμῖν)]" (*Disc*. 1.1.7). It should now be clear that *eph hemin,* and all its variants, refer to our *prohairesis*, our ability to make use of our impressions. Correctly using our *prohairetic* ability, is, in turn, necessary for attaining true wisdom, happiness, and freedom.[45] Epictetus also explains that our ability to make use of our impressions is itself *divine*, writing:

> I've given you a certain portion of myself, this faculty of motivation to act and not to act, of desire and aversion, and, in a word, the power to make proper use of impressions; if you pay good heed to this, and entrust all that you have to its keeping, you'll never be hindered, never obstructed, and you'll never groan, never find fault, and never flatter anyone at all. (*Disc*. 1.1.12).[46]

So, correctly using our prohairesis is necessary to attain freedom from external hinderance because doing so aligns our *prohairesis* with that of God, as our power of impulse is itself a portion of divinity God has bestowed upon us. Epictetus writes "we should put our trust not in the crowd, who say that only free men can be educated, but rather in the philosophers, who say that none but the educated can be free." (*Disc*. 2.1.22). So, education about what we should really be concerning ourselves with, i.e., correct use of our *prohairesis*, is necessary to attain freedom.

So, let us turn to what correct use of *prohairesis* look like. If actions are not in our power, and therefore we cannot choose our actions, what is it that we choose? According to Epictetus, what we choose is how we will make use of our impressions, i.e., we choose to assent or dissent to them, or we may choose to suspend judgement about them. So, correctly using our *prohairesis* consists of correctly making use of our impressions. Making correct use of our impressions is

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[45] Freedom, in this case, should be understood as un-predeterminist, which supposes that a decision may not be fully causally determined, but given the same circumstances, the same agent will always decide in the same way. This notion of freedom also allows for interpretation of Epictetan *prohairesis* to be some sort of early notion of a free will, but in a strikingly different way than we may conceive of such a will now. This is all discussed in a later section discussing the possibility Epictetan προαΐρεσις is an early faculty of a (un-predeterministically) free will.

[46] A similar sentiment is found in Seneca, who writes, "that is finally perfect which is perfect in accordance with universal nature", which implies that goodness for man, i.e., moral virtue, consists of aligning oneself with God's will (Seneca, *Letters* 124.13-14, LS 60H).

especially important when the propositional content they are conveying are judgements of value. So let us now turn, briefly, to a discussion of the Stoic account of virtue, vice, and, more importantly, preferred and dispreferred indifferents and the danger of mistaking these things to be good and bad, respectively (i.e., misusing our *prohairesis*). According to Epictetus, the things that people normally desire, like health, money, power, etc., are not actually in our power. So, valuing these things as good or bad results in frustration and an improper use of our *prohairesis*. Deeply embedded in Stoic philosophy is the tenet that that which is good is only virtue and that only vice and participants in vice are bad. All else is indifferent, meaning they are not actually beneficial nor harmful. These things, though lacking no real, i.e. moral, value, may possess practical or planning value. This type of value is called "planning value" because it is merely a hypothetical value aimed at future states of affairs. Health, for instance, has a positive planning value, as when looking toward the future, being healthy is more advantageous than being diseased, and it is reasonable to assume that it is in our nature to aim to preserve our health. The things that are judged to have planning value can be understood as preferred indifferents, whereas those things that have planning disvalue are dispreferred indifferents.[47]

As rational animals, human beings are generally good at observing what has planning value and disvalue, and so we tend to seek preferred indifferents over dispreferred ones.[48] By and

[47] Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology", 263-264.

[48] There is a much more nuanced and interesting conversation to be had about why the Stoics thought that we are skilled at recognizing preferred and dispreferred indifferents. In short, the Stoics believe we, in utero, behave like plants, and after birth, like animals. Animals, as designed by God, have a natural ability to do what is necessary to maintain themselves. Humans, however, gain rationality growing up, and thus, unlike animals who have mere impulse towards self-maintenance, we have ability to maintain ourselves because we choose to do so; we are able to maintain ourselves of our own initiative. This is echoed in the difference between animal and human action. Animals lack assent, so when they receive an impression, it is sufficient to motivate action. Humans however can maintain ourselves through our own initiative, meaning we have the ability to make use of our impressions and decide whether or not they will suffice to motivate us to act. So, humans can recognize those things which are helpful to our self-maintenance as advantageous, which is what makes them preferred indifferents. For more on this topic, see chapter 5 of Frede's "A Free Will".

large, the Stoics do not critique our ability to accurately discern preferred from dispreferred indifferents. The issue Stoic philosophers take with most people with respect to their attitude toward indifferents is that they conflate preferred and dispreferred indifferents with what is actually good and actually bad, respectively. The Stoics took this common tendency of man to be woefully erroneous. To do so is to set oneself up for a lifetime of frustration and disappointment because Stoic metaphysics is fervently deterministic. This sentiment is best illustrated in Hippolytus, who reports:

> (1) They [likely Chrysippus and Zeno][49] maintained that everything is in accordance with fate, and they use the following illustration: (2) that when a dog is tied to a cart, (3) on the one hand, if it wants to follow, it is both pulled and follows, combining what is in its power with Necessity [i.e. fate]; (4) on the other hand, if it does not want to follow, it will be in any event necessitated. (5) And the same holds for human beings, too. (6) For even if they do not want to <follow>, they are in any event necessitated to enter into what is destined <for them>.[50]

In a fully fated universe, necessity will impose itself on a person regardless of her attitude towards her lot, just as the cart will pull the dog regardless of whether he wishes to follow. If he does wish to follow, he may travel in accordance with the cart comfortably and happily, whereas if he resists, the dog will be painfully dragged along the route of the cart, frustrated by the journey. Such frustration is analogous to the frustration of judging preferred and dispreferred indifferents as good and bad outside of their future planning value. So, if it is fated by nature, i.e. God's will, that I will be penniless and cripplingly diseased years before my untimely death, to desire otherwise would be futile and would only result in my own frustration. This sentiment is echoed in Epictetus, as he writes:

> Now, since it lies in the nature of every mind to give its assent to what is true, and to dissent from what is false, and to suspend judgement with regard to what is uncertain, it

[49] Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom*, 352.
[50] Qtd. in Bobzien, "Determinism and Freedom", 351.

> lies in its nature likewise to be moved by desire towards what is good, and by aversion from what is bad, and to remain indifferent towards what is neither good nor bad. … [15] Death is something that lies outside the sphere of choice [*ho thanaos estin aprohaireton* (ὁ θὰνατος ἐστιν ἀπροαὶρετον)]. Away with it. You met a consul? Apply the rule. What kind of thing is a consulship? One that lies outside the sphere of choice, or inside? [*aprohaireton ē prohairetikon*? (ἀπροαίρετον ἤ προηαιρετικόν;)] Outside. Throw that away too, it doesn't stand the test. Away with it; it is nothing to you. (*Disc*. 3.3.2-15)

So, it is useless to concern ourselves with anything outside the sphere of choice.

To regard preferred or dispreferred indifferents as actually good or bad is mistaken because these things have no true power to compel your *prohairesis*. Instead, your mistaken judgement compels itself, as Epictetus writes:

> It isn't what you're threatened with that compels you, but your own judgement that it is better to do this or that than to die. (26) So once again it is your judgement that has constrained you, or in other words, your choice has constrained itself" [Disc. 1.17.25-26, *palin oun to son dogma se ēnagkasen, tout esti prohairesin proairesis (*πάλιν οὖν τὸ σὸν δόγμα σε ἠνάγκασεν, τοῦτ' ἔστι προαίρεσιν προαίρεσις)]

This passage is extremely illustrative of how dangerous it is to assent to propositions that express judgements of value that are actually false; imagine while I am growing up, I (mistakenly) assent to the proposition that to die would actually be the worst thing that could happen to me, worse than doing a vicious action (also recall that assent to impression results in belief). So, if later in life, someone commands me to do something gravely vicious or they will kill me, I would have already formed the belief that it would be worse for me to die than for me to commit a vicious action. So, instead of correctly judging that it would be morally worse to commit a vicious action than it would be to die, my judgement about what to do will be clouded by the belief I acquired because of my former assent, and I would therefore likely choose the vicious action over death. It

is in this way that our *prohairesis* constrains itself, which is extremely dangerous if we are trying to correctly discern when we should assent or dissent to the impressions we find ourself with.

Stoic Freedom and Epictetan Prohairesis as Candidate for An Early Notion of a Free Will

We are now ready to establish the connection between freedom and correctly making use of one's impressions to avoid needless frustration. This connection is clearly illustrated throughout Book II of the *Discourses*. For instance, Epictetus claims "nowadays is freedom [*eleutheria* (ἐλευθερία)] anything other than the ability to live as we wish?" (*Disc*. 2.1.23), and "someone is free [*eleutheros* (ἐλεύθερος)] if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice [*kata prohairesin* (κατὰ προαίρεσιν)] and no one else is able to impede him" (*Disc*. 1.12.9). What it takes to be free, according to the Stoics, is strikingly different than our modern notion of freedom. Learning to correctly identify virtue and vice and regard all else as indifferent is to align one's *prohairesis* with that of God and his natural order. To be free, then, also consists of aligning one's desires with the natural design fated by God.

The Stoics believe that when we are born, we are like non-rational animals, but we slowly acquire reason growing up, after which we evolve into rational adults. However, during this process, we often enslave ourselves to the passions of the body, mistakenly conflating preferred indifferents for what is actually good and dispreferred indifferents for what is actually bad. When we become adults, we are unable to make use of our impressions correctly, for we have effectively tainted our otherwise divine *prohairesis* and trained it to constrain itself. Only the Stoic Sage is truly wise and does not enslave their assent in this way and their assent is therefore always aligned with the will of God. Recall the allegory of the dog and the cart, in which the dog will always be forced to follow the direction of the cart, regardless of whether he

happily and willingly follows along or is dragged the whole way. The cart represents God's plan, and we can choose to be free only if we submit ourselves to the plan he has created.[51] So, in an entirely fated universe, we *will* necessarily follow the cart (i.e., the plan of God) whether we like it or not. The Sage has escaped enslavement of their *prohairesis*, for the Sage will accurately believe that it is according to nature (i.e., God's will) that something happens, and then, like the well-behaved dog, they will readily follow.

The rest of us fools, enslaved before we gain rationality, may only proceed one of two ways: 1) we will be painfully dragged along the ground to follow the cart, constantly frustrated by our inability to change a predetermined universe, or 2) we will be manipulated into willingly following the cart for the wrong reasons, like the driver of the cart is holding in front of us a carrot on a stick enticing us to follow. Whereas the Stoic Sage follows the natural plan of God *because* it is good, as the Stoics believe God wills what is good, the rest of us will be motivated to follow for the wrong reasons; at best, we will follow because God lays in front of us preferred indifferents we mistakenly understand to be good, and thus want for ourselves (or, of course, he motivates us by introducing a dispreferred indifferent we take to be bad and thus want to run away from). As Frede writes, in the case of the foolish enslaved person:

> God only has to set up the circumstances in such a way that either the foolish person in these circumstances has no motivation to do what he is not meant to do or, though he is motivated to do what he is not meant to do, circumstances interfere with his carrying out what he is motivated to do and hence tries to do.[52]

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[51] This is clearly represented in advice given in *Disc*. 2.16.41-42, in which Epictetus writes: "Raise up your eyes toward God and say to him, 'Use me just as you will from this time onward; I'm of one mind with you; I'm yours. I refuse nothing that seems good to you. Lead me where you will, wrap me in whatever clothes you wish. Is it your wish that I should hold office, or remain a private citizen, that I should stay here, or go into exile, that I should be poor, or rich?"

[52] Frede, A Free Will, 78.

This passage is extremely important to establishing freedom in Epictetus. We have seen Epictetus refer to *prohairesis* as that which can never be externally constrained, but it is important to note here that Epictetus does not believe that even *God* can change our assent or dissent, as is clear in *Disc*. 1.1.23, "You can chain my leg, but not even Zeus can overcome my power of choice [*prohairesin* (προαίρεσιν)]". So, God can merely manipulate the circumstances around us to be ones in which we will act in the way he wants us to, but this is not understood as him changing our *prohairesis* itself.

The wise Sage, however, is considered free only because God does not need to mislead, entice, or force him to bring about the natural plan. The Sage will follow for the sole reason that it is God's will that such events take place (which will be actualized anyway according to necessity). The wise man, through his wisdom, will recognize the correct way to proceed in any given scenario, and the good way to proceed in any scenario is exactly what God wills. Frede further writes:

> In [the Sage's] case, to ensure that the world proceeds according to the divine plan so that it will be the best possible world, God cannot simply set up the circumstances in such a way that the person will be forced to act in the desired way. But God does not have to do anything to bring about the wise and free person's compliance.[53]

Epictetus frequently writes of the freedom one gets from submitting one's desires to those of God, like in *Disc*. 4.1.89, "But for my part, I've never been hindered in the exercise of my will, or constrained to do anything against my will. And how could that be possible? I have submitted my impulses to God". Freeing one's *prohairesis*, according to Epictetus, looks something like the following example: imagine I am a fantastic college baseball player and there is every indication I could go "pro", but it is fully fated that I will be struck in my knee by a golf ball,

[53] Ibid., 79.

ruining my chances of making it big. Regardless of how I feel about my situation, there is no way that my body will function well enough to continue to play baseball. So, according to Epictetus, I have two options: 1) I can spend the rest of my life frustrated and upset at my injury, or 2) I can understand that what I expected would be my life plan was not in accordance with God's divine plan. Doing so, I would come to believe that there must have been some reason God brought about my injury, so it must not *actually* be bad, and I therefore free myself from frustration about my situation.

Let us now turn to the question of whether Epictetan *prohairesis* constitutes a notion of a will, perhaps a free will, and what type of freedom such a will might have. Recall that the first notion of willing seems to emerge in the Stoic notion of assent, as argued by Frede, but this is not yet a full notion of faculty of a will, much less a free will, as there is not yet quite a notion of choice. However, both may emerge in Epictetus with his restriction of what is up to us and his adoption of *prohairesis.*

Epictetan *prohairesis* is likely the first notion of a willing ability in ancient thought. Frede argues that it is the first notion of a will, because it is "a disposition to choose to deal with our impressions in a certain way, most crucially how to assent to impulsive impressions … this ability and disposition, insofar as it accounts for your willing whatever it is that you will to do, can be called 'the will'".[54] Epictetus holds that anything that can possibly be externally hindered is not up to us, and therefore limits that which is truly in our power to how we make use of our impressions, by assenting or dissenting to them, examining them, or withholding judgment about the propositional content they convey. Frede argues, in doing so, Epictetus introduces the first real notion of the will being our *prohairesis*, which Epictetus seems to identify with the true self.

[54] Ibid., 46.

I do not believe that *prohairesis* in Epictetus constitute the first notion of a will. I agree with Frede that it may be merely referred to as such in the sense that it accounts for your willings, as Frede writes, "this assent, which you choose to give, will constitute a willing, and this willing is the impulse which makes you act in a certain way."[55] However, there are certain features of *prohairesis* in Epictetus that don't align with an agential will (the discussion of the resemblance to a free will will be explored later). Perhaps, if we can refer to this disposition as a "will", it is only so in the sense that it accounts for our willings.

First and foremost, if by "will" we mean that which is responsible for our choices, a "decider", then Epictetan *prohairesis* cannot be a candidate for a will. We repeatedly find passages in the *Discourses* advising *us* to make the correct use of *our prohairesis*. In Disc. 1.25.1, we get an example of this: "the good of man, and likewise his ill, lies in how *he* exercised his choice" [*to agathon tou anthropou en prohairesei kai to kakon* (τὸ ἀγαθὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐν προαιρέσει καὶ τὸ κακόν), emphasis added]. Further, all the practical advice Epictetus gives about aligning ones *prohairesis* with the natural plan of God to avoid frustration implies the existence of a central self in charge of how we may align our *prohairesis*. It seems, then, that Epictetan *prohairesis* does not denote a faculty of a will as we understand it today, where it is "at the heart of human agency"[56], because Epictetus implies the existence of a *more essential self* that dictates how we use our *prohairesis*.

This seems entirely contradictory to passages we find elsewhere in the *Discourses*, where Epictetus seems to identify *prohairesis* with the true self. Recall, for instance, he writes "For you yourself are neither flesh nor hair, but *choice* [*prohairesis* (προαίρεσις)], and if you render that beautiful, then you yourself will be beautiful." (*Disc*. 3.1.40). But, as we have seen already,

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Pasnau, Chapter 3: "The Agential Will", *Medieval Voluntarism and Moral Agency*, (unpublished manuscript)

elsewhere he seems to suggest a more central self that is responsible for how we make use of our *prohairetic* ability. Perhaps Epictetus himself did not quite make up his mind about how to rectify this contradiction, if he noticed it at all.

At any rate, Epictetus' work was important for the later development of a notion of a will in medieval thought with the rise of the *liberum arbitrium*, the "agential will". The crucial step made by these medieval philosophers is to shift from saying that you must control your *prohairesis*, as is present in Epictetus, to saying that the will *itself* is in control. It is incomprehensible to claim that the agential will is something controlled by us. Rather, it seems that this will *itself is* the controlling faculty. This agential sense is not present in Epictetus' discussion of *prohairesis*. Epictetan *prohairesis*, then, can be more accurately understood as a willing disposition than a will itself; for this reason, I believe *prohairesis* in Epictetus is a "proto-will", only in the sense it provides the necessary steppingstone for the later development of an agential will. (Please note: the following discussion will be pertaining to the possibility that *prohairesis* in Epictetus may further be an early notion of a free "will", but keep in mind it is solely in this sense of a free *proto*-will as it is a steppingstone to the first actual notion of a will, which arises in the medieval period. However, the term free proto-will is admittedly clunky, so I will merely be using the word "will".)

I suggest that *prohairesis* in Epictetus constitutes the first notion of a *free* (proto)will as it emerges in the *Discourses*. But, if Epictetan *prohairesis* is an early version of a free will, it is not a notion of a free will like the one we have in mind today. Recall that, according to Bobzien, the modern notion of freedom of the will is a subset of indeterminist freedom, where there exists some deciding faculty that chooses action when the outcome of the decision is not causally determined, i.e., it is *indetermined*. This indeterminism of the outcome of decision is commonly

associated with modern conceptions of a free will, as many people have in mind freedom to do otherwise as a component of a truly free will. Any notion of indeterminist freedom was not present in the time of Aristotle or Epictetus, but more common in antiquity, and especially present in Stoic thought, is the concept of "*un*-predeterminist freedom". This is the kind of freedom that obtains when a choice made by an agent is not necessarily determined by external causal factors, but given the same dispositions in the same circumstance, the agent will *always* choose the same option. This is the type of freedom the Stoics seem to attribute to the wise Stoic Sage because their assent need not be manipulated or coerced, and thus is not determined like the fool's assent. Epictetan *prohairesis* can only be understood as the first notion of a free "will" if the freedom we have in mind is un-predeterminist, not indeterminist.

Why Prohairesis?

Epictetus' concept of *prohairesis* represents a striking shift from Aristotle's original concept of *prohairesis*, through which Epictetus radically limits the scope of that which is up to us. In Aristotle, what is up to us is what is voluntary, being that which we are the moving principle of and what we can be held morally responsible for. In Aristotle, *prohairesis* pertains to that which is up to us, but he never considers whether *prohairesis* is itself something that could be in our active control. In Epictetus, what is up to us and in our power, *ta eph hemin*, is restricted to only that which can never be externally hindered, which is our ability to make use of our rational impressions, as Epictetus writes:

> 'Yes, but what if I have an impulse to go for a walk, and someone else prevents me?'— What can he prevent in you? Surely not your assent? — 'No, but rather my poor body.'— Yes, as he could a stone.—'Granted, but I can no longer go for my walk.' [73] —And who told you that taking a walk is an act of your own that isn't open to hindrance? For my part, I said *only that your impulse to do so isn't subject to hindrance*. But when it

> comes to the use of our body, and its cooperation, you've learned long since that *none of that is your own*. (*Disc*. 4.1.72-73, emphasis added)

This passage is extremely important to understanding why Epictetus chose *prohairesis* to denote this faculty, even though he uses it to mean something entirely different than the original Aristotelian term. Remember back to the dog and the cart analogy – the dog cannot control the course of the cart no matter how much he wishes he could because the course of nature is not up to him. Likewise, I can assent to any proposition that to do x would be good, and there is any number of things out of my control that may constrain my ability to actually do it if it is outside the plan of God. But, there is no one who can constrain my assent, my *prohairesis*, which is the only thing I am fully casually responsible for. So, if the dog learns to control his desires such that he wants only to follow the cart no matter which way it goes, there is nothing that can impede him from doing so. Similarly, I can align my *prohairesis* with the natural plan of God (which will come about regardless of my feelings toward it), and in doing so I am never subject to hindrance, even by God himself, as my will has already been aligned with his. So, if it is in God's plan that my body fail, I will not be upset at my deteriorating health, because this is neither in my control nor is it actually bad.

Prohairesis in Aristotle is an agent's ability to choose their own life plan.[57] Perhaps Epictetus took aligning one's desires with the natural (i.e, God's) plan to give one an analogous ability to choose a life plan; even though they are not able to choose their own fate in the same way, they may adjust their desires, acknowledging that all they are is how they make use of their impressions, and can thus avoid frustration. By aligning one's will with the will of God, one also ensures that there is nothing they will face that will frustrate them, because the will of God is

[57] Striker, "Two Kinds of Deliberation: Aristotle and the Stoics", 2022.

fully necessitating. As quoted earlier, in *Disc*. 1.12.9, Epictetus writes "someone is free [eleutheros (ἐλεύθερος)] if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice [*kata prohairesin* (κατὰ προαίρεσιν)] and no one else is able to impede him"; this does not mean that the wise Sage is free because he can bend the world around him to fit what is in accordance with his choice. Rather, he is free because he manipulates his choice to fit God's necessitated plan, recognizing it as truly divine.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored both Aristotelian and Epictetan *prohairesis.* Let us conclude by again considering the extent to which either constitute a faculty of a will. Aristotelian *prohairesis* cannot be a faculty of a will, much less a faculty of a free will, as it is not a faculty at all, merely a type of rational desire, a *boulēsis*. Furthermore, even if it was a faculty, Aristotelian *prohairesis* cannot be understood as a notion of a *free* will, as he never states that it is itself up to us, only that it pertains to what is up to us. However, this is not to say that *prohairesis* in Aristotle does not perform important functions we currently designate to the faculty of the will; our *prohaireseis* are highly indicative of both our moral character, revealing the ends we desire and the means that we are willing to go to to actualize them, and how good we are at practical reasoning.

Prohairesis in Epictetus is an important step toward the development of the concept of a will in antiquity, restricting the scope of that which is up to us. In Aristotle, that which is up to us is the voluntary, and in earlier Stoic doctrine, it is our action consequent from our mental assent. Epictetus restricts that which is up to us only to that which can never be externally hindered, even by Zeus himself, which is our *prohairesis*. Epictetus certainly has very interesting things to

say about *prohairesis*, some of which makes it resemble the agential will developed later in the medieval period, perhaps resembling even a *free* will. His notion of freedom is a very distinct concept of freedom, as it does not denote any freedom to do otherwise than one actually does; freedom in Epictetus merely consists of freedom from enslavement of our *prohairesis*. But notably, his language suggests there may be some more central authority that can choose how to utilize and align our *prohairesis*; Epictetan *prohairesis*, therefore, does not quite constitute a notion of an agential will. So, though perhaps not a notion of a will itself, much less a free will, Epictetus' use of *prohairesis* provided a valuable steppingstone to the development of the free will problem in late antiquity.

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