

Prohairesis, Voluntariness and Virtue

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Thesis submitted for the MSt in Ancient Philosophy

July 2022

Abstract

In the ethics of both Aristotle and Epictetus, *prohairesis* occupies a central role, relating ends, desire and action. Because Epictetus's conception of *prohairesis* is founded upon Stoic psychology, its dissimilarity to Aristotle's has often been emphasised. However, I contend that this view risks understating the connection between the two: Aristotle and Epictetus each maintain that *prohairesis* cannot be compelled, thus affording it great significance in defining autonomy, voluntariness of action and virtue of character. As Aristotle says, "people do bad things even when compelled to but no one decides under compulsion" (*EE* II.11, 1228a12–15).

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1. Introduction

Men of evil mind do not know the good that they hold in their hands till they lose it.

—Sophocles, *Ajax* 964

The basis of this thesis is a philosophical peculiarity: that, to our knowledge, among all ancient thinkers, only two, from different schools and at almost four centuries' remove from one other, employ *prohairesis* as a central concept. As I will show, for Aristotle (c. 384–322 BCE) and Epictetus (c. 50–135 CE), *prohairesis* connects the overarching ethical goal of living well to our capacity for rational reflection, and to the limitations of what lies within our power. These areas of apparent similarity invite comparison, and this is my project—to set out each account, to evaluate the extent to which the *prohairesis* they describe are alike, and to elucidate where and why they diverge. I will conclude that past studies, especially those that identify a general “lack of match between Epictetus’ and Aristotle’s concepts” (Sorabji, 2007, p. 93), have neglected significant affinities between the two. Most notably, both maintain that *prohairesis* and not action should be used to evaluate moral character, as it cannot be compelled, and is always up to us. In the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), Aristotle posits that “people do bad things even when compelled to but no one decides under compulsion” (*EE* II.11, 1228a15), a claim echoed in Epictetus’s famous assertion that “you can chain my leg, but not even Zeus can overcome my decision” (*Discourses* I.1.23). In addition, both define a virtuous person as one who is always and knowingly in a state of good *prohairesis*, and who uses this faculty to ensure that their interaction with the external world promotes living well.

In Section 2, I will set out Aristotle’s theory of *prohairesis*, as presented in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Before analysing how Aristotle arrives at the conclusion above, I will set out a brief survey of the differing senses in which the word *prohairesis*, formed as a compound of a prefix *pro(s)* and the word *hairesis* (choice), can plausibly be understood, and why this range of meaning presents difficulties for translation (2.1). Additionally, I will provide justification for focusing

on the *Eudemian Ethics* and not the *Nicomachean* (*EN*), despite the latter being the text upon which the preponderance of studies of *prohairesis*, and of Aristotle's ethics, is based (2.2). Given the dense interrelation of concepts in Aristotle's moral psychology, it would not be possible to focus solely on the chapters (II.10–11) that directly establish the role in which *prohairesis* is cast. For this reason, I will explore sequentially the entirety of the latter half of book II of the *EE* in Subsection 2.3, with supporting evidence drawn from elsewhere in the *EE*, and other works by Aristotle, where necessary. The relevant chapters centre, in turn, on causation and agency (II.6), voluntariness (II.7), force and compulsion (II.8), ignorance and responsibility (II.9), the definition of *prohairesis* (II.10), and the relationship between *prohairesis* and virtue (II.11). Where there are noteworthy areas of differentiation between the *EE* and the *EN*, and indeed between my interpretation and that of others, I will highlight them. I will conclude by arguing that, in positing the uncompellability of *prohairesis*, and by strongly linking this to the evaluation of state of character, Aristotle draws out how crucial *prohairesis* is to his notion of living well more clearly in the *EE* than in the *EN*.

In Section 3, I will conduct a study of *prohairesis* in Epictetus's philosophy, as relayed in the *Discourses* and the *Handbook*. Due to the structure of these works, this analysis will be carried out topically, rather than in the order presented by Epictetus. First, I will establish the foundations of his ethics, and of his version of *prohairesis*, in the context of his Stoic predecessors (3.1). Following this, I will explicate how *prohairesis* relates to that which is up to us, and examine how we should understand the claim that we can only attain freedom by perfecting it, and restoring it to its natural state (3.2). Subsection 3.3 will address the issue of how *prohairesis* relates to action, and to external objects. Through examining *Discourse* II.5, and the analogy of life to a ball game, I will interpret Epictetus as arguing that the objects of *prohairesis* can include plans of action, and the careful use of externals, so long as no real value is placed upon material things in themselves. I will conclude by returning to the theoretical and practical importance of *prohairesis* to Epictetus—the only way to take control of our lives, and thus to attain happiness, is through understanding what makes good *prohairesis*, and the habituation of this faculty.

In Section 4, I will evaluate the degree of similarity between Aristotle and Epictetus's conceptions of *prohairesis*, using notable previous comparisons as starting points for discussion. Widely accepted broad-stroke (dis)similarities, many of which are surveyed in Long (2002), will first be established (4.1). Subsequent to this, I will set out Sorabji's (2007) analysis, which stresses the disagreement of the two *prohairesis* on the basis of differences in what is 'up to us', and show that it relies on apparent misconceptions of this notion in connection to *prohairesis*, both in Aristotle and Epictetus (4.2). Finally, I will challenge Frede's (2012) assertion that in Epictetus but not Aristotle we find a plausible notion of a 'free will', as, for both, the virtuous person uses good *prohairesis* in every relevant instance (4.3). From these points, my overall conclusion, that the likeness of Aristotle and Epictetus's accounts of *prohairesis* has previously been understated, emerges. I will end, in Section 5, by giving an outline of some of the questions this conclusion raises for our understanding of the history of Aristotelian thought, and its relationship to the development of Stoicism in the Roman period.

2. Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* on *Prohairesis*

2.1. The Meaning of *Prohairesis*

Prior to exploring the use of the concept of *prohairesis* in Aristotle, there is value in decomposing the possible meanings of the term itself, such that we have a broad understanding within which its treatment in the *Eudemian Ethics* can be contextualised. '*Prohairesis*' is formed of two parts, a prefix and a noun—*pro(s)* + *hairesis*. The latter component, *hairesis*, is widely accepted to be broadly equivalent in meaning to the English term 'choice', sometimes with a fairly strong sense. In early Stoic ethics, for example, *hairesis* is often restricted to objects that are really good and bad, whereas the weaker *ekloge* ('selection') is used regarding indifferents.¹ In contrast, the prepositions *pro* and *pros* have numerous senses, depending on context; the occurrence of two in the ancient literature is uncontroversial:²

¹ See e.g. Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives* (DL) 7.104–5, Sorabji (2007, p. 93).

² Inwood (1985, pp. 240–242) presents a succinct overview of this point.

Temporal : *prohairesis* is choice taken prior to (*pro* + genitive) an action, or a subsequent choice.

Preferential : *prohairesis* is choice of one thing in preference to (i.e. before — *pro* + genitive) another.

We need not stop at two, however. As Nielsen (2018, 2022) observes, in most modern editions of the *EE*, 1226b8 is emended from a definition of *prohairesis* as “*hairesis ... heterou pros heteron*” (lit. ‘choice of one thing for another’), to “*hairesis ... heterou pro heterou*”, because this *pro* + genitive construction permits the dominant temporal and preferential readings. However, if we reject this emendation, then the original *pros* + accusative construction suggests a third sense:

Teleological : *prohairesis* is choice for the sake of (*pros* + accusative, *pro* + genitive) an end.³

This leaves us with three distinct ways in which we can understand the word *prohairesis*. I find it highly plausible that Aristotle and Epictetus’s use of it as a term of art was motivated in part by this flexibility, of which they were surely aware; indeed, all three senses are broadly applicable to both accounts.

There appear to be two main problems underlying the lack of consensus concerning the translation of the word *prohairesis*: the breadth of meaning that can be conveyed by the term itself means that it is challenging to work on this basis alone; and its philosophical usage is so closely tied together with other related concepts that isolating its meaning without reference to these is not straightforward. Many translators have ultimately chosen to derive a rendering from their perception of its role in a particular philosophical system—for example, ‘deliberate’, ‘rational’, or ‘purposive’ choice in Aristotle, and ‘volition’ or ‘will’ in Epictetus.⁴ In a comparative study, however, this approach does not seem suitable, and so, where *prohairesis* is

³ For detailed arguments for rejecting Sylburg’s emendation, and for the validity of a teleological reading of *pro* + genitive, see Nielsen (2022).

⁴ These are the translations favoured, respectively, by Reeve (2021), Crisp (2014), Kenny (1979), Long (2002) and Frede (2012).

translated here, I opt instead for ‘decision’,⁵ which I believe can be read in each of the three ways identified above, without having obvious further implications for what the concept substantially consists in.⁶

2.2. Reading the *Eudemian Ethics*

Fifty years ago, the use of the *Eudemian Ethics* as the basis for an analysis of Aristotle’s ethics would have been deeply unusual, and would likely have been rebuked. It arguably still requires justification. The *EE* has, however, begun to emerge from the shadow of its Nicomachean sibling over this period. Harlfinger’s (1971) identification of the ‘common books’ (*EE* IV–VI = *ENV*–VII)⁷ in historic manuscripts of the *EE* greatly reduced the prevalence of the view that they are a much later insertion from the *EN*, thus reopening the question of the chronology of these books, and of the two works. In view of this, Kenny (1978), perhaps the staunchest opponent of the historic relegation of the *EE* to an “inferior and provisional position”, used textual analysis to support three claims that I believe are worth noting: that the original home of the common books is the *EE*; that the *EE* is later than the *EN*, and thus represents a more mature stage in Aristotle’s ethical thought; and that between Aristotle’s death and the second century CE, writers refer with far greater frequency to the *EE* than the *EN*. This last claim, if true, would suggest that the *EE* and not the *EN* was the basis for the understanding of Aristotle’s ethics at the time of Epictetus, and therefore would be more likely to have influenced his thought. Evaluating these claims regarding textual history is beyond the scope of this thesis—suffice to say that they have proven highly divisive, but are yet to be conclusively refuted, and have led to a growing drive towards granting higher esteem to the *EE*, and study of it on its

⁵ As do Inwood and Woolf (2011), Irwin (1999), Meyer (2011) and Nielsen (2022), among others.

⁶ Epictetus, unlike Aristotle, nowhere provides a nominal definition of *prohairesis*. One plausible explanation of this is that he is assuming familiarity with the term on the part of the reader, either in an Aristotelian context or in a Stoic one. Stobaeus refers to an early Stoic notion of *prohairesis* as a “*hairesis pro haireseos*” (*Ecl.* 2.87), suggesting a choice temporally before a choice; as Inwood (1985, p. 241) notes, and the following discussion will elucidate, Epictetus’s usage appears to align less with this narrow definition than with Aristotle’s.

⁷ Because the focus in this thesis is on the *EE*, references to the common books will be to their location in this work, although flagged with an asterisk (i.e. *EE* * IV–VI). This is not intended to represent my position on their provenance.

own merits.⁸ This shift in status is exemplified by the attitude of Reeve (2021, p. xxi), who maintains that neither the *EE* nor the *EN* is decidedly superior, but that the comparative strength of each varies from topic to topic. However, the volume of detailed scholarship on the *EE*, including on the subject of *prohairesis*, is yet to reflect this increased credibility. For this reason, and the conjectured possibility that it is the more likely influence on Epictetus, I believe that the *EE* warrants the attention afforded to it here.

2.3. Aristotle's Eudemian Account of *Prohairesis*

Aristotle's account of human action in *EE* II culminates in the following passage:

...it is in reference to the decision rather than to the deed that we bestow praise and blame on all (even though the activity of virtue is more choiceworthy than virtue itself), since people do bad things even when compelled to but no one decides under compulsion. (II.11, 1228a12–15).

The central claim here is that because our decision cannot be compelled, unlike our action, it is the appropriate object of praise and blame. There is no parallel to this argument in the *EN*, and, as I will show in Section 4, it implies a greater degree of similarity between Aristotle and Epictetus's philosophy than has been widely acknowledged. The conclusion of Aristotle's argument at 1228a12–15 cannot, however, be examined without first defining the concepts (decision, compulsion (*anangke*), praiseworthiness) it relates, and reconstructing the preceding stages. I will thus build my analysis from the account of cause in II.6, which Aristotle himself identifies as the appropriate "starting point" (*arche*) of enquiry (1222b15).

The first section of II.6 seeks to identify and characterise some species of *archai* (*EE* II.6, 1222b15). Within this *genus*, a distinction is drawn between the *arche* that all natural (i.e. animate but not divine)⁹ beings can be, namely the starting point of the reproduction of things "of the same sort", and an *arche* that humans, uniquely among animals, can be: the "starting point of certain actions [*praxeis*]" . This latter type is restricted to humans, as no other animal

⁸ For a summary of the status of the debate sparked by Kenny (1978), see Jost (2014).

⁹ Reeve (2021, p. 185, n. 138).

“acts” in a meaningful sense (1222b19). The next differentiation drawn between *archai* is between those that originate “movements” (*kinesis*), which are termed “authoritative” (*kurios*), and those that do not (1222b21). As an action is a kind of movement, humans can thus be said to be authoritative starting points of some actions (1222b29). Following this, Aristotle links the notion of *archai* to that of causation—he defines an *arche* as a “cause” (*aition*) of which “nothing further is the cause”, which is to say a first or uncaused cause (1222b40). In this way, we can now observe two crucial distinctions: not all *aitia* are *archai*, but only those that do not have further causes; and not all *archai* are *kuriai*, but only those that lead to *kinesis*.

With these points in place, the next concept introduced is necessity. At 1223a1, Aristotle claims that “what follows from things that are of necessity is also necessary, but what follows from that which is not necessary may surely turn out in opposite ways”.¹⁰ Where humans are the authoritative starting point for action, these actions are not of necessity, and therefore (it is implied but not stated) neither are humans. This is followed by an elucidation of the sense in which these actions are contingent. They are not necessary as they can “come about or not come about”, and we are the *kuria arche* of them because this coming about (or not) is “up to oneself” (*eph’hauto*). In other words, we are authoritative over their “existence or non-existence” (1223a5–7).¹¹ This status, of something being up to oneself, holds if and only if one is its cause (1223a9). We are thus, in short, the authoritative starting point, and cause, of actions whose existence or non-existence is non-necessary, and up to us (*eph’hemin*).

The final section of II.6 provides a first indication of how Aristotle intends to develop his argument towards the conclusion at the end of II.11. I believe that, if we are to be charitable, we should seek to identify a coherent reconstruction of this argument. If we amend (c1) (see n.

¹⁰ I understand the kind of necessity referred to here as follows: a starting point, and its consequence, are necessary, if, because of the sort of thing the starting point is, the consequence will always follow. For example: the triangle having two right angles within it is the starting point of the demonstration that the quadrilateral has four; this result is necessary (1222b32). To say that something is not necessary in this sense clearly does not imply that it is causally undetermined.

¹¹ I side with Irwin (1980, p. 345), against Kenny (1978, pp. 7–8), who maintains that we should interpret Aristotle as here arguing that we can also be authoritative starting points of actions that are up to us to do, but not up to us not to do, such as growing old. This would be a significant divergence from the *EN*, but is not required by the language here, nor supported by the only other passage (1233a33) cited by Kenny as evidence.

13 below), and accept that in the *EE* ‘involuntary’ is equivalent to the negation of ‘voluntary’,¹² the text supports this valid formalisation:

- (p1) We are praised (blamed) for our virtue (vice), and the actions resulting from it (1223a10).
- (p2) If we are praised (blamed) for something, we are cause of it (1223a12).
- (c1) We are cause of our own virtue (vice), and the actions resulting from it (from p1, p2) (1223a14).¹³
- (p3) If something is either voluntary (*hekousion*) for us, or in accordance with our decision, we are cause of it. If something is involuntary (*akousion*) for us, we are not cause of it (1223a16).
- (p4) If something is in accordance with our decision, it is voluntary for us (1223a18).
- (p5) If something is voluntary for us, we are cause of it. If something is involuntary for us, we are not cause of it (from p3, p4).
- (c2) Our own virtue (vice) is voluntary for us (from c1, p5) (1223a20).

From (p2) and 1228a12–15, neither of which are ambiguous in meaning, we can already see that Aristotle’s argument will entail that we are cause of our own *prohairesis*, and that it must be up to us, as it is the correct object of praise and blame. It has been argued, for example by Bobzien (2013, 2014), that there is no direct textual evidence in the *EN* that *prohairesis* is up to us. While it is correct that Aristotle states this outright in neither *Ethics*, an argument similar to that above can be constructed from the *EN*: we are praised for that which is voluntary (*EN*

¹² Unlike in the *EN*, in the *EE* Aristotle does not refer to additional classes of ‘non-voluntary’ and ‘mixed’ actions.

¹³ Aristotle’s actual claim here is that virtue and vice *concerns* (*peri* + genitive) that of which we are cause (i.e. certain actions), but the stronger claim follows from (p1) and (p2), and is required for the rest of the argument. Reeve (2021, p. 186, n. 145) opts instead to alter (c2) to suggest that virtue and vice *concern* that which is voluntary; doing so, however, removes the argumentative link between (c1–2) and (p1–5). This argument, if it is to be viewed as a continuation of the preceding discussion, seems to lack an as-yet-undemonstrated premise—that if an action is up to (caused by) us, and derives from a certain state of character, that state of character is itself up to (caused by) us. Aristotle addresses this point at *EN* III.5, 1113b7, ff.

III.1, 1109a30); if something is voluntary it is up to us (III.1, 1111a21); our decision is an appropriate object of praise (III.2, 1112a7); therefore decision is up to us.¹⁴ There are several unresolved issues, including why *prohairesis* is up to us, its relation to the voluntary, and why it (but not action) is uncompellable. Aristotle's response to these puzzles hinges upon the definition of the *hekousion* and its relation to force (*bia*) and compulsion, as presented in II.7–9, to which we now turn.

At the start of II.7, Aristotle gives three broad notions with which the voluntary could plausibly be identified: “desire” (*orexis*), decision, or “thought” (*dianoia*) (*EE* II.7, 1223a24). Within desire, however, there are three candidate species—“wish” (*boulesis*), “spirit” (*thumos*), and “appetite” (*epithumia*) (1223a26)—which bear the same names as those characteristic of each part of Plato's tripartite soul.¹⁵ The remainder of II.7 proceeds as an argument by elimination, with each kind of *orexis*, and then *prohairesis*, being discounted in favour of voluntariness as a kind of *dianoia*.

As Kenny (1978, p. 21) notes, several of the arguments Aristotle gives against the view that the voluntary is a kind of desire appear intended to reflect popular sentiment, rather than to set forth his own view. Aristotle offers two main arguments *in propria persona* against the candidatures of spirit and appetite. First, that there is often a conflict between these forms of desire and action, as in the case of the continent person (*enkrates*), who acts voluntarily in accordance with his *boulesis*, but against his *epithumia*. Second, the simple observation made at 1223b30, which he takes as a “proof” (*tekmerion*) of his case, that in many cases an action is voluntary, and yet occurs in “absence of anger¹⁶ and appetite”. If one can exist without the other, or in opposition to it, then they cannot be one and the same; both are true in this instance. The

¹⁴ If Aristotle were a participant in the contemporary debates concerning free will and compatibilism, it would be surprising that he does not explicitly state that *prohairesis* is always up to us. However, we have no evidence to suggest he was aware of these issues.

¹⁵ See e.g. Kenny (1978, p. 13); Reeve (2021, p. 186, n. 145) cautions against a straight-forward identification of the two.

¹⁶ For Aristotle, anger (*orge*) and spirit (*thumos*) are often synonymous (see Reeve (2021, p. 186, n. 145)).

case against wish, made at 1223b30–36, is more rigorous. I understand it as a *reductio*, as follows:¹⁷

- (p5) The incontinent person (*akrates*) does what he thinks bad.
- (p6) No one wishes what he thinks bad.
- (p7) If voluntary action is action in accordance with wish, the incontinent person acts involuntarily (from p5, p6).
- (p8) Unjust action is voluntary.
- (c3) If voluntary action is action in accordance with wish, the incontinent person does not commit an unjust act (from p7, p8).

Because it is taken as absurd (“impossible”) to suggest that incontinent action is not unjust, we must reject the identification of voluntary and wished action. Aristotle has thus eliminated all the species of desire as determinants of voluntariness.

The next line of argument, made at the start of II.8, is for the discounting of *prohairesis* as defining voluntariness. This conclusion emerges from a few simple claims—that every wished action is voluntary; that some wished actions are completed “instantaneously”; and that decision cannot occur instantaneously (1224a1–3). From this, it follows that there are some wished actions (those that occur instantaneously), and therefore some voluntary actions, that take place without decision. Thus, we can see that voluntary action cannot be identical to prohairetic action. This argument raises a number of questions concerning *prohairesis* that must be addressed. First, why it is not instantaneous, and what significance this has for our understanding of it. Second, what its precise relation to wish is. Third, why it is often taken to occupy such a significant role in Aristotle’s conception of virtue, given that at present it seems to be removed from it by the distinct notion of voluntariness. I will return to each of these later.

The relationship between voluntariness, force and compulsion occupies the remainder of II.8, and is clarified through the examination of two relevant puzzles (*aporiai*). A

¹⁷ Kenny (1978, p. 24) formalises this passage in similar terms.

biconditional relation between force and the voluntary is first established: “what is forced is involuntary and ... everything involuntary is forced” (1224a10). While force and compulsion are easily defined for non-rational beings as movement “from without contrary to ... internal impulse”, such as the rock that is forced or compelled upwards, contrary to its (gravitational) impulse to move downwards (1224a18–23), the case of humans is puzzling as they may have one or more conflicting internal impulses—the continent person, for example, moves in accordance with the stronger (“intrinsic”) rational impulse, but contrary to an appetitive one (and the incontinent vice-versa) (1224a30). They are thus often said to act through force or compulsion, but also voluntarily (1224b1). This is not possible under the above definition of force. Aristotle resolves the problem in this way: the incontinent person is not forced and is acting voluntarily as they are following an internal impulse, not an external one; their *boulesis* can, however, be said to be forced as the *epithumia* is external to it and overriding it (1224b14–28). That force/compulsion occurs when an external impulse overcomes an internal one will be crucial to our understanding of how *prohairesis* is un-compellable.

The second *aporia* concerns cases where someone does something that they would otherwise think bad, because the alternative is another evil. Again, popular perception is that they act voluntarily and by compulsion (1225a7). If the alternative evil is trivial, it would be “absurd” to argue other than that the action is voluntary, un-compelled and unforced (1225a16). If it overstrains human nature, we cannot speak of our actions being “up to us”, and so they are clearly involuntary, forced and compelled (1225a27). In the intermediate case, of the bad action preventing something “worse and more painful” (1225a18), two readings have been proposed: that it is voluntary, unforced but compelled; or that it is involuntary, forced and compelled (*contra EN III.1*).¹⁸ I take the latter to be the more plausible view, even though it requires a minor emendation to the Greek,¹⁹ as nowhere else in the *EE* does Aristotle differentiate force and compulsion, and the directly preceding discussion of *akrasia* appears to define and otherwise treat the two identically. Rejecting this synonymity would also leave us without any

¹⁸ See e.g. Kenny (1978, pp. 38, ff.), Reeve (2021, p. 189, n. 164), Wood (1982, p. 143).

¹⁹ “*Anankazomenos kai me bia*” becoming “*anankazomenos kai e bia*”. See e.g. Kenny (1978, p. 44), Reeve (2021, p. 189, n. 164).

explanation of the nature of the link between compulsion on one hand, and force and voluntariness on the other; such a link appears crucial in the chain of reasoning that takes Aristotle from his discussion of cause to the conclusion that because it is un-compellable, *prohairesis* is praise or blameworthy.

The final concept Aristotle connects to voluntariness is knowledge, or lack thereof. Here he adopts a broad notion of involuntariness—where we are in a state of “ignorance” (*agnoia*) of “what, with what or on whom” as concerns our action, this action is involuntary (1225b8).²⁰ In this way, all that is done “in” and “due to” ignorance is involuntary and therefore forced (1225b9). However, he mitigates this claim by including in the voluntary two categories of ignorance: where the agent has the relevant knowledge but “negligently” fails to use it; and where they do not possess the knowledge but it is knowledge “easy or necessary [to know]”, and their ignorance is a consequence of “negligence, pleasure or pain” (1225b14). With this, Aristotle is in a position to give a complete definition of the voluntary, as “anything one does without ignorance that is up to oneself not to do” (1225b10). With this understanding of the voluntary in place, we are finally able to introduce a substantive account of *prohairesis*, in connection with the preceding discussions of causation and voluntariness.

In order to define decision, and to ascertain whether it is identical to the voluntary, Aristotle begins with some common conceptions of what it consists in: either “belief” (*doxa*) or “desire” (*orexis*), as these are “concomitants” of *prohairesis* (1225b24). As in the case of the voluntary, he proceeds to exclude each of these as being the “heading” under which decision should be placed (1225b21). Desire is again divided into its three species, of wish, spirit and appetite. Aristotle dismisses the latter two for two reasons. First, that animals possess them, but lack *prohairesis*; and, second, that *thumos* and *epithumia*, but not *prohairesis*, are “always accompanied by pain” (1225b27–30, cf. II.2, 1220b12). The object of wish is broader than that of *prohairesis*, and therefore also cannot be identified with it: we can wish for that which we know is “impossible” (*adunatos*), whereas we decide only on those things that—as far as we know—are possible (1225b35). Similarly, we can wish for that which is possible but not

²⁰ The account in *EN* III.1 is broadly similar on the question of ignorance, but significantly more detailed.

eph'hemin, but can only decide on that which we believe is “up to us to do or not to do” (1225b37). This discussion reveals not only that *prohairesis* is not simply one of the three species of desire, but also that its object is restricted: “what is decided must be something that is up to oneself” (1225b39).²¹ From the discussion in II.6, it was determined that we are the *kuria arche*, and cause, of that which is up to us to do or not do; and so we can further say that *prohairesis* concerns the actions for which we can (to our knowledge) be the authoritative starting point.

Decision is not to be identified with belief, either. The first reason given for this is akin to the argument against wish—that belief, but not decision, can concern that which is not up to us, such as that “the diagonal of the square is commensurable with its side” (1226a3). Moreover, we describe beliefs as being “true or false”, but not decision, which is considered good or bad (1226a5). Finally, Aristotle argues that both wish and belief are “above all about the end [*telos*]”, whereas decision concerns not the end but that which “contributes to it” (1226a7). For example, we do not decide to “be healthy”, but rather to “take a walk, or sit down, for the sake of one’s health” (1226a9). Our wish, however, is to be healthy, and our belief is that we should try to be healthy (1226a11). This enables us to discern the general structure of a decision, as being composed of “what one wants to do, and that for the sake of which one decides to do it” (1226a12). *Prohairesis*, therefore, is not reducible to either belief or desire; its object is that which is up to us to do or not do, and its structure is of an action for the sake of an end. However, as Aristotle acknowledges, it remains unclear what its relation to belief and desire, and indeed voluntariness, actually amounts to (1226a18).

To flesh out the concept of *prohairesis*, Aristotle connects it to that of “deliberation” (*bouleusis*) (1226a27). Those things about which we can deliberate are the same as those about which we can decide—that which is up to us to do or not do, or, in other words, the things “achievable by action that are up to us” (1226a27). However, we do not deliberate about all

²¹ Aristotle is not always rigorous in distinguishing actions that are up to us from actions that are, to our knowledge, up to us. The latter is how Aristotle earlier defines the object of *prohairesis*, and best fits with his later discussion of the possibility of action not following *prohairesis*.

such things (1226a31). Aristotle is now able to provide the nominal definition of *prohairesis* discussed in Subsection 2.1:

he prohairesis hairesis men estin, ouk haplos de, all'heterou pros heteron [/pro heterou] (1226b7).

Because of the emphasis of the preceding argument on the structure of *prohairesis* being an action for the sake of an end, and the lack of reference to preference, I follow Nielsen (2022)'s teleological reading of this passage, which is to say that, characteristically:

decision is choice not unqualifiedly, but of one thing for the sake of another.²²

This structure requires deliberation to achieve—we cannot ascertain whether an action is for the sake of a certain end without “reflection and deliberation”; for this reason, decision is “based on deliberative belief” (*ek doxes bouleutikes*), which is to say it involves the reasoned belief that the action will promote the end (1226b9).²³ We do not, however, deliberate about both the end and the means to it, as the former is “a given”—the doctor deliberates about how to promote health, not whether to (1226b10). The goal of the deliberative process is to bring the “starting point ... into our hands”, which is to say we seek to find an end-promoting action of which we can be the *kuria arche* (1226b14). Aristotle then gives a second definition of *prohairesis* as a “deliberative desire [*orexis bouleutike*] for things that are up to oneself” (1226b17)—in other words, *prohairesis* is a desire whose *arche* and *aition* is our deliberation (1226b20). It should be clear from the definitions of *prohairesis* and of *bouleusis* that neither is possible if we have no aim in mind: this is a prerequisite for deliberation, which is itself required for decision (1226b30).

As we have seen, the voluntary is defined as “anything one does without ignorance that is up to oneself not to do” (II.9, 1225b10). Decision requires deliberation, and its object must be that which is up to us or do or not do, and therefore, as per this definition, action in accordance with decision must also be voluntary (1226b34). However, because it is also possible

²² The *EN* defines *prohairesis* with a *pro* + genitive construction; this permits any (or all) of the three senses of *prohairesis*, whereas this reading of the *EE* allows only the teleological.

²³ This does not mean that decision *is* a deliberative belief—if nothing else, it is good or bad, not true or false.

for an action to be up to us and completed without ignorance, without prior deliberation, that which is voluntary is not necessarily prohairetic (1226b36). There are thus three levels of purposiveness of action: the involuntary; the voluntary; and the voluntary and “premeditated” (1226b39). I would like, at this juncture, to summarise our understanding of *prohairesis* at this stage of Aristotle’s argument: it is the outcome of the deliberative faculty by which we move from an end, to an action of which we (to our knowledge) can be the cause, and authoritative starting point; if we decide on a course of action, we believe it to promote the end, and *prohairesis* is the desire to do it for this reason; the action itself, as it is completed without ignorance and is “in our hands”, is voluntary.

We are now also in a position to understand the relationship between *prohairesis* and *boulesis*. Aristotle argues that the object of *boulesis* can be one of two things: by nature it is for the “good”; but “contrary to nature ... the apparent good” (1227a23). If we are not in the natural state, we wish for the “pleasant”, and to avoid the “painful”, as these “appear good to the soul” (1227a40). Pleasure is not, however, the “end which is unqualifiedly best [for us]”, and so this is only an apparent good (1227a21). This *boulesis*, for the (apparent) good, underpins *prohairesis*—we wish for the good, deliberate upon it, and are left with a *prohairesis*, an *orexis bouleutike*, to complete a certain action for the sake of the good.

In II.11, Aristotle shifts his focus to the influence virtue (*arete*) has on *prohairesis*, and the specific question of whether it ensures the correctness of the end, or the process of reasoning from this end (1227b14). It must, he argues, make correct the aim, as this cannot be “arrived at by deduction or reasoning” (1227b26), and as the cause of “all correctness is either reason or virtue”, if it cannot be the former it must be the latter (1227b34).²⁴ As a result of this, we can see that “the starting point of thinking ... is the end, but the starting point of action is where thinking terminates” (1227b32, cf. 1139a30). Aristotle supplements this claim at *EE* * V.2, 1139a30, by stating that “decision is the starting point of action ... whereas desire and reasoning for the sake of something are the starting point for decision”. On this basis, I understand the

²⁴ Cf. *EN* VI.2, 1139b4–6.

chain of *archai* for virtuous human action as follows: virtue is the *arche* of deliberation; together these are the *arche* of *prohairesis*, which is the *arche* of action.²⁵

Finally, we are able to understand fully Aristotle's conclusion at 1228a12–15. That action can be compelled was made clear in II.8: where there is an external impulse that causes an action, overriding an internal impulse, the action can be said to be forced, compelled and involuntary. In contrast, because *prohairesis* is itself an internal impulse with internal origins, we cannot similarly be made, by something external, to decide in a certain way—the outcome of our *prohairesis* depends by definition only on our own virtue and our own reason, both of which are internal causes. *Prohairesis* must therefore be up to us in every instance. In the case of the *akrates* who abandons his *prohairesis*, the earlier discussion of compulsion becomes relevant: I take Aristotle's position to be that the process of decision is not externally compelled in a certain direction (as the *akrates* still reaches the same decision as the virtuous person), but it is internally compelled in the sense of its outcome, the prohairetic *orexis bouleutike*, being ultimately overridden by the *epithumia* as the starting point of action. As we are cause of all that is up to us, and praise and blame are given only for that of which we are cause, our *prohairesis* is a natural subject of these attitudes. Actions are only sometimes up to us, as they may be involuntary, and therefore are worse guides to character, and less appropriate subjects of praise and blame. However, action is still more “choiceworthy” (*haireton*) than inaction (1228a14). Aristotle has thus hinted towards a two-tier view of agency and moral evaluation: there is that which could be described as ‘strongly’ (i.e. necessarily) up to us, such as *prohairesis*, which is the most appropriate basis for evaluation; and correspondingly the ‘weakly’ (i.e. contingently) up to us, such as action, which is only to be used for evaluating character as a proxy for that which is strongly up to us:

it is because of the difficulty of discerning the character of the decision that we are compelled to judge a person's character on the basis of their deeds. (1228a18).

²⁵ This structure also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to vicious human action.

In this sense, then, the virtuous person has good *prohairesis*: when they reach a decision, because the end and reasoning are both correct, and they do not suffer from *akrasia*, their intrinsic impulse is to complete the action that best promotes the good. However, this faculty covers only those actions that are actively deliberated upon, which, as we saw earlier, does not account for all voluntary actions. To understand more reflexive virtuous voluntary actions, I believe we should appeal to Aristotle's definition of virtue as a *hexis prohairesetike*—a prohairetic state (*EE* II.10, 1227b9; *EN* II.6, 1106b36). By this, I understand him as positing that the virtuous person, even in the case of undeliberated-upon action, completes the action that good *prohairesis* would lead them towards, and does so knowing that it would do so.²⁶ They could, if prompted after the fact, justify the action in light of the end of living well. There are thus two senses of *prohairesis* at play—the active faculty of decision-making, and the disposition to knowingly act as this faculty would recommend.

3. Epictetus on *Prohairesis*

3.1. Epictetus and the Stoics

The philosophy of Epictetus both belongs to, and shows significant divergence from, the Stoic tradition; to reach a broad delineation of the role of *prohairesis* in his thought, I thus believe it worthwhile to view it in contrast with a more 'orthodox' Stoic position on moral psychology. For Epictetus, as for other Stoics, the soul is rational all the way down—indeed, Epictetus appears to identify the soul with reason (*logos*): the “elements” of a human are “the body ... and reason and intelligence” (*Discourses* I.3.3). Because of this, *prohairesis*, and any other faculty of the soul, must be rational. The governor of our reason, in orthodox Stoicism, is the *hegemonikon*, our 'commanding faculty', which is widely accepted to be responsible for at least three key functions: “impressions [*phantasiai*], assents [*sunkatatheseis*] ... and impulses [*hormai*]” (Aëtius 4.21.1 = LS 53H). Animals also possess a commanding faculty, albeit a non-rational one (Calcidius *In Pl. Tim.* 220 = SVF 2.879). In contrast, Epictetus's *prohairesis* is responsible for just two of these functions, assent and impulse (*Discourses* I.17.21, ff.), and was

²⁶ As virtue requires knowledge that the action is virtuous: see e.g. *EN* II.4, 1105a34.

gifted by the gods to man alone (*Discourses* I.1.7). Because of this, it is clear that *prohairesis* for Epictetus cannot simply be an instance of idiosyncratic terminology being used to describe the inherited concept of the *hegemonikon*—it is narrower both in its function and its possession.²⁷ It is yet to be ascertained, however, what the functions of assent and impulse are, and why impression does not belong to the faculty of *prohairesis*.

Impression refers to an “affection occurring in the soul, which reveals itself and its cause”; for example, if there is a book visibly before us (the “impressor”), it will cause, through our vision, our soul to have the impression that there is a book before us (Aëtius 4.12.1–2 = LS 39B). To have an impression of something requires no active mental evaluation of it: to use Zeno’s famous analogy, it is akin to holding something before us, prior to examination, or commitment to its veracity (Cicero *Academica* 2.145 = LS 41A). Assent, arguably the fundamental concept in Stoic epistemology, is the ability to accept, or to not accept, an impression as being true or false. The wise person will assent to and believe only those impressions that are “cognitive” [*phantasiai kataleptikai*], which is to say caused by what is as it is (DL 7.54 = LS 40A). Impulse, which non-rational animals also possess, albeit in a different form, is for humans an “act of assent” with a certain kind of object (Stobaeus 2.88,2 = LS 33I)—it guides us in our “search for what is appropriate [*oikeion*] to us” (DL 7.85 = LS 57A). Epictetus here gives the example of the impulse to “take a walk” (*Discourses* IV.1.72).

The notion of *horme* is closely integrated for the Stoics, including Epictetus, with that of *orexis*. On Inwood (1985, p. 118)’s interpretation, Epictetus speaks of *orexis* as if it were entirely distinct from *horme*, whereas the earlier Stoics describe the former as a species of the latter. At *Discourses* I.4.11, for example, Epictetus speaks separately of avoiding “failing to attain what you desire”, and being correct concerning the “impulse to act or not to act”. I find plausible Klein (2021, pp. 243–244)’s view that we need not find a divergence between Epictetus and orthodox Stoicism if we take *horme* to refer both broadly to the genus containing the species *orexis*, and narrowly to a second species within this genus. Broadly, *horme* thus refers to the

²⁷ This view is shared by Long (2002, p. 211).

hexeis that produce guidance concerning what actions are *oikeion*, or *kathekon* ('proper'), and narrowly to those broad *hormai* that directly lead to a psychological *kinesis*. *Orexeis*, as distinguished from narrow *hormai* by Epictetus, are thus those broad *hormai* that do not have direct motive power, and instead assess the general value of their object. In the example of the impulse to 'take a walk', there are two stages on this model—an *orexis* that taking a walk in such a situation is *kathekon*, and a motive *horme* that actually impels us to take a walk at this moment.

From this, we can observe why Epictetus may centre *prohairesis* and not the *hegemonikon* in his account of rationality, and of the governance of the soul. Impression has an external cause, and is thus a passive and unreflective capacity—our soul is (to some extent literally) impressed by something external to us. In contrast, we have a far greater degree of control over assent and impulse; once we hold an impression before us, we can deploy our reason in deciding whether to grasp it, and how to respond to its content:

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. (*Discourses* II.18.24).

Indeed, these two functions of *prohairesis* are by nature entirely up to us:

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. (*Discourses* IV.1.72).²⁸

This initial analysis of Epictetian *prohairesis*, as a faculty that is necessarily up to us and that consists in the functions of assent and impulse, leaves open several lines of enquiry. Those of particular interest, taken up in the following sections, include the object and use of decision, the relationship between *prohairesis*, freedom (*eleutheria*) and that which is up to us, and the role of *prohairesis* in our interaction with the external world.

²⁸ Note that Epictetus, like Aristotle at *EE* 1224a18, uses the example of a rock for *kinesis* against internal impulse.

3.2. Freeing Ourselves

Although it has been established what the functions of *prohairesis* are, it is as yet unapparent how they should be used, and what consequence this has for our happiness. Epictetus addresses these points with regard to the case discussed earlier, of the impulse to ‘take a walk’. Because it is possible that our body can move contrary to our impulse, like a stone, it is not “our own”, which is to say its movement cannot be said to be up to us, as it is not necessarily in our power (*Discourses* IV.1.73).²⁹ Our body is thus a “slave to everything stronger than itself” (*Discourses* IV.1.78). If we “attach value” to something that is not up to us (and is thus enslaved), we too are said to be enslaved—we have “put [our] head under the yoke” by forming beliefs that things outside our power are good or bad, or by desiring these things as being thus (*Discourses* IV.1.77). As Epictetus writes:

...understand that whoever longs for things that are not within his power ... must be tossed in all directions along with those things, and is inevitably placing himself under the dominion of other people. (*Discourses* I.4.19).

Our assent and impulse must be trained to resist powerful impressions that such externals are good or bad. Epictetus uses sexual temptation as an example of this point: we cannot control the impression we have that someone is attractive, and that to sleep with them would be good, but it is up to us to assent to the impression, and to have the impulse to act accordingly. We can thus avoid being “swept away” by the impression by not assenting to it, and instead “introducing some fine and noble impression in its place” (*Discourses* II.18.20–25). Over time, this will become easier—we build our prohairetic “shoulders, muscles and strength” and become less and less tempted to follow the impression (*Discourses* II.18.26). By assenting to an impression of this sort, we are compelling and thus enslaving ourselves and our *prohairesis*—through the functions of assent and impulse we are attaching ourselves to objects outside our power. Because it is the functions of *prohairesis* itself that lead us astray, Epictetus concludes that “*prohairesis*

²⁹ Epictetus’s use of *eph’hemin* to describe that which is necessarily up to us is a stronger line than that taken by many earlier Stoics. Chrysippus, for example, described some actions as being *eph’hemin*, if we were their cause (see Bobzien (1998, p. 336)). This does not mean that Epictetus’s account implies that we cannot be the cause of our actions.

cannot be hindered by anything outside the sphere of *prohairesis*, but only by *prohairesis* itself” (*Discourses* III.19.2).

Decision, for Epictetus, is thus itself up to us, and if it is correct, does not lead to our having *orexeis*, *doxai* or *hormai* that assign real value to that which is not also up to us. When we correctly confine the object of our *prohairesis*, and assent to only cognitive impressions, we are in our ‘natural’ condition. By this, Epictetus employs the notion of naturality as life in accordance with (our) nature (*phusis*), which is defined by Zeus (e.g. *Discourses* III.1.43–4). We are thus to develop our *prohairesis*, in order that it is “in harmony with nature”, and is “free [*eleutheros*], unhindered, unobstructed, trustworthy and self-respecting” (*Discourses* I.4.18). The aspiration is to be free like the dying Socrates, who proclaims that “If it pleases the gods that this should come about, so be it!”, rather than the tragic Priam, whose attitude is to lament that he is “Alas, a poor old man” (*Discourses* I.4.24). Epictetus’s goal of *eleutheria* is, therefore, not a form of libertarian freedom—it consists in aligning our beliefs and desires with the natural order, rather than an ability to act other than as we do. Bobzien (1998, pp. 355, ff.) identifies as Epictetian a famous Stoic simile that illustrates this sense of freedom, and the benefits it has for our well-being:

When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity, but if it does not want to follow it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined. (Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.21 = LS 62A).

It is up to us to decide whether we align our beliefs and impulses with the direction of the cart, but it is not up to us to decide the direction itself. By deciding to follow its natural course, we avoid the pain of being dragged contrary to our desires, and attain the tranquillity (*ataraxia*) of knowing that our trajectory is destined (*Discourses* II.2.1–4).

The sage, then, is he who has mastered and liberated his *prohairesis*—his assents and impulses are not swayed by persuasive impressions that things outside his power are good or bad, and he is content in his awareness of his accordance with nature. Contrastingly, because

we continue to assign real value to that which is not up to us, we compel our natural *prohairesis* with corrupted *prohairesis*, and cause ourselves great dissatisfaction. Epictetus summarises these findings at the conclusion of the *Handbook*, with a verse from Cleanthes:

Guide me O Zeus, and thou, O Destiny,
To wheresoever you have assigned me;
I'll follow unwaveringly, or if my will fails,
Base though I be, I'll follow nonetheless. (*Handbook* 53.1).

Our *prohairesis* should not conclude that taking a walk is good, and should not issue in an impulse to act on this basis. However, we are yet to ascertain whether there are *any* appropriate impulses and beliefs concerning the use of things that lie outside our power. The line of argument given in this section may seem to be heading towards the view that the answer is in the negative. In order to show that this is not the case, I believe we should examine Discourse II.5, which equates the use of externals to the playing of a ball game.

3.3. Life as a Ball Game

On the issue of our interaction with external indifferents (*adiaphora*), Sorabji (2007, pp. 92–3) detects a significant wedge between the views of Epictetus and the earlier Stoics. As previously mentioned, for the earlier Stoics, we can make selections (*eklogai*) among externals, and thus express a preference between them, so long as this does not assign real value to them—our assents and impulses must treat them as being indifferent to our happiness. In this way, we can have a preference for a diet of fowl, as it encourages health; we cannot, however, believe that fowl is truly good for us. Orthodox Stoics thus “counsel careful selection” among indifferents, so that we are able recognise and select (avoid) preferred (dispreferred) indifferents (Sorabji, 2007, p. 93). Contrastingly, he finds in Epictetus a “denial that selection is available at all” (*ibid.*). This is a significant oversight of the textual evidence, which connotes the opposite:

Are we to use externals in a careless fashion? —Not at all; for that is again bad for our *prohairesis*, and thus contrary to nature. Rather they should be used with care [*epimelos*], because their use is not a matter of indifference, and at the same time with composure and calmness of mind, because the material being used is indifferent. (*Discourses* II.5.6–7).

Epictetus illustrates the way in which we are to interact with externals with three examples: a ship's captain, a ball player, and Socrates. As captain of a ship, we are able to 'select' (*eklegeo*) the crew and a plan for our voyage. By so doing, we have "completed our role", and therefore, if the ship were to sink, we can "drown without fear ... without hurling accusations against God" (*Discourses* II.5.10–2). We can thus use our *prohairesis* to select among externals, including setting out plans of action, so long as we do not unduly attach real value to them, or expect them to lie within our power when they do not. This is how ball players act—they do concern themselves with "how to throw and catch" the ball, but not with whether it is "good or bad"; were they to do the latter, it would disrupt their tranquillity and turn it into a "brawl and not a game" (*Discourses* II.5.15–17). In this way, a ball player does "their best to show skill with regard to external material, without becoming attached to it" (*Discourses* II.5.21). Socrates is, in a metaphorical sense, taken to be a superior ball player: during his trial, his handling of the ball he was assigned ("life, imprisonment, exile ... the loss of his wife and having to leave his children as orphans") was undeniably "dextrous", partly because it showed no strong attachment to these externals (*Discourses* II.5.18–20).

Selecting correctly using our *prohairesis* will help keep its rational 'muscles' strong, as it requires us both to recognise the lack of value in externals, and to understand what is true to our nature. If we are to act with care, we must recognise the two-sidedness of our nature, as both an individual and as part of a broader universe laid out by the gods. Epictetus uses a further analogy to illustrate this point. Although it is natural for the foot itself to "be clean", it is also part of the body and so it is also natural for it to sometimes "step into mud, trample on thorns or ... even to be cut off" for the sake of the body as a whole—if it did not do so, it would not be a foot (*Discourses* II.5.24). The analogy between ourselves and the foot is straightforward: it is good for us in "isolation" from all else to "live to an advanced age, to be rich, and to enjoy good health"; as part of a "universal city" of men and gods, however, we may be required to "fall ill, ... be exposed to danger, ... or perhaps even die before our time" (*Discourses* II.5.25–6). Because membership of this universal whole is part of our nature, just as much as concern for ourselves as an individual, if we neglect it we are in some sense discarding our own humanity. We can cash this out also in terms of the ball game—we praise footballers not only for their individual

performances but also for diligence in performing a self-effacing tactical role within the team. Epictetus's attitude to indifferents, in short, is this: by considering what is appropriate (*oikeion*) to each part of our nature, we should use our *prohairesis* to select correctly between indifferents, while treating them as having no intrinsic value in themselves. While Epictetus couches it in terms of *prohairesis*, this position concerning indifferents is nonetheless firmly in line with those of his Stoic predecessors.

In the *Discourses*, Epictetus does not hesitate in emphasising the centrality of *prohairesis* to his ethics:

For you yourself are neither flesh nor hair, but *prohairesis*, and if you render that beautiful, then you yourself will be beautiful. (*Discourses* III.1.40).

We are now in a position to understand why he reaches this conclusion. Our decision represents the two faculties of our soul over which we have control—assent and impulse—while both impression and action are not necessarily in our hands. *Prohairesis* is thus the only faculty which belongs entirely to us, and for this reason we can, in some sense, be identified with it. Because *prohairesis* alone is our “special property”, we should look to it and not action when allotting “praise or criticism” (*Discourses* IV.4.44), even though discerning the decisions underlying actions cannot be done “easily” (*Discourses* IV.8.1–4). By using our *prohairesis* correctly, we remove the constraint of attachment to indifferents, enable ourselves to live in accordance with our nature, and thus become free. To do so we must train it in the real world, by relating our “guiding principles” to our everyday life, through reflection on the content of the impressions we receive even when “bathing” or “dining” (*Discourses* I.4.20). We should, in short, strive to avoid being “lions in the classroom, and foxes outside it” (*Discourses* IV.5.37).

4. Finding Common Ground

4.1. The Basics

Although my contention is that there are affinities between Aristotle and Epictetus that have not been adequately acknowledged, this does not mean that previous comparisons have failed

to correctly identify some similarities, and dissimilarities, between the two. I will thus set out some of the observations that I believe are broadly accurate, before moving to more detailed argument to support the claim that there are further areas of common ground.

A first point, raised by Long (2002, p. 213), is that both accounts of *prohairesis* imply that practical reason is characterised by the “integration of thought and desire”.³⁰ Both conceptions of *prohairesis* require the use of reason in order to reach decisions: in Aristotle, we must deliberate upon the best way to achieve our end; and in Epictetus decision is constituted of the rational faculties of assent and impulse. Moreover, the outcome of both includes desire—a *prohairesis* in Aristotle is itself an *orexis bouleutike*, and in Epictetus our practical impulses include *orexeis* concerning the value of action. Decision is thus an important interface for both philosophers, as it enables them to connect the intellectual capacity of reason to the formation of desires relating to action.

Dobbin (1991, p. 117) maintains that the primary reason for Epictetus’s adoption of the term *prohairesis* is that it serves to pick out the “province of man” when dividing types of *archai*. By this, I understand him as meaning that both Aristotle and Epictetus view the concept of *prohairesis* as linked to the notion of man-as-starting-point: either decision is itself a starting point belonging to man, or its starting point is man. I agree with Dobbin’s main insight, that the limit of human causation is a focus shared by both Aristotle and Epictetus’s use of the term *prohairesis*; indeed, the extent of their agreement in this regard will be elucidated in the following section. However, I resist his identification of this as the dominant point of similarity, and his further claim that this similarity motivated Epictetus’s reintroduction of Aristotelian terminology. The former conclusion requires that there be no other parallels between the two accounts that are of similar significance, which, as will become apparent, does not reflect the evidence. The latter conclusion requires that we can infer motivations directly from areas of conceptual agreement; this is a leap between distinct kinds of claim.

³⁰ See also Dobbin (1991, p. 129).

A dissimilarity between Epictetus and Aristotle concerning the scope of *prohairesis* is also noted by Long (2002, p. 213), among others. For Epictetus, because our soul is rational all the way down, all of our desires and beliefs are the product of decision: if we believe something to be the case, it is because we have used our *prohairesis* to assent to it. Conversely, for Aristotle, *prohairesis* is responsible only for certain beliefs and desires relating to action—we come to believe that our doing a certain action would promote our happiness, and thus desire that we complete said action for the sake of this end. However, Epictetus’s focus is narrowly ethical: “the practice of philosophy consists in ... investigating how it is possible to exercise one’s desires and aversions without hindrance” (*Discourses* III.14.10), and so, while it is true that there is a divergence from Aristotle regarding the remit of *prohairesis*, many of the beliefs and desires with which he actually concerns himself are those that would also be the product of Aristotelian decision—that it would not be conducive to *eudaimonia* to sleep with a married woman, for example (*Discourse* II.18).

4.2. What is *Eph’hemin*?

One scholar who does not equivocate in his evaluation of the likeness of the two *prohairesis* is Sorabji (2007, pp. 91–3). He concludes that there is a “lack of match” between Aristotle and Epictetus, and justifies this using two illustrative dissimilarities. First, that although both relate decision to that which is up to us in a way that appears superficially similar, their claims are distinct: Aristotle posits that *prohairesis* concerns that which is up to us, i.e. plans of action, whereas Epictetus claims that *prohairesis* is itself *eph’hemin*. Second, and relatedly, that what is an appropriate object of decision for Aristotle, such as the selection of a “diet of fowl” is not an appropriate object of decision for Epictetus. I believe that Sorabji is mistaken concerning these conclusions; by identifying why this is the case, I will also seek to demonstrate that Aristotle and Epictetus agree that *prohairesis* is itself up to us, and concerns that which up to us, including selection among externals.

Regarding the claim that Epictetus’s *prohairesis* is up to us, but Aristotle’s is not, Sorabji maintains that “[Epictetus] is saying that no one else can force you to make a choice ... Aristotle is less decided about action (not choice) due to compulsion”. I take the last clause, and the

analysis that follows, to imply that Aristotle affords no attention to the issue of the compellability of *prohairesis*, and that, as concerns actions, he is inconsistent on the link between voluntariness and compulsion.³¹ From the discussion in Subsection 2.3, it should be clear that the former line of argument does not accurately capture the content of *EE* II.6–11. Aristotle defines force and compulsion as movement caused by an external impulse, in conflict with an internal one. Because *prohairesis* is by definition internal in its origin (its *arche* is our own deliberation and wish), we cannot be compelled to use our *prohairesis* in a certain way, or to decide upon a certain course of action, a conclusion expressly stated at 1228a15: “people do bad things even when compelled to but no one decides under compulsion”. The argument of the *EE* also implicitly entails that *prohairesis* must be up to us: it is an appropriate object of praise and blame; if something is praised or blamed it must be voluntary; if something is voluntary, it must be up to us. We can thus see that for Aristotle, because of the nature of its starting points, *prohairesis* cannot be compelled, and is necessarily *eph’hemin*, contrary to Sorabji’s interpretation.

For Epictetus, *prohairesis* was shown in Section 3 to be up to us, in his strong sense, for similar reasons to Aristotle: the functions of assent and impulse are the only aspects of humans that cannot, in their natural state, be compelled in a particular direction by external forces, as their origin can only be internal (they rely only on our own reason). The remaining significant function of reason, impression, is dependent on external causes—things outside our soul make *phantasiai* appear before our reason—while our bodies are often subject to physical coercion that go against our rational impulses, like stones being lifted against gravity. Because it is, in this way, necessarily up to us, our decision should be used to evaluate character and apportion praise and blame. We can thus see that in this regard Aristotle and Epictetus are in agreement: because our decision, by definition, is determined by internal functions (desire and deliberation in Aristotle, and assent and impulse in Epictetus), it cannot be compelled by something external, and is therefore necessarily *eph’hemin*, and so acts as the best guide to moral character. The

³¹ It is true that there are noticeable differences between the Nicomachean and Eudemian accounts of force and compulsion. This is of secondary concern here, however, as Sorabji raises this point only because of the perceived absence of a direct link between *prohairesis* and compulsion.

starting point for action may or may not be internal—*praxis* can be compelled by externals—and so although it is choiceworthy for Aristotle, and likely to be more in accord with our nature than inaction for Epictetus,³² it should not be used in the formation of attitudes of praise and blame, other than as a proxy for *prohairesis*.

I believe, therefore, that we can reject the notion that it is true only for Epictetus that *prohairesis* is itself up to us; in Aristotle, too, we find the idea that it is always thus. This was only half of the mismatch identified by Sorabji, however. His interpretation implies that the two differ not only on the issue of whether *prohairesis* is itself up to us, but also on what the correct object of decision is. From the earlier discussion, it should be evident that Epictetus maintains that we should use our assent and impulse to assign value to objects only where those objects are themselves up to us; Epictetus is typically impassioned on this point:

You've delivered yourself into slavery, you've put your head under the yoke, if you attach value to anything that isn't your own, if you conceive a desire for anything that is subject to anyone else and is perishable. (*Discourses* IV.1.77).

This is reconcilable with the idea that we can use our *prohairesis* concerning the use of externals, even though we should not attach ourselves to the externals themselves:

...things that are not within my power to obtain ... are neither good or bad; whereas the use I make of them is either good or bad, and that does lie within my power. (*Discourses* II.5.8)

By 'use' of externals, I take Epictetus to refer to mental use, including plans of action—it is up to us to form preferences between externals, to select between them (as in the case of the ship's crew), and to intend to use them in a certain way (as in the case of the ball player); it is not up to us to follow through on these plans by acting, as this is contingent on alignment with external causes, which are dictated by fortune. Epictetus, therefore, despite allowing the domain of *prohairesis* (in ethics) to extend to the use of externals, does not allow it to include that which

³² All the examples in *Discourses* II.5 hint towards this: a good ball player and a healthy foot are not idle; nor, intuitively, should we be if we seek to be good citizens of the (global) city.

is not up to us.³³ In our natural state, we form ethical beliefs and desires relating only to that which is in our hands (and attach ourselves only to these objects in so doing).³⁴ Our *prohairesis* should not attach us in this way to anything that is beyond our power—i.e. to any external objects in themselves.

Similarly, for Aristotle, good *prohairesis* is used only concerning that which is up to us. This characteristic was drawn out in the elucidation of the difference between *prohairesis* and *boulesis* at 1225b35–37; the latter can concern the impossible and that which lies outside our power, while the former can do neither. His conception of the *eph'hemin*, however, is weaker than Epictetus's, as it allows those things that are contingently up to us, such as actions, for which we are sometimes but not always the starting point. In this way, both Aristotle and Epictetus agree formally on what the correct object of *prohairesis* is in ethical matters (that which is up to us) but disagree substantially on what this consists in (actions for Aristotle; assents and impulses for Epictetus). Sorabji (2007, p. 91) notes this substantial difference, but because he fails to address Epictetus's discussion of indifferents at *Discourses* II.5,³⁵ views it as greater in magnitude than is justified by the text—Epictetus holds that we can still decide upon plans of action in our natural state, and select among externals (such as forming a preference for a diet of fowl), albeit without coming to believe that the actions or objects are themselves good, or *eph'hemin*.

Once unpacked, these conclusions regarding the relationship between decision and that which is up to us together represent a deeper accord between Aristotle and Epictetus than is often recognised. The concept of decision, for both philosophers, represents a faculty of reason whose origin is necessarily internal, and which, for this reason, cannot be compelled and is entirely up to us. When used well in the ethical sphere, its object is limited to that which is in our hands, and it enables us to organise our lives in line with our *phusis* and thus in view of what

³³ See *Discourses* III.3.14–19, III.8.1–5 for further examples, including what we would consider aesthetic judgements—“A handsome man or a beautiful woman” (*Discourses* III.3.14).

³⁴ Because Epictetus's focus is ethical, he does not address the use of *prohairesis* in entirely descriptive, non-normative contexts. Intuitively, and per Stoic orthodoxy, cognitive impressions (and therefore the use of assent) outside the ethical sphere could concern that which is not up to us: we can believe that ‘the sea is blue’.

³⁵ See Subsection 3.3.

will ensure our *eudaimonia*. This includes preserving our own natural interests with regards to externals, as well as service for the community, both local and global. In serving this role, it underpins and represents our moral character, and, for this reason, is the appropriate basis for praise and blame.

4.3. Virtue, Free Will and *Prohairesis*

The definition of a ‘free will’, and the identification of the ancient philosopher who first developed a concept matching this description, have long been points of contestation.³⁶ In the remaining space, I can, of course, not resolve these disputes; instead, I will focus on developing a response against the argument of Frede (2012), who finds sufficient divergence in Aristotle and Epictetus’s notions of *prohairesis* to justify the claim that the latter but not the former can sometimes be described as a free will. In so doing, I will show that both philosophers’ conceptions of *prohairesis* satisfy Frede’s definition of a free will in the case of a virtuous person, as all of their activity is defined by its accordance with the faculty of decision, which cannot be compelled.

Frede (2012, p. 8) deliberately adopts a broad conception of the will, as an “ability to make such choices or decisions which make us act in the way we do”, while freedom, on a “grossly simplified” level, refers to an absence of external constraint—we thus have a free will if all our unforced actions are guided by a faculty of choice that is not itself impeded.³⁷ Underpinning Frede’s conclusion that Aristotle does not invoke anything that fits into this definition is his treatment of *akrasia*. In the case of action from *akrasia*, there are two competing desires: an akratic person may, for example, act on the basis of his *epithumia*, and neglect his prohairesic *orexis bouleutike*. However, and crucially, he does not do so on the basis of the

³⁶ See e.g. Dihle (1982), Kahn (1988), Irwin (1992), Frede (2012).

³⁷ Some may feel that the notion of freedom that is more relevant to Aristotle is libertarian freedom: that it is possible for us to act other than we actually do; and that our actions are, in this sense, contingent. However, it is not clear that Aristotle is committed to, or concerned about, this notion of contingency of action. Meyer (2014, pp. 81–87) makes a credible case for the view that Aristotle’s statement that some actions are ‘up to us to do or not do’ should not be taken to imply that we could act other than as we do, but rather only that the actions’ occurrence is controlled (i.e. caused) by us; the latter claim is supported by the exegesis of II.6 given in Subsection 2.3 here. Moreover, my concern in this regard is not to evaluate the applicability of every sense of freedom to Epictetus and Aristotle’s moral psychologies, but instead to show that both philosophers’ *prohairesis* can be free wills (in the Fredean sense), and that they each place value on this kind of freedom.

outcome of a further psychological faculty. The *akrates* does not actively choose to follow one desire and not the other; rather, he will act from appetite simply because he is conditioned and habituated to do so. As Frede (2012, p. 24) concludes, there is “no further instance which would adjudicate or resolve the matter”, and, therefore, there is no concept that can be cast in the role of the will.

However, there is an immediate problem in this line of argument: just because the akratic person does not have a (free) will does not entail that there is no notion of a free will in Aristotle, or that no one can be said to possess a free will under his moral psychology. As was discussed previously, the virtuous person is said to be in a *hexis prohairesitike*, which suggests that they are disposed to act on the basis of their faculty of decision, even if this is not actively used: while they do not always deliberate upon possible courses of action, they always act with the knowledge that their action best promotes their *eudaimonia*, and so follow an informed desire. Because their *epithumia* and *thumos* are correctly habituated, there is no conflict between their internal impulses, and so no additional adjudicating faculty is required. In this way, the *prohairesis* of the *phronimos* surely satisfies Frede’s definition of the will: his action (unless forced) always follows his faculty of decision, which, when called upon, enables him to choose between alternatives. Moreover, this ‘will’ is free by definition, as it is internal in its origin, and, as has been stressed, cannot be externally compelled. If we abide by Frede’s definitions, we can thus identify a free will in Aristotle’s ethics, but one that is only possessed by the virtuous person. Everyone else does not have a will—if to have a will it must be a stable disposition—let alone one that is *eleutheros*.

For Epictetus, all our desires and beliefs, including those that concern action, are the result of the two faculties of *prohairesis*, assent and impulse, which are *eph’hemin*. We, therefore, possess an ability to make choices and decisions that guide our behaviour—when we hold an impression before us, it is our decision that determines what motive impulses are formed. Frede (2012, p. 46) thus finds in Epictetus’s *prohairesis* a notion of will that is shared by all rational humans. When we assent to impressions that assign value to that which is not *eph’hemin*, however, we can constrain this *prohairesis*—the attachment to externals means that we are no

longer entirely in control of our will.³⁸ For this reason, only the person who has confined his *prohairesis* to that which is up to him (i.e. the wise person) can be said to be free, or to have what Frede labels free will; else his choices are compelled, at least partially, by externals. In its natural state, this free will is not compellable even by Zeus, because its constituent functions are, by definition, in our hands.

The virtuous person, therefore, is the sole possessor of Frede's conception of a free will in both Aristotle and Epictetus—if we possess ideal moral character, our plans of action are always guided by uncompelled prohairesis that correspond to knowledge of what lies within our power, and what contributes to our *eudaimonia*. This suggests that, in this regard, Epictetus's account of *prohairesis* was not seminal in the manner Frede's analysis indicates: in the *EE* we can already locate an externally uncompellable faculty of choice that, for some persons, acts as the sole governor of intentions concerning action. In Aristotle, if we fail to attain this ideal, we do not reliably possess a Fredean will at all, as there is no additional faculty of choice to resolve conflicts between desires; in Epictetus we always possess a will, but it is not free unless we are virtuous, as it will introduce constraints to its own natural operation. The substantive and practical difference between the two need not be considered as great as this may suggest, however. In both cases, what prevents the attainment of a free will is inappropriate desires for—and attachment to—externals. If we are to mitigate this effect, we should habituate the recognition of the lack of contribution these attitudes make to our wellbeing. That these inappropriate desires belong within the rational faculty of choice for Epictetus, and outside it for Aristotle, is a consequence their psychological commitments, and represents perhaps the most fundamental difference between the two *prohairesis*: that for Epictetus but not Aristotle all beliefs and desires are the product of decision.

³⁸ See e.g. *Discourses* I.4.19 (p. 22).

5. Conclusion

When we spell out the findings of the previous sections, the degree of affinity between Aristotle and Epictetus's accounts of *prohairesis* becomes far clearer. Decision, unlike action, is entirely up to us, and cannot be compelled, because its origin is necessarily internal; moreover, its appropriate object in the ethical sphere is also that which is up to us. It is a faculty of reason that produces beliefs and desires concerning the value of the options that are within our power, in relation to our pursuit of a life of *eudaimonia*. If we habituate it correctly, we can train our *prohairesis* such that all of our activity is guided by it, is appropriate to our nature, and thus contributes to a life that is maximally well-lived. In this way, the virtuous person's life is characterised by the pervasiveness of an unconstrained ('free') faculty of decision. Because our *prohairesis* is internal in origin, and reflects both our conception of what goodness consists in and the functionality of our reason, it and not action should be used to assess moral character; anything that is possibly external in origin is not necessarily in our hands, and is thus an unreliable guide to the kind of person we are.

These points of contact are greater in number and depth than previous studies on *prohairesis* note. Epictetus's use of the term does not only share Aristotle's concern with defining the sphere of things that are caused by humans, or the connection of virtue with practical reason—as I have shown, in its origin, object, outcome and role in the good life, there is noticeable agreement. The most obvious outstanding question is how Epictetus came to use the term *prohairesis*, and to afford it a role in his philosophy that bears these similarities to its Aristotelian precursor, given their ideological and temporal separation. The history of the reception of Aristotle's ethical thought between his death and the Roman period is an under-evidenced and under-studied topic, although recent studies such as Annas (1990), Nielsen (2012) and Inwood (2014) lend credence to the idea that Aristotle's thought influenced early Stoic philosophy to a greater extent than had previously been supposed. If this is the case, then fit between originally Aristotelian concepts such as *prohairesis* and a broadly Stoic ethical system is less surprising than it may seem on the surface—one partially inherited notion is intuitively more likely to align with others with the same common ancestor. Even if the transmission of Aristotle's philosophy up to the time of Epictetus could be ascertained, there is the further issue

of Epictetus's background and philosophical education. The paucity of biographical evidence is such that, while it is known that he attended the lectures of the Stoic Musonius Rufus, his familiarity with other schools of thought is largely a matter of conjecture.³⁹ As a result of these problems, it cannot be asserted with any confidence how Epictetus understood his concept of *prohairesis* in relation to Aristotle's, or how much of the affinity between the two is due to conscious revival. This thesis is thus only the philosophical strand of a two-sided inquiry: if one sought to argue that Epictetus's account of *prohairesis* was a deliberate return to, and modification of, that given by Aristotle in the *EE*, they would have to provide historical justification as well as demonstrating significant conceptual overlap.

Addressing these questions would serve to more broadly illuminate the reception of Aristotelian thought in light of the emergence and evolution of Stoicism. Moreover, as decision is highly integrated within the broader philosophical systems of Aristotle and Epictetus, its genealogy also traces the development of other concerns that are now fundamental in ethics: what it means to have a free will; the relationship between belief, desire and action; the importance of moral character; and how causation links to moral responsibility. Because of this, I believe that the central finding made here, that the two accounts of *prohairesis* have more in common than has been widely credited, should not be taken as an isolated peculiarity, but as one observation in a discussion that is far from complete.

³⁹ Long (2002, ch. 1) offers an insightful overview of what is known of Epictetus's context.

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