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FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM IN EPICTETUS' *DISCOURSES*

Since Bobzien's analysis of the early Stoic concept of that which 'depends on us' (τὰ ἐφ' ἡμῖν) and of its later connection with the concept of freedom (ἐλευθερία),[1] great progress has been made in the endeavour of producing a new reading of Stoic ethics that can do away with the assumptions foreign to Hellenistic philosophy that had so long pervaded the traditional interpretations of Stoicism. Notwithstanding the persistent interest in early Stoic discussions of the problem of compatibilism,[2] the analysis of Epictetus' particular conception of freedom has frequently been neglected: it has often been equated to his distinction between that which 'depends on us' and that which does not, being interpreted as meaning that we are free in our actions as long as we limit ourselves to that which depends on us and neglect that which does not, that which has nothing to do with us. Initially, all the evidence in both the *Discourses* and in the *Enchiridion* certainly seems to support such an equation: for something to be free (ἐλεύθερος) it must necessarily be something which depends on us. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the 'us' in the last formula. I shall argue that only by analysing that precise element will we be able to reach a complete understanding of Epictetus' solution to the problem of freedom and determinism and the rationalist educational programme he designs as its natural projection. I will claim that there is no such thing as an abstract 'us' which could be instantiated by each and every rational being; on the contrary, I propose to construe the reference of that term as a particularizing strategy that denotes not only each distinct individual but also each distinct individual's epistemic disposition of his *prohairesis* at a given moment.

The fact that the *ability to do otherwise* is not at stake in Epictetus' reflections on the problem of freedom and what depends on us has been noticed both by Bobzien and by Long; however, both authors have assumed that 'some kind of free will' is to be taken for granted.[3] It will be my goal, on the contrary, to show that not only is there no need to presuppose any such instance of freedom (simultaneously precluding any interpretation that proposes to construe Epictetus'

[1] See S. Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998).

[2] See, *inter alia*, P.K. Sakezles, 'Aristotle and Chrysippus on the psychology of human action: criteria for responsibility', *BJHP* 15.2 (2007), 225–52; R. Salles, 'Compatibilism: Stoic and modern', *AGPh* 83.1 (2001), 1–23; D. Hahm, 'A neglected Stoic argument for human responsibility', *ICS* 17 (1992), 23–48; A.A. Long, 'Freedom and determinism in the Stoic theory of action', in id. (ed.), *Problems in Stoicism* (London, 1971), 173–99; S. Botros, 'Freedom, causality, fatalism and early Stoic philosophy', *Phronesis* 30 (1985), 274–304; J. Gould, 'The Stoic conception of fate', *JHI* 35.1 (1974), 17–32; M.E. Reesor, 'Fate and possibility in early Stoic philosophy', *Phoenix* 19.4 (1965), 285–97; R.W. Sharples, 'Aristotelian and Stoic conceptions of necessity in the *De Fato* of Alexander of Aphrodisias', *Phronesis* 20.1 (1975), 247–74.

[3] Cf. Bobzien (n. 1), 335; A.A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford, 2004), 221. It must be admitted, however, that both interpreters take great pains to forestall indeterminist interpretations of the issue of whether any agent could have acted otherwise in the exact same circumstances.

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conception of the self as an anticipation of the indeterminist notion of free will), but also that the *Discourses* provide a fully deterministic conception of freedom which relies on a thorough account of the psychology of action.

I. FREEDOM AND WHAT DEPENDS ON US

Both the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* place an unprecedented emphasis on the distinction between that which depends on us and that which does not.[4] Although this distinction had already played a substantial role in the arguments that Chrysippus had advanced as a compatibilist answer to the objection that universal determinism and the attribution of moral responsibility are mutually exclusive, it is only in Epictetus' work that it reaches a position so pre-eminent that it becomes the core distinction that articulates the whole of his ethical reflections:

τῶν ὄντων τὰ μέν ἐστιν ἐφ' ἡμῖν, τὰ δὲ οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν· ἐφ' ἡμῖν μὲν προαίρεσις καὶ πάντα τὰ προαιρετικὰ ἔργα, οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν δὲ τὸ σῶμα, τὰ μέρη τοῦ σώματος, κτήσεις, γονεῖς, ἀδελφοί, τέκνα, πατρίς, ἁπλῶς οἱ κοινωνοί. (1.22.10–11)

Some things are under our control while others are not under our control. Under our control are *prohairesis* and all the acts of *prohairesis*; but not under our control are the body, the parts of the body, possessions, parents, brothers, children, country – in a word, all that with which we associate.[5]

Bobzien has convincingly argued for two main points concerning the concept of 'that which depends on us' (from now on: D): (i) Epictetus borrows Chrysippus' concept of D without modifying its general definition; however, (ii) he narrows the scope of the original notion so that some of the things which would originally be considered as D are not considered as such any more. Bobzien's main contention concerns the necessary requirement for something to be considered as D, that is, that it must neither be *forced* or *compelled* from outside the agent nor must it be something that could be *hindered* by external obstacles.[6] Although this may seem to be a mere modification of the definition, it profoundly alters the direction of the Stoic theory of agency concerning the problem of the significance of meaningful

[4] The main alternative translations of ἐφ' ἡμῖν offered by editors and interpreters are 'under our control', 'in our power' and 'up to us', indirectly influenced by Cicero's formulas *in nobis* and *in nostra potestate*.

[5] All quotes, with minor modifications, are from Oldfather's edition of the *Discourses*: W.A. Oldfather (ed.), *Epictetus. The Discourses as Reported by Arrian: The Manual and Fragments* (London, 1961). The most important modification consists in the substitution of 'moral purpose' with the transliteration of προαίρεσις, which I shall use in order to avoid the misleading connotations latent in any of the possible translations. For a discussion of this problem, see Long (n. 3), 218.

[6] Cf. Bobzien (n. 1), 330–57. In the case of *the use of our impressions*, the connection between D and the absence of external determinations or obstacles can be made explicit by joining two passages from the *Discourses*: 'the gods have put under our control only […] the power to make correct use of external impressions (ἠν ὀρθὴν ταῖς φαντασίαις); but all the others they have not put under our control' (1.1.7); '[The] power to deal with external impressions […] I possess this beyond all hindrance and constraint; no one can hamper me; no one can force me to deal with them otherwise than as I will.' (3.24.69). Both requirements are well attested in the sources by the recurrence of certain formulaic expressions containing ἀκώλυτος, ἀπαραπόδιστος and ἀνανάγκαστος.

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human actions: whereas in Chrysippus D has the structure of a conditional ('X depends on me *if* …', X being instantiated by both actions and mental activities), Epictetus opts for a categorical proposition: 'X depends on me', X being able to be instantiated *only* by *τὰ προαιρετικά*.[7] In other words, whereas for Chrysippus both an action and an impulse may or may not D, Epictetus states that my opinions, assents, judgements and impulses *always* depend on me; my actions *never* do. The consequences are evident and noteworthy:

τῶν περὶ αὐτὸ τὰ μὲν ἀκώλυτα ἔχει καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῷ, τὰ δὲ κωλυτὰ καὶ ἐπ' ἄλλοις· ἀκώλυτα μὲν τὰ προαιρετικά, κωλυτὰ δὲ τὰ ἀπροαίρετα. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο, ἐὰν μὲν ἐν τούτοις μόνοις ἡγήσηται τὸ ἀγαθὸν τὸ αὑτοῦ καὶ συμφέρον, τοῖς ἀκωλύτοις καὶ ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ, ἐλεύθερον ἔσται, εὔρουν, εὔδαιμον, ἀβλαβές. (4.7.8–9)

He has some of the things which are about him free from hindrance and under his control, but […] others are subject to hindrance and under the control of others. Free from hindrance are those things which lie in the sphere of *prohairesis*. And so, if he regards his own good and advantage as residing in these things alone, in those, namely, which are free from hindrance and under his control, he will be free, serene, happy, unharmed.

The argument that underlies this passage is relatively simple: (a) *eudaimonia* is – or can only be attained through – the complete absence of perturbations; (b) perturbations can be – in broad terms – reduced to the frustration of desire; (c) the causal origin of those perturbations lies in desiring what does not depend on us; therefore, (d) if we do not desire what does not depend on us, we will not experience perturbations and will, as a consequence, attain *eudaimonia*. Whereas the two first premises could be endorsed by many Hellenistic philosophers, it is in the implications of the third premise that we find Epictetus' main contribution to Stoic ethics[8] but, at the same time, his most controversial and uncompromising stance. The polemical element in this position comes from one single derivation of the argument: if *human actions* (which I take to mean the concrete projection of the soul towards the sphere of indifferents) are not something that depends on us, and if the absence of perturbations can only be reached by focussing on what does depend on us and neglecting what does not, *eudaimonia* seems to become a blissful state that can only be acquired by doing away with all of our social attachments and retreating to the inner citadel of the soul.[9]

[7] The shift from a conditional to a categorical principle does not imply, to be sure, that *everything* depends on me; it simply means that *there is a certain class of things* (i.e. those that fall under the sphere of the *prohairesis*) that always and unconditionally depend on me.

[8] This does not imply considering (d) as Epictetus' *innovation*; but in none of the extant records of early Stoics concerning the concept of D do we find either a connection between D and freedom, or the use of that concept as the axis around which revolve the possibility of *eudaimonia* and the possibility of a legitimate relationship with the sphere of indifferents.

[9] The necessary and mutual implication between the notions of 'that which depends on me' and 'what has to do with my *prohairesis*' raises questions on the problem of the moral evaluation of human actions, since there does not seem to exist (in Epictetus' ethics) any observable quality that might provide a criterion to distinguish morally commendable actions from censurable ones, whether they be performed by different agents or by the same agent at different times. This last case takes us to the problem of moral progress, since, as has been pointed out to me by *CQ*'s anonymous referee, if we accept this extremely restrictive conception of 'that which depends on us', a curious consequence seems to follow: moral progress could be interpreted as a modification of the soul which need not express itself outwardly, given that I could improve morally without any change in my actions. In other words, given that actions do not

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I am not concerned here, however, with these alleged derivations,[10] but rather with the place that the argument assumes within Epictetus' ethical reflections: setting aside the fact that the distinction between D and its opposite becomes the touchstone to the question of how to deal with the world that lies outside our souls, what matters in relation to the problem of freedom is that D seems to stand in a position of *complete equivalence* with the concept of freedom. If whatever is qualified as depending on us (whether it be our *prohairesis*, our opinions, assents and impulses, or the use of our impressions) can alternatively be said to be free,[11] the idea of something being free could easily be resolved into D: our *prohairesis*, our opinions, etc., are free in that they cannot be externally hindered or forced.

However, although ἐλεύθερος and ἐφ' ἡμῖν can certainly be taken for synonyms on most occasions (that is, when functioning in adjectival phrases and clauses), there is one aspect where the concept of freedom departs from the idea of 'that which depends on us': whereas the latter can only function as the predicate of something else (an agent or an action), ἐλευθερία seems to designate something altogether different from its adjectival form ἐλεύθερος. What this freedom stands for is what I shall try to unveil. Nevertheless, in order to do that, we must first analyse the meaning of the equation between freedom and D.

2. THE CASE AGAINST INDETERMINISM

What does it mean to say that our opinions, assents and impulses 'depend on us'[12] or that they are 'up to us'? One possibility would be to consider that it amounts to saying that 'we *are* always in a position […] to decide what to make of any impression, and whether or not to give it our assent' (Long [n. 3], 214). A number of passages from the *Discourses* definitely seem to back this interpretation (which I shall call **T**):

μή τίς σε κωλῦσαι δύναται ἐπινεῦσαι ἀληθεῖ; οὐδὲ εἷς. μή τίς σε ἀναγκάσαι δύναται παραδέξασθαι τὸ ψεῦδος; οὐδὲ εἷς. ὁρᾷς ὅτι ἐν τούτῳ τῷ τόπῳ τὸ προαιρετικὸν ἔχεις ἀκώλυτον ἀνανάγκαστον ἀπαραπόδιστον. (1.17.22–24)

depend on me, I could make moral progress and yet perform exactly the same actions I performed before that progress took place. I believe Epictetus would have been untroubled by this remark, since the criterion he proposes for moral assessment is not the success or failure *per se* of my desires and rejections, but rather whether my desire has as its object something that lies outside the sphere of my *prohairesis* or not. To be sure, Epictetus repeatedly states that the attainment of freedom (and thereby the possibility of making moral progress) *entails the actual success of my desire* (cf. 2.8.29; 2.23.42; 3.12.4–5; 4.1.46); but the desire he has in mind is precisely a desire the object of which does not lie outside my *prohairesis* and, because of that, cannot possibly be hindered or frustrated. In consequence, something *must* be different if I am to be considered as having made moral progress, but that need only be a positive change in the quality of my desire (which will, nevertheless, necessarily reflect on its success or failure). See R.S. Braicovich, 'La posibilidad de la acción libre en las *Disertaciones* de Epicteto', *Revista de filosofía* 64 (2008), 17–32.

[10] On the issue of the 'retreat to the inner citadel' and its possible solutions, cf. especially Long (n. 3), 67–96, and J. Annas, 'Epictetus on moral perspectives', in A. Mason and T. Scaltsas (edd.), *The Philosophy of Epictetus* (Oxford, 2007), 140–52.

[11] Thus, we either find that *prohairesis* is *free* (1.15.1) or that it *depends on us* (1.22.9–10).

[12] I am obviously concerned here with the frequent connotations of the verb 'to depend' in contemporary English, and not with its etymological background.

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Can anyone prevent you from assenting to truth? No one at all. Can anyone force you to accept the false? No one at all. Do you see that in this sphere you have a *prohairesis* free from hindrance, constraint, obstruction?

Σκέψαι τίς εἶ. τὸ πρῶτον ἄνθρωπος, τοῦτο δ' ἔστιν οὐδὲν ἔχων κυριώτερον προαιρέσεως, ἀλλὰ ταύτῃ τὰ ἄλλα ὑποτεταγμένα, αὐτὴν δ' ἀδούλευτον καὶ ἀνυπότακτον. (2.10.1–2)

Consider who you are. To begin with, a man; that is, one who has no quality more sovereign than *prohairesis*, but keeps everything else subordinate to it, and this *prohairesis* itself free from slavery and subjection.

ὀρθῇ προαιρέσει […] *ἐπ' ἐμοὶ αὐτὸ ἐποίησεν καὶ ἔδωκεν οἷον εἶχεν αὐτός, ἀκώλ*[υ]*τον, ἀνανάγκαστον, ἀπαραπόδιστον.* (3.3.8–10)

A right *prohairesis* [… Zeus …] put under my control, and he gave it to me even as he had it himself, free from hindrance, compulsion, restraint.

What Epictetus appears to be endorsing here is an *absolute* and *unconditional* freedom of our *prohairesis* to choose between different courses of action: since nothing (and nobody) can possibly either compel or hinder our assents, opinions or impulses (for they are just not the kind of things that could be compelled or hindered), it is *entirely up to us* to choose X rather than Y, regardless of who we are. In other words, every individual would be able to freely choose X or Y in every single moment of his life, regardless of whether his epistemic condition is marked by complete ignorance or absolute wisdom.

The difficulties that this interpretation encounters are critical. The first objection has to do with consistency: **T** stands in open contradiction with the Stoic principle that the wise man can never assent to a non-kataleptic impression (let alone a *false* one[13]) and can never be wrong in his assessments and axiological evaluations.[14] The

[13] Cf. Long (n. 3), 67–127. Although it might be objected that this principle is never explicitly stated as such throughout Epictetus' work, there is neither any textual support to argue for Epictetus' disavowal of it, nor is there any convincing reason to assume that he has departed from orthodoxy in this point. To be sure, there is (as Long has so carefully analysed, ibid. 67–96) a substantial shift in emphasis and attitude concerning the problem of 'moral progress', stressing its actual possibility instead of concentrating on the (unbridgeable) gap that early Stoicism had placed between utter ignorance and perfect wisdom. However, this should by no means force us to conclude that Epictetus has altogether abandoned the early Stoic characterization of the wise man. As I shall address this problem later, suffice it to say that what we find in Epictetus is the transformation of the Stoic *objective description* of the wise man's attitudes and behaviour into an *imperative* addressed at his hearers, where the formulaic 'the wise man always Xs and never Ys' becomes 'if you want to conquer freedom and happiness you must never X and you must always Y'.

[14] The complete absence of the complementary argument (that is, that an ignorant or uneducated individual can never – except by mere chance – be right in his assessments and axiological evaluations) should perhaps be interpreted as a symptom of Epictetus' profound commitment to the pedagogical task of raising his students out of the pit of ignorance. See J.M. Cooper, 'The relevance of moral theory to moral improvement in Epictetus', in Mason and Scaltsas (n. 10), 9–19. Dragona-Monachou suggests a complementary reason against indeterminist interpretations of Epictetus' conception of freedom: 'Philosophy has prepared a man to be capable of responding to crucial dilemmas immediately, without the need to deliberate over what to do; therefore, freedom to do otherwise is somehow meaningless for him' (M. Dragona-Monachou, 'Epictetus

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second difficulty concerns textual evidence: there is not a single passage either in the *Discourses* or the *Enchiridion* that could unequivocally back the claim sustained by **T**. However, the main argument against such an interpretation comes from the question of the precise status or nature of the concept of *prohairesis.* If we are to consider it as a faculty (δύναμις), this can only be legitimate as long as we conceive of it merely as a 'function' of the soul, only analytically distinguishable from the *hegemonikon.*[15] However, to regard it as a faculty in this restricted sense does not entail considering it as something qualitatively independent from the subjective history of the individual or from its present epistemic disposition. It is certainly not an abstract faculty shared by all rational individuals, nor is it something which remains identical to itself throughout an individual's whole life. That it is not a neutral, noumenal[16] faculty is testified by a series of passages which are decisive for a correct understanding of the concept:

τούτου κατορθωθέντος ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος [ἀγαθὸ]ς γίνεται, ἀποτευχθέντος κακὸς ἄνθρωπος γίνεται. (2.23.28)

When [a man's *prohairesis*] has been set right a man becomes good, when it has failed a man becomes bad.

Οὐσία τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ προαίρεσις ποιά, τοῦ κακοῦ προαίρεσις ποιά. τί οὖν τὰ ἐκτός; ὕλαι τῇ προαιρέσει, περὶ ἃς ἀναστρεφομένη τεύξεται τοῦ ἰδίου ἀγαθοῦ ἢ κακοῦ. πῶς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ τεύξεται; ἂν τὰς ὕλας μὴ θαυμάσῃ. τὰ γὰρ περὶ τῶν ὑλῶν δόγματα ὀρθὰ μὲν ὄντα ἀγαθὴν ποιεῖ τὴν προαίρεσιν, στρεβλὰ δὲ καὶ διεστραμμένα κακήν. (1.29.1–4)

The essence of the good is a certain kind of *prohairesis*, and that of the evil is a certain kind of *prohairesis*. What, then, are the external things? They are materials for the *prohairesis*, in dealing with which it will find its own proper good or evil. How will it find the good? If it does not admire the materials. For the judgements about the materials, if they be correct, make the *prohairesis* good, but if they be crooked and awry, they make it evil.

on freedom: parallels between Epictetus and Wittgenstein', in Mason and Scaltsas [n. 10], 112–39, at 132). I do not, however, see this argument as central to Epictetus' position, and neither does it seem to play any role in other Stoic sources.

[15] It is essential to bear in mind that Epictetus does not offer a technical distinction between all the terms involved. The first difficulty relates to the frequent overlapping of the definitions of *prohairesis* and *hegemonikon*, given that either one or the other appear alternatively as the subject of identical predications, making it impossible to locate the topographical limit that distinguishes them. The main problem, however, lies in the fact that the same procedure is applied to *prohairesis* and 'the use of our impressions' (ἡ χρῆσις τῶν φαντασιῶν): both expressions appear as 'that which depends on us', as the supreme good, and as the only thing we are responsible for. (Cf. 1.1.7; 1.30.3–4; 1.20.15; 1.12.32–5; 2.8.4–6; 2.19.32–3; 2.22.29; 3.24.69). This makes it difficult to settle the precise status of *prohairesis*: if it is to be considered as an exact synonym of 'the use of our impressions', it cannot be classified as a 'faculty' of the soul, but rather as a particular act or mental event (which source would presumably be the *hegemonikon*). Although certain passages effectively appear to back this alternative (especially 1.17.25), the evidence that demands that we interpret *prohairesis* as a faculty, and not as a mere 'act of the *hegemonikon*', is overwhelming.

[16] Cf. A.A. Long, 'Representation and the self in Stoicism', in id., *Stoic Studies* (University of California Press, 1996), 264–84, at 277–82.

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Two conclusions can be drawn from these passages: (i) given that *prohairesis* can be either good or bad, correct or incorrect, it is something that can be analysed in terms of *quality*;[17] (ii) the specific quality that can be ascribed to *prohairesis* is the result of the quality of the opinions and judgements that the individual entertains, that is, it is the expression of his *epistemic disposition*. If this is the case, a correct *prohairesis* can only produce correct judgements, assents and impulses; inversely, entertaining correct judgements or assenting in a correct manner to correct impressions can only result in a correct *prohairesis*.[18] Does this amount to saying that an individual is *determined* by his *prohairesis*? Epictetus' profound analysis of the problem of *akrasia* (or incontinence) and the intellectualistic premises on which he denies that phenomenon may be the starting point to answer that question:

Τί ἐστιν αἴτιον τοῦ συγκατατίθεσθαί τινι; τὸ φαίνεσθαι ὅτι ὑπάρχει. τῷ οὖν φαινομένῳ ὅτι οὐχ ὑπάρχει συγκατατίθεσθαι οὐχ οἷόν τε. διὰ τί; ὅτι ἡ φύσις αὕτη ἐστὶ τῆς διανοίας τοῖς μὲν ἀληθέσιν ἐπινεύειν, τοῖς δὲ ψευδέσι δυσαρεστεῖν, πρὸς δὲ τὰ ἄδηλα ἐπέχειν. τίς τούτου πίστις; 'πάθε, εἰ δύνασαι, νῦν ὅτι νύξ ἐστιν.' οὐχ οἷόν τε. 'ἀπόπαθε ὅτι ἡμέρα ἐστίν.' οὐχ οἷόν τε. 'πάθε ἢ ἀπόπαθε ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρτίους εἶναι τοὺς ἀστέρας.' οὐχ οἷόν τε. ὅταν οὖν τις συγκατατίθηται τῷ ψεύδει, ἴσθι ὅτι οὐκ ἤθελεν ψεύδει συγκαταθέσθαι· πᾶσα γὰρ ψυχὴ ἄκουσα στέρεται τῆς ἀληθείας, ὡς λέγει Πλάτων· ἀλλὰ ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ τὸ ψεῦδος ἀληθές. ἄγε ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν πράξεων τί ἔχομεν τοιοῦτον οἷον ἐνθάδε τὸ ἀληθὲς ἢ τὸ ψεῦδος; τὸ καθῆκον καὶ παρὰ τὸ καθῆκον, τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ ἀσύμφορον, τὸ κατ' ἐμὲ καὶ οὐ κατ' ἐμὲ καὶ ὅσα τούτοις ὅμοια. 'οὐ δύναται οὖν τις δοκεῖν μέν, ὅτι συμφέρει αὐτῷ, μὴ αἱρεῖσθαι δ' αὐτό;' οὐ δύναται. πῶς ἡ λέγουσα 'καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἷα δρᾶν μέλλω κακά, θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων'; ὅτι αὐτὸ τοῦτο, τῷ θυμῷ χαρίσασθαι καὶ τιμωρήσασθαι τὸν ἄνδρα, συμφορώτερον ἡγεῖται τοῦ σῶσαι τὰ τέκνα. 'ναί· ἀλλ' ἐξηπάτηται.' δεῖξον αὐτῇ ἐναργῶς ὅτι ἐξηπάτηται καὶ οὐ ποιήσει· μέχρι δ' ἂν οὔ μὴ δεικνύῃς, τίνι ἔχει ἀκολουθῆσαι ἢ τῷ φαινομένῳ; (1.28.1–11)

What is the reason that we assent to anything? The fact that it appears to us to be so. It is impossible, therefore, to assent to the thing that appears not to be so. Why? Because this is the nature of the intellect to agree to what is true, to be dissatisfied with what is false, and to withhold judgement regarding what is uncertain. What is the proof of this? 'Feel, if you can, that it is now night.' That is impossible. 'Put away the feeling that it is day.' That is impossible. 'Either feel or put away the feeling that the stars are even in number.' That is impossible. When, therefore, a man assents to a falsehood, rest assured that it was not his wish to assent to it as false; 'for every soul is unwillingly deprived of the truth', as Plato says; it only seemed to him that the false was true. Well now, in the sphere of actions, what have we corresponding to the true and the false here in the sphere of perceptions? Duty and what is contrary to duty; the profitable and the unprofitable; that which is appropriate to me and that which is not appropriate to me, and whatever is similar to these. 'Cannot a man, then, think that something is profitable to him, and yet not choose it?' He cannot. How of her [Medea] who says: 'Now, now, I learn what horrors I intend: But passion overmastereth sober thought.' It is because the very gratification of her passion and the taking of vengeance on her husband she regards as more profitable than the saving of her children. 'Yes, but she is deceived.' Show her clearly that she is deceived and she will not do it; but so long as you do not show it, what else has she to follow but that which appears to her to be true?

[17] See J.M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1977), 228–32, and Sorabji's recent analysis of Epictetus' manifold concept of *prohairesis* and its problematic relationship with the notion of one's 'self' (R. Sorabji, 'Epictetus on proairesis and Self', in Mason and Scaltsas [n. 10], 87–98).

[18] This could well be rephrased appealing to a metaphor present in Seneca (*Epistulae*, 114.3) and Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, 5.16): both an individual's faculties and acts are 'tinted' by the same colour.

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The argument behind this passage can be set out as following: (a) every rational individual desires what he conceives to be convenient for himself and rejects what he considers to be inconvenient for himself;[19] (b) no one acts contrary to what he believes to be convenient or inconvenient for himself; (c) therefore, there is no such thing as an *akratic* action: every single human action is the *necessary* outcome of a rational evaluation concerning what is most convenient at *that* moment for *that* agent.[20] It must be noticed, however, that the principle of *epistemic determinism* (as I shall call it for reasons of brevity), which states that an individual cannot possibly fail to act according to what appears to him as a true impression and cannot but refrain from doing what appears to be wrong,[21] does not presuppose at all a *correct* evaluation of the truth value of the impressions involved; it simply deals with the truth value assigned to those impressions by the agent at that precise moment, regardless of his epistemic condition,[22] and thus, whether the agent is completely mistaken about his evaluations and assessments is completely irrelevant for the argument.[23] On the contrary, stating that the individual is determined by his axiological evaluations concerning what is convenient or not is, in fact, tantamount

[19] 'Just as it is impossible to assent to what is seen to be false (*τῷ ψευδεῖ φαινομένῳ*), and to reject what is true, so it is impossible to reject what is seen to be good.' (3.7.14–15); 'It is impossible to judge one thing expedient (*συμφέρον*) and yet desire (*ὀρέγεσθαι*) another, and again, to judge one thing fitting (*καθῆκον*), and yet be impelled (*ὁρμᾶν*) to another.' (1.18.2–7); 'Just as it is the nature of every soul to assent to the true, dissent from the false, and to withhold judgement in a matter of uncertainty, so it is its nature to be moved toward the good, with aversion toward the evil, and feel neutral toward what is neither evil nor good.' (3.3.3).

[20] This denial of the phenomenon of *akrasia* is founded on the early Stoic identification of passions with wrong judgements, of which conception Epictetus offers the most precise and elaborate analysis we find in Stoic sources. Concerning the issue of whether Zeno and Chrysippus disagreed on the characterization of passion, see T. Brennan, 'Stoic moral psychology', in B. Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge, 2003), 257–94; S.K. Strange, 'The Stoics on the voluntariness of the passions', in S. Strange and J. Zupko (edd.), *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations* (Cambridge, 2004), 32–51; L.C. Becker, 'Stoic Emotion', in Strange and Zupko, 250–75.

[21] There is no room here for Long's attempt to soften Epictetus' radicalism in this matter by affirming that we are '*inclined* to accept all impressions that appear to be true' (n. 3, 214). After all, Long himself admits, when dealing with the question of tolerance, that 'people are *necessarily motivated* by their conceptions of what they take to be good or bad for themselves' (ibid. 250; so also in [n. 16], 276–7).

[22] Technically, the obstacles **T** encounters could be stated in a threefold projection: we are not in any sense *free* to (a) withhold our assent when presented with a *kataleptic* impression (provided that we recognize it as such); (b) assent to a false impression (provided that we recognize it as such); (c) simultaneously assent to two mutually contradictory impressions (provided that we recognize them as such). On this last impossibility, cf. 2.26.1–7.

[23] It must not be thought that Epictetus has completely abandoned the *absolute* perspective, and the irrelevance of the absolute truth value of the impression concerning the psychology of action does not force Epictetus to either epistemic or ethical relativism: the fact that the agent may be mistaken in his assessment does not negate that every impression is either true or false or that every course of action is convenient or inconvenient from an absolute perspective. It simply implies that the absolute perspective does not concern the *descriptive* aspect of his analysis of human action, but rather the *normative* side of it: given that human error is the product of the inadequacy between the absolute and the apparent truth value of the impressions that we are presented with, it is in the adequacy or convergence of both perspectives that lies the possibility of moral progress. In rigour, the most general class of actions is that of actions done in accordance with that which *appears* good to the agent at the moment of the action. Actions done in accordance with that which is good in *absolute* terms constitute a subset of the former, particularized by the fact that the agent's personal assessment of good and bad is completely *identical* with what is good in absolute terms. The remaining subset is, of course,

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to saying that he is determined by his *prohairesis*. This being the case, the *ability to do otherwise* is radically suppressed: an agent X who at *t* chose to F, could not have chosen at *t* to not-F (unless, of course, the disposition of his *prohairesis* had been different; in which case, we could well refrain from considering him as the same agent).[24]

If it is the sum of our past opinions, assents and impulses that makes us who we are, if it shapes and constitutes our *selves*, our present and future opinions, assents and impulses will not be the result of a free volitional act; they will be the direct expression of that personal history. Where exactly does *prohairesis* fit in? It can certainly be seen to assume two roles in the sequence: it is both the *source* of our opinions and the *result* of them; we entertain a certain set of opinions and not another on account of the quality of our *prohairesis*, but the quality of our *prohairesis* is, at the same time, determined by the set of opinions we entertain. Is there a way out of this vicious circle? To assume that there must be one and to ask what it can be presupposes that Epictetus himself not only was aware of the circularity of the argument but that he also shared our aversion to such a kind of argumentation. No evidence seems to support either of these claims,[25] and Epictetus certainly does not appear to be concerned at all by such an issue.

3. FREEDOM: *ATARAXIA* AND SELF-DETERMINATION

After these considerations, we must renew the question: given that, as Barney points out when addressing the mind's reactions to impressions, 'the whole process

formed by actions which are based on an initial *error of judgement* concerning what must be pursued and rejected.

[24] The possibility (effectively ascribed by Epictetus) that the same agent *at* *t*+1 chose *not* to F concerns the issue of moral progress and not the problem of the ability to do otherwise.

[25] Long (n. 16, 278–81) has nevertheless firmly sustained that there is a way out to this problem, resorting to the Stoic doctrine of preconceptions or prenotions (προλήψεις). However, as he himself acknowledges, 'preconceptions are [not] sufficient criteria on their own to guide our judgements […] We need Stoic doctrine in order to learn that conventional goods such as health or wealth are not strictly good nor their opposites strictly bad because they are not unequivocally profitable or harmful respectively, or to learn that happiness does not consist in a succession of pleasurable sensations and an absence of painful ones. Our preconceptions need to be articulated by definitions far more precise than their innate content involves; and we need unremitting training in order to make our conduct consonant with these refinements' (Long [n. 3], 80). If this is so, it could hardly be demanded that we fall back on our preconceptions to avoid acting on wrong opinions and evaluations: the concrete application of preconceptions is as much *dependent on* the quality of the agent's *prohairesis* as are his opinions, assents and impulses. Going back to the problem of *akrasia*, Medea (contrary to Long's interpretation) could in fact claim that at the moment of killing her children (*t*), she indeed had the innate preconception of good, but that what seemed good and convenient to her at *t* was to take revenge on Jason. Whether she could in *t*-1 or in *t*+1 comprehend that, from the perspective of virtue, her act was in fact wrong, is foreign to Epictetus' argument: what only matters is that at that precise moment (*t*), the sub-optimal epistemic disposition of her *prohairesis* prevented her from seeing what would have been the correct course of action. Contrary to my interpretation, Joyce, Long and Gill have attempted to diffuse the dividing line between Medea's epistemic capabilities at *t* and her previous (Joyce) or innate (Long) or potential (Gill) capabilities concerning the comprehension of what is good or bad. Cf. Long (n. 16), 278–81; R. Joyce, 'Early Stoicism and *akrasia*', *Phronesis* 60.3 (1995), 315–35; C. Gill, 'Did Chrysippus understand Medea?', *Phronesis* 28 (1983), 136–49. In line with Epictetus' analysis, cf. H. Foley, 'Medea's divided self', *ClAnt* 7.1 (1989), 61–85.

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sounds *almost automatic*',[26] what does it mean to say that our opinions, assents and impulses *depend on us*? The indeterminist alternative having been discarded, we must add further nuances to the original abstract formula: opinions, assents and impulses *depend on us* in the sense that they *depend on the prohairesis of a specific agent at a specific time*.

As is evident, the modified formula can hardly function as a foundation for any theory of freedom that presupposes that a rational agent can operate a rupture in the causal nexus of the world or that he can initiate completely independent causal processes. We might wonder, indeed, if it can serve any function at all in the question about freedom. After all, what kind of freedom can be ascribed to an agent whose acts are the mere expression of the state of his *prohairesis*, which in turn is nothing more than the result of past experiences which have completely determined its actual disposition and quality?

A convincing alternative has been offered to answer this problem. Bobzien has argued that Epictetus' innovation in relation to the early Stoics was to connect explicitly the concepts of freedom and 'that which depends on us', in such a sense that the nexus between both concepts could be conceived as a means–end relation: freedom is a 'virtuous state of mind, desirable and to be aimed at. […] You possess freedom if, knowing what depends on you, you do not ever desire or deplore anything that does not depend on you' (Bobzien [n. 1], 342). In line with this, on analysing the connection between freedom and *autonomy,* Long states: 'Freedom from being constrained by […] external contingencies, and freedom from being constrained by the errors and passions consequential on believing that such contingencies *must* influence and inhibit one's volition [*prohairesis*] […] is achievable only by those who attend to his constantly repeated injunction to focus one's desires and aversions exclusively on things that fall within the scope of one's volition' (Long [n. 3], 225). On this interpretation, freedom can be seen primarily as a synonym of *ataraxia*: we are free in that we are *free from* the perturbations and frustrations that would befall us if we were to concern ourselves with what does not depend on us.

However, a central passage from Epictetus' *Discourses* suggests that there is more to freedom than what this equation between freedom and *ataraxia* offers:[27]

ἐλεύθερος γάρ ἐστιν, ᾧ γίνεται πάντα κατὰ προαίρεσιν καὶ ὃν οὐδεὶς δύναται κωλῦσαι. τί οὖν; ἀπόνοιά ἐστιν ἡ ἐλευθερία; μὴ γένοιτο. μανία γὰρ καὶ ἐλευθερία εἰς ταὐτὸν οὐκ ἔρχεται. ἀλλ' ἐγὼ θέλω πᾶν τὸ δοκοῦν μοι ἀποβαίνειν, κἂν ὁπωσοῦν δοκῇ. μαινόμενος εἶ, παραφρονεῖς. οὐκ οἶδας, ὅτι καλόν τι ἐλευθερία ἐστὶ καὶ ἀξιόλογον […] πῶς γὰρ ἐπὶ γραμματικῶν ποιοῦμεν; βούλομαι γράφειν ὡς θέλω τὸ Δίωνος ὄνομα; οὔ· ἀλλὰ διδάσκομαι θέλειν, ὡς δεῖ γράφεσθαι. τί ἐπὶ μουσικῶν; ὡσαύτως. τί ἐν τῷ καθόλου, ὅπου τέχνη τις ἢ ἐπιστήμη ἐστίν; εἰ δὲ μή, οὐδενὸς ἦν ἄξιον τὸ ἐπίστασθαί τι, εἰ ταῖς ἑκάστων βουλήσεσι προσηρμόζετο. ἐνταῦθα οὖν μόνον ἐπὶ τοῦ μεγίστου καὶ κυριωτάτου, τῆς ἐλευθερίας, ὡς ἔτυχεν ἐφεῖταί μοι θέλειν; (1.12.9–15)

[26] R. Barney, 'Appearances and impressions', *Phronesis* 37.3 (1992), 283–313, at 298.

[27] Dragona-Monachou's word of warning could not be more appropriate: 'Freedom for Epictetus is in fact much broader than the agency required by the problem of free will, much richer than that which depends on us and more complicated than the inner freedom of resignation' (Dragona-Monachou [n. 14], 126).

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He is free for whom all things happen according to his moral purpose, and whom none can restrain. What then? Is freedom insanity? Far from it; for madness and freedom are not consistent with one another. 'But I would have that which seems best to me happen, in every case, no matter how it comes to seem so.' You are mad; you are beside yourself. Do you not know that freedom is a noble and precious thing? […] For how do we act in writing? Do I desire to write the name 'Dio' as I choose? No, but I am taught to desire to write it as it ought to be written. What do we do in music? The same. And what in general, where there is any art or science? The same; otherwise knowledge of anything would be useless, if it were accommodated to every individual's whims. Is it, then, only in this matter of freedom, the greatest and indeed the highest of all, that I am permitted to desire haphazardly?

The first proposition in this passage certainly refers to the narrow sense of freedom in which it is equated with *ataraxia*: that something should happen according to someone's *prohairesis* implies that his intention (that is what *prohairesis* seems to stand for in this particular context) has been accomplished; consequently, his desire has not been frustrated. However, it is Epictetus himself who perceives the imminent objection: if we were to equate freedom with every action that takes place according to the agent's intentions, we would be forced to ascribe freedom to any agent who is effectively able to translate his intentions into actions, *however irrational the former may be*.

The frequently neglected relevance of this passage lies in the fact that it brings to light the *rationalistic* solution that Epictetus endorses to avoid such derivation. Incorporating what I have said so far, we are in a position to reconstruct the following argument: (a) we are free in our opinions, assents and impulses to the extent that they cannot possibly be *externally* determined or hindered. Thus far, we are always self-determined, we might say, in that (b) it is not external events or individuals who determine us, but rather the opinion or judgement we hold of them.[28] However, freedom cannot be simply equated to self-determination because: (c) our opinions are an expression of the specific state of our *prohairesis*; (d) *prohairesis* is not an abstract and neutral faculty equal in all rational beings, but rather a qualified faculty which can be hierarchically classified according to its proximity to wisdom; therefore, (e) the opinions that spring from that *prohairesis* are also qualified (that is, they retain the quality of the *prohairesis* that produced them and, thus, 'depend on us' in a particularized sense) and are hierarchically classified;[29] (f) only the opinions that belong to the top of the hierarchy are an expression of freedom.[30]

[28] 'In every case the way a man fares is determined by his judgement (*αἴτιον τοῦ πράσσειν πως τὸ δόγμα*).' (3.9.2); 'Nothing but judgement (*δόγμα*) is responsible (*αἴτιον*) for the disturbance of our piece of mind and our inconstancy.' (3.19.3).

[29] '… judgements […] are each man's own possessions (*τὰ ἴδια ἑκάστου*), which make actions either base or noble.' (4.4.44); 'If a man's judgements determine everything (*πάντων αἴτια τὰ δόγματα*), and if a man has unsound (*φαῦλα*) judgements, whatever be the cause such also will be the consequence.' (3.9.4–5).

[30] In other words: that *prohairesis* cannot be determined from the outside does not mean that it cannot be forced from the inside. These inner determinations can be either considered as an *obstacle* in the way to rationality ('Nothing else can overcome [*νικῆσαι*] *prohairesis*, but it overcomes itself.' [1.29.12]; 'It is not possible that that which is by nature free should be disturbed or thwarted by anything *but itself*.' [1.19.7], or they can be considered the *condition* that makes it possible ('[God] has commended me to myself, and he has subjected to me alone my *prohairesis*, giving me standards (*κανόνας*) for the correct use of it.' [4.12.12]).

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If this argument has been reassembled correctly, freedom must be considered not as mere self-determination, but as the self-determination of a rational *prohairesis*, a *prohairesis* which is to be ὡς δεῖ and κατὰ φύσιν.[31] It is evident by now that we have definitively left behind the possible connection between freedom and free will: the freedom that is at stake here is the product of the acquisition of a precise *episteme*, and not just a fact of human nature: '– What, therefore, is it which makes a man free from hindrance and restraint in writing? – The knowledge of how to write. – And what in playing on the harp? – The knowledge of how to play on the harp. – So also in living, it is the knowledge of how to live.' (4.1.63). Although the reference to this *episteme* – as Long suggests (Long [n. 3], p. 221) – seems to refer to nothing less than the whole practical corpus of Stoic ethics, what concerns us here is only the fact that such requirement introduces a binary classification between the possible internal sources of determination of our actions: granted that there are no external events that have the power to determine us to act, we still are necessarily compelled by inner determinations, which (we may assume) range from the utmost ignorance to perfect rationality. Thus, the possibility of freedom lies not in the absence of determinations from the inside (which would anyway be impossible), but in *being driven by the correct kind of inner determinations*.

The concept of 'autonomy' may be, thus, legitimately equated to this idea of freedom, so long as we remember that the mere self-imposition of practical guidelines to one's conduct may be the outcome of a completely irrational process, or, more precisely, the outcome of a rational argumentative process delivered by an unhealthy *prohairesis*.[32] In order to attain freedom, the healing of such a deviated *prohairesis* certainly demands a precise training (ἄσκησις) and formation (ἐξεργάζομαι),[33] but both of them constitute (or contribute to) an ἐπιμέλεια which is based on *intellectual* foundations:[34]

[31] '… a proper *prohairesis* (οἵα δεῖ προαίρεσις) […] that alone is good.' (4.5.32); 'A proper *prohairesis* (προαίρεσις οἵα δεῖ) and a proper use of impressions.' (1.30.3–4); 'To maintain freedom of *prohairesis* in accord with nature (κατὰ φύσιν).' (2.2.2). On account of the naturalistic foundations on which Stoic metaphysics is erected, both expressions amount to the same.

[32] Based on this, an additional argument against **T** could be produced: a) the norms that the agent sets himself are mere *means to an end*, which is no other than *eudaimonia*; b) we are not free to choose the end (*summum bonum*), for the tendency to pursue *eudaimonia* is an innate fact of human nature; c) we are not free to choose the means to that end, for they are determined by the epistemic disposition of our *prohairesis*.

[33] 'Where, then, is progress? If any man among you, withdrawing from external things, has turned his attention to the question of his own *prohairesis*, cultivating and perfecting it so as to make it finally harmonious with nature, elevated, free, unhindered, untrammelled, faithful, and honourable' (1.4.18); 'It is impossible without great and constant training to secure that our desire fail not to attain, and our aversion fall not into what it would avoid.' (3.12.4–5).

[34] That freedom is a conquest which can only be attained through a rigorous training is not only widely testified in the sources but also deducible from the fact that not every rational being is free in the sense of being effectively self-determined in a rational manner. It could be argued, too, that the *Discourses* explicitly state on numerous occasions that Zeus has given us capacities (*prohairesis*, opinions, etc.) which are naturally free and cannot be hindered or forced. If these were taken to mean that every rational agent has at any given moment the capacity to determine himself in a rational manner, it would certainly be an obstacle to our interpretation. Against this, I believe that such passages must be interpreted as mere pieces of rhetoric which do not, when placed into their context, contradict our contention that the expressions concerning the 'natural freedom' of our *prohairesis* (opinions, assents, etc.) must be understood as implying that the *possibility* of freedom is in their nature. This becomes evident in Zeus' words to Epictetus: 'We have given you a certain portion of ourself, this faculty of choice and refusal, of desire and

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ἔργα δὲ ψυχῆς ὁρμᾶν, ἀφορμᾶν, ὀρέγεσθαι, ἐκκλίνειν, παρασκευάζεσθαι, ἐπιβάλλεσθαι, συγκατατίθεσθαι. τί ποτ' οὖν ἐστι τὸ ἐν τούτοις τοῖς ἔργοις ῥυπαρὰν παρέχον αὐτὴν καὶ ἀκάθαρτον; οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ τὰ μοχθηρὰ κρίματα αὐτῆς. ὥστε ψυχῆς μὲν ἀκαθαρσία δόγματα πονηρά, κάθαρσις δ' ἐμποίησις οἷων δεῖ δογμάτων. (4.11.6–8)

The functions of a soul are the exercise of choice, of refusal, of desire, of aversion, of preparation, of purpose, and of assent. What, then, can that be which makes the soul dirty and unclean in these functions? Nothing but its erroneous decisions. It follows, therefore, that impurity of a soul consists of bad judgements, and purification consists in creating within it the proper kind of judgements.

4. EPISTEMIC DETERMINISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

It might be argued that my interpretation has not dealt with the issue of where Epictetus stands on the problem of universal determinism. This objection could rightly be answered by claiming that that issue (controversial as it may be) has no bearing on my account of Epictetus' conception of freedom, since we have only been concerned with the connection between the epistemic disposition of our *prohairesis* and our opinions, assents and impulses, none of which brings into the formula any point of contact with the world outside the soul (we have just stated a regression ad infinitum: opinions are the result of our *prohairesis*; *prohairesis* is the result of our previous opinions). Yet, in a sense, the objection stands, for this precise circularity not only could be construed as a particularized, located kind of determinism, but also ends up with difficulties analogous to those imputed by ancient critics to the early Stoic conception of determinism. After all, the most serious objection concerns the problem of *moral responsibility*: how can we be legitimately praised or blamed for an action if we have been determined to undertake it by the epistemic disposition of our *prohairesis*? How can we be legitimately considered morally responsible for an action that was not in our power to avoid?

A partial answer to this questions can be found in a particular application (which I shall call **R1**) of the distinction between what depends on us and what does not: 'Is anything disgraceful to you which is not your own doing (σὸν ἔργον), for which you are not responsible (αἴτιος), which has befallen accidentally (ἀπήντησεν), as a headache or as a fever?' (3.26.8). If this were just the 'tip of the iceberg', that is, if these were just a representative passage of Epictetus' systematic approach to the problem of moral responsibility, we would be justified in ascribing to him a conception of moral responsibility close to that of Chrysippus: we are morally responsible for something if we (and not *something* or *somebody* else) are the main causal factor in its production.[35] However, this is the *only*[36] extant passage

aversion, or, in a word, the faculty which makes use of external impressions; *if you care* for this and place all that you have therein, you shall never be thwarted, never hampered.' (1.1.11).

[35] This is the view taken by Bobzien (n. 1), 336–7.

[36] Contrary to Salles' (n. 2) interpretation, 2.19.29–34 bears no relation with the problem of moral responsibility; it is merely an exhortation to undertake one's own moral *emendatio*, emphasizing the effective possibility of moral progress. Cf. Salles (n. 2), 11.

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that deals explicitly with the concept of responsibility in this particular sense;[37] whatever passages from the *Discourses* we may indirectly relate to the problem of moral responsibility are nothing more than scattered remarks, none of which bear any consequence of import in Epictetus' overall ethical or metaphysical reflections.

None the less, an alternative conception of the notion of responsibility [**R2**] arises elsewhere in the *Discourses*:

οὐ μᾶλλον εὐχαριστεῖς τοῖς θεοῖς, ὅτι σε ἐπάνω τούτων ἀφῆκαν ὅσα μηδ' ἐποίησαν ἐπὶ σοί, μόνον δ' ὑπεύθυνον ἀπέφηναν τῶν ἐπὶ σοί; γονέων ἕνεκα ἀνυπεύθυνον ἀφῆκαν· ἀδελφῶν ἕνεκα ἀφῆκαν, σώματος ἕνεκα ἀφῆκαν, κτήσεως, θανάτου, ζωῆς. τίνος οὖν ὑπεύθυνόν σε ἐποίησαν; τοῦ μόνου ὄντος ἐπὶ σοί, χρήσεως οἵας δεῖ φαντασιῶν. τί οὖν ἐπισπᾷς σεαυτῷ ταῦτα ὢν ἀνυπεύθυνος εἶ; τοῦτό ἐστιν ἑαυτῷ παρέχειν πράγματα. (1.12.32–36)

Do you not rather render thanks to the gods that they have allowed you to be superior to all the things that they did not put under your control, and have rendered you accountable only for what is under your control? As for parents, the gods have released you from accountability; as for brothers, they have released you; as for body, they have released you; and for property, death, life. Well, for what have they made you accountable? For the only thing that is under your control – the proper use of impressions. Why, then, do you draw upon yourself that for which you are not responsible? This is to make trouble for yourself. [38]

The notion of being responsible (*ὑπεύθυνος*) at play in this passage pertains to an altogether different meaning of the concept: that we are responsible for X simply means that X is something that has been given to us for us to take care of; it is something of which we are in charge. Consequently, it must be related to the distinction between what is mine and has to do with me and what does not, what depends on me and what does not, and is not predicated of actions (as in **R1**), but rather of the state of our *prohairesis*. What happens if I neglect the care of X? Epictetus draws from early Stoic legacy to answer this question:

ὁ νόμος θεῖος καὶ ἰσχυρὸς καὶ ἀναπόδραστος οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τὰς μεγίστας εἰσπρασσόμενος κολάσεις παρὰ τῶν τὰ μέγιστα ἁμαρτανόντων; τί γὰρ λέγει; 'ὁ προσποιούμενος τὰ μηδὲν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔστω ἀλαζών, ἔστω κενόδοξος· ὁ ἀπειθῶν τῇ θείᾳ διοικήσει ἔστω ταπεινός, ἔστω δοῦλος. (3.24.42–43)

The divine and mighty and inescapable law is the law which exacts the greatest penalties from those who are guilty of the greatest offences. Now what are its terms? 'Let him who makes pretence to things which in no wise concern him be a braggart, let him be a vainglorious man; let him who disobeys the divine governance be abject, be a slave.'

Τί οὖν ὄφελος αὐτῷ τοῦ πρᾶξαι καλῶς; – Τί δ' ὄφελος τῷ γράφοντι τὸ Δίωνος ὄνομα, ὡς χρὴ γράφειν; αὐτὸ τὸ γράψαι. – Ἔπαθλον οὖν οὐδέν; – Σὺ δὲ ζητεῖς ἔπαθλον ἀνδρὶ ἀγαθῷ μεῖζον τοῦ τὰ καλὰ καὶ δίκαια πράττειν. (3.24.51)

[37] Moreover, this vague observation by Epictetus does not answer the main objection it naturally raises: even if something is considered as our own doing, are we accountable for it, given that it was not in our power to do otherwise?

[38] Cf. likewise 4.12.12 and 1.5.15: 'His patrimony, his paltry farm, and paltry dwelling, and his tavern, and his poor slaves [...] none of these things is a man's own possession, but they all belong to others, are subservient and subject, given by their masters now to one person and now to another (*ὑπεύθυνα ἄλλοτε ἄλλοις διδόμενα ὑπὸ τῶν κυρίων*).'

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'What good does he get, then, from acting right?' And what good does the person get from writing the name 'Dio' as it ought to be written? The mere fact of writing it that way. 'Is there, then, no further reward?' And are you looking for some further reward in the case of a good man, a reward which is greater than the doing of what is fine and right?'

Reward and punishment are not something that (necessarily) pertain to the sphere of law or custom: both of them are the immanent result of virtue and vice. The only legitimate reward for acting virtuously is the very same act of doing so (since it puts us one step closer to *eudaimonia*); the only punishment for acting viciously that need concern us is the fact that by doing so we are perpetuating for ourselves a life of ignorance, irrationality and frustrations. Consequently, the answer to the previous question lies in itself: if we neglect the care of our *prohairesis*, we are neglecting our potential for *eudaimonia*; and what worse punishment could we possibly be threatened with?

Even so, it could be argued that Epictetus might have just intended to state this principle of immanence (which makes praise and blame at least unnecessary or redundant) from the perspective of *eudaimonia*, and not from the perspective of social relationships. But on the contrary, it is Epictetus himself who guards his listeners against adopting a condemnatory perspective on this issue:

ἀμήχανον δ' ἄλλο μὲν κρίνειν τὸ συμφέρον, ἄλλου δ' ὀρέγεσθαι καὶ ἄλλο μὲν κρίνειν καθῆκον, ἐπ' ἄλλο δὲ ὁρμᾶν, τί ἔτι τοῖς πολλοῖς χαλεπαίνομεν; […] *πεπλάνηνται περὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν. χαλεπαίνειν οὖν δεῖ αὐτοῖς ἢ ἐλεεῖν αὐτούς; ἀλλὰ δεῖξον τὴν πλάνην καὶ ὄψει πῶς ἀφίστανται τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων. ἂν δὲ μὴ βλέπωσιν, οὐδὲν ἔχουσιν ἀνώτερον τοῦ δοκοῦντος αὐτοῖς. Τοῦτον οὖν τὸν λῃστὴν καὶ τοῦτον τὸν μοιχὸν οὐκ ἔδει ἀπολωλέναι; – Μηδαμῶς, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο μᾶλλον 'τοῦτον τὸν πεπλανημένον καὶ ἐξηπατημένον περὶ τῶν μεγίστων καὶ ἀποτετυφλωμένον οὐ τὴν ὄψιν τὴν διακριτικὴν τῶν λευκῶν καὶ μελάνων, ἀλλὰ τὴν γνώμην τὴν διακριτικὴν τῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ τῶν κακῶν μὴ ἀπολλύναι;' κἂν οὕτως λέγῃς, γνώσῃ πῶς ἀπάνθρωπόν ἐστιν ὃ λέγεις.*
(1.18.2–7)

It is impossible to judge one thing expedient and yet desire another, and again, to judge one thing fitting, and yet be impelled to another – [if all this be true,] are we any longer angry with the multitude? […] They have simply gone astray in questions of good and evil. Ought we, therefore, to be angry with them, or rather pity them? Only show them their error and you will see how quickly they will desist from their mistakes. But if their eyes are not opened, they have nothing superior to their mere opinion. 'Ought not this brigand, then, and this adulterer to be put to death?', you ask. Not at all, but you should ask rather, 'Ought not this man to be put to death who is in a state of error and delusion about the greatest matters, and is in a state of blindness, not, indeed, in the vision which distinguishes between white and black, but in the judgement which distinguishes between the good and the evil?' And if you put it this way, you will realize how inhuman a sentiment it is that you are uttering.[39]

To put it in Strawsonian terms,[40] 'reactive attitudes' are not only unnecessary, but also *useless*, for they set us apart from those who we have the obligation to lead to the correct path; hence, they must be substituted by 'objective attitudes', such as tolerance and mercy. This demand for objective attitudes towards those who

[39] Cf. also 1.28.1–11.

[40] Needless to say, Strawson's concept of 'reactive and objective attitudes' is far more comprehensive than what we are dealing with here, which does not preclude the general use I put them to in this context.

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perform vicious acts could be construed as a support for a conception of moral responsibility that presupposed our 'ability to do otherwise': (i) an agent is not liable to censure or punishment for an action if he has been determined to it by his ignorance; (ii) if he had performed that action voluntarily, that is, if he had known that what he was doing was wrong, he would be liable to such reactive attitudes. The reason why (ii) figures nowhere in Epictetus' work is by now evident on account of Epictetus' denial of the phenomenon of *akrasia*. But then, if no one errs voluntarily, when is it legitimate to exercise censure and punishment? Apparently *never*.

Does this conflict with **R1**? Not necessarily: all that Epictetus might have meant by **R1** (following Bobzien again) is that we are responsible for our own doing just because it was we and not something or somebody else who performed it, regardless of whether we were determined by our epistemic disposition to perform it. But if this is so, we are clearly not dealing with a notion of moral responsibility but rather with a conception of causal responsibility: we are the (decisive) causal factor that brought about X, just as a dog could be considered the causal factor that brought about the destruction of my armchair. It is not surprising, then, that we may be considered responsible for doing something and yet, at the same time, worthy of mercy rather than blame.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Starting off from the connection offered by Epictetus between the concepts of ἐλεύθερος and ἐφ' ἡμῖν, I stated that something depends on us if it cannot possibly be externally hindered or forced. In this narrow sense, to say that 'X depends on us' is tantamount to saying that 'X is free' (*free from* external determinations or obstacles). This abstract equation leaves the door open for a critical misapprehension of Epictetus' conception of freedom: if that requisite is all that is implied by Epictetus, his conception of freedom could well be considered compatible with an indeterministic conception of human agency.

That Epictetus' conception of freedom, on the contrary, not only disallows any indeterministic element but also demands a fully deterministic approach has been shown by stating the following principles: (i) there is no such thing as an abstract *prohairesis*, that is, a neutral faculty possessed by all rational agents which would be independent in its operations from the agent's epistemic disposition and which could be put in motion in any possible direction; (ii) consequently, the statement that 'X depends on us' should be interpreted as meaning that 'X depends *on the prohairesis of the agent at a specific moment*'; (iii) therefore, it is not in our power to hold certain opinions or their contrary, or to assent or withhold our assent from a certain impression that arises in the soul; we are fully determined to one (and only one) course of action by the epistemic disposition of our *prohairesis*. Recalling Epictetus' intellectualistic account of the phenomenon of *akrasia*, I insisted on the impossibility of isolating the acts of the agent from the specific epistemic condition of his *prohairesis* at the time of the action, from which I derived the principle of *epistemic determinism*: an agent cannot help assenting to what appears to him to be convenient and cannot refrain from rejecting what appears to him as inconvenient or unprofitable.

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Concerning Epictetus' precise conception of freedom, I have suggested that although the equation between freedom and *ataraxia* is certainly all-pervasive throughout his work, it cannot be taken to be Epictetus' final word on the subject: although such a conception certainly accounts for one of the requisites for something being ἐλεύθερος (that is, that it must be free from external determinations or obstacles), it leaves untouched the problem of the existence of inner determinations. The absence of such determinations not being one of Epictetus' goals (for they are the condition of possibility of any action), the question becomes what kind of inner determinations we should subordinate ourselves to in order to attain freedom. The answer is at hand and in line with Stoic rationalism: only a healthy *prohairesis* which sets rational norms to itself can be considered legitimately free. If this last conception of freedom exceeds the narrow prescription of freedom/*ataraxia*, it certainly rules out any possible connection between *freedom* and *(indeterminate) free will,* however moderate a conception we may have of this last notion.[41]

The brief approach I have offered to the problem of compatibilism has led me to establish the following conclusions. In the first place, Epictetus does not offer a systematic and precise account of how his epistemic determinism can be compatible with the concept of moral responsibility. All that we can find in the *Discourses* is an isolated remark that connects the notion of responsibility with our own doing, which cannot certainly be taken, on account of its vagueness and lack of precisions, for an elaborated compatibilist theory.[42] A second sense of responsibility that reappears sporadically bears no relation to the problem of compatibilism, but is connected, instead, with the primary distinction between what depends on us and what does not. While this alternative does not answer in any manner to the problem of the compatibility of the attribution of praise and blame with the fact that each of our actions is determined by our epistemic disposition, it has served to connect the issue of responsibility to the doctrine of the immanence of punishments and rewards and to the question of tolerance.

If the reduction of the problem of responsibility to a causal (and not moral) question and the absolute proscription of censure and punishment appear as disturbing derivations of Epictetus' arguments, they serve to make explicit how far his fundamental concerns are from some subsequent discussions of the issue: whereas every analysis rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition begins with the question 'when are we liable to praise or blame?', Epictetus approaches the problem by asking: what is it that has led us to act as we have? Once we are able to locate the precise epistemic factor responsible for such outcome, it is our obligation to either (i) modify the judgement that has led us to act as we have – if it is our own actions that we are analysing – or (ii) lead the person who has erred to correct his own judgement.

[41] It could be objected that Epictetus' reflections on the problem of freedom might be interpreted in terms of a 'counterfactual free will' (a notion current in contemporary debates about the problem of determinism and responsibility). To be sure, as I have already pointed out (cf. *supra*, p. 217), Epictetus would probably have admitted that an agent could have acted otherwise *if he had wanted to*, that is, if his epistemic disposition had been different. However, he does not elaborate on this idea, and neither does he suggest that it offers any ground for the attribution of moral responsibility.

[42] Taking a prudent stand on the issue, Dragona-Monachou states, while acknowledging that labels are unimportant and superfluous, that Epictetus 'could perhaps be regarded as a reconciliationist, enjoying his inner freedom and accepting complacently the course of events' (Dragona-Monachou [n. 14], 134).

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Accordingly, Epictetus' disregard for the problem of compatibilism (as well as the fact that he did not take issue with the problematic circular argument on which his epistemic determinism is founded[43]) can hardly be seen as a lack of awareness, but should rather be read as a lack of interest in the issue of responsibility. On the one hand, his conception of the immanence of punishment and reward and his demand for tolerance and mercy, make it virtually inane to revolve endlessly around the problem of praise and blame: such attitudes are both *unnecessary* and *useless*. On the other hand, contrary to subsequent discussions, his ultimate goal lies not in the distribution of prizes and rewards, but in the moral-epistemic reform of his listeners. After all: 'The school of a philosopher is a hospital' (3.23.30).

It is precisely concerning this rationalist educational programme that we can evaluate our twofold contention on the problem of determinism and indeterminism: on the one hand, I have claimed that there is no textual evidence to support the indeterminist interpretation; on the other, I have attempted to bring to light the fact that Epictetus provides not only a clear and uncompromising stand on the side of determinism, but perhaps the strongest and most comprehensive account of the projections of determinism into the field of the psychology of action. Contrary to any indeterministic position, the function of Epictetus' psychology is not to signal the ability of the human soul to initiate new causal processes, but rather to support the unbreachable *continuum* of man and world, human action and external events. We might say, in this respect, that Epictetus does not build his therapeutic project *despite* the problem of inner determinations, but rather on top of it: it is only because a correct kind of *prohairesis will* (and not *might*) produce virtuous actions, that an educational project makes sense. Were it otherwise, that is, if we were able to freely decide to assent or not to an impression that arose in our soul,[44] our success or failure (considered from a virtue–vice perspective) would not be causally related to our previous history, not at least in the strong sense that Epictetus seems to be interested in. We could well have been the recipients of the wisest and most virtuous kind of intellectual training and yet be free to assent to an impression that expressed the absolute value of external goods such as fame or wealth. In other words, if indeterminist freedom could hardly be a value endorsed by any Stoic, it is Epictetus' particular concern to provide his *prohairesis* (and his listeners') with a disposition so firm and stable in its rational assessments that it *cannot but* assent to kataleptic impressions, produce correct judgements and have rational impulses.

A final and conclusive comment. While Bobzien has argued that Epictetus' concept of *prohairesis* may have been an important influence on the birth of

[43] This could have been done, e.g. either by specifying that at the beginning of the regression we encounter a *given* particular nature, or that throughout the initial stages of our life our *prohairesis* is shaped by outward circumstances, such as social or educational factors.

[44] It might be objected that certain passages from the *Discourses* certainly seem to imply so, such as 1.17.28 or 4.10.3. However, following Kamtekar, I feel inclined to interpret them as *pedagogical strategies* aimed at reminding his interlocutors of their true potential (Cf. R. Kamtekar, '*Aidos* in Epictetus', *CPh* 93.2 [1998], 136–60, at 153–4). This does not imply that every single individual will be able to attain moral perfection (many passages testify to Epictetus' hopelessness regarding the disposition of certain individuals' souls, cf. esp. 1.5.1–10); it only means that self-confidence (rather than Socratic self-diffidence) constitutes the necessary starting point of moral progress.

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the concept of will (*voluntas*),[45] I believe that if *prohairesis* is to be assigned a particular place in the history of the psychology of action, it can only be that of a forgotten but solid and still stimulating alternative. If I am correct in this appraisal, contemporary discussions on the problem of moral responsibility (five decades of sterile insistence around the same alternatives having passed) could be significantly enriched by a profound and renewed reading of the *Discourses*, where the absence of treatment of the dichotomy compatibilism/incompatibilism allows us to understand to what extent contemporary debates have been built on the naturalization of psychological faculties that we would do well (at least in a speculative mood) to question.

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[45] Cf. Bobzien (n. 1), 411–12 and id. 'The inadvertent conception and late birth of the free-will problem', *Phronesis* 43.2 (1998), 133–75, at 165. For an alternative (intellectualistic) interpretation, cf. Rist (n. 17), *228–32*, who emphasizes the continuity between Chrysippus and Epictetus (along with Seneca) on the issue of 'willing and knowing'.

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