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Two Senses of Freedom

Epictetus on the Will

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Abstract

What conception of freedom is expressed in the thought of Epictetus? In this essay, I argue that there are two different ways in which the will can be said to be free for Epictetus. The first is that the will is free by nature (*freedom of autonomy*). The will is autonomously free because it is inherently self-governed and cannot be ruled by anything or anyone else. The second kind of freedom is about the will being free from bad choices (*freedom of wisdom*). This freedom is about happiness. It is the freedom of the wise will that is not ruled by unruly passions or false beliefs. Every will is by nature autonomously free to choose as it may, but only a few wills are free in the wise and happy sense. Although it has not been sufficiently recognized hitherto, I argue that Epictetus' main contribution to the conceptual development of the notion of free will was autonomous freedom since he through that notion made every human being free to pursue wise freedom.

Preface

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1 Introduction: Free Will

In *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, Michael Frede argues that the first notion of a free will in the history of Western philosophy was expressed in the thought of Epictetus.¹ The specific conception of free will that Frede finds in Epictetus is one in which the will is free if it is not forced to make its choices.² For Epictetus, this is not (at least not obviously) an absence of force in a metaphysical sense. Rather, it is a practical conception. To be forced in your choice means to be determined in your choices by things that are outside of your control. If you have attachments to external things and make your choices based on these attachments, you are not free. You are not free because you have no control over your choices since they are forced by whatever contingent thing happens in the world. If you are not forced to make choices based on contingent events in the world, but rather have the capability of making wise choices, then you have a free will. While an unfree will is forced to make choices by external things, a free will chooses only based on its own knowledge of the good.

This is the freedom I will later elaborate on as freedom of wisdom. According to this sense of freedom, only wise people have a free will. It is the sense of freedom that is most obviously associated with the Stoics, and it is the sense that most interpreters of Epictetus find in his thought. Epictetus was not a theoretical, but a practical, ethical philosopher. His writings put much emphasis on the ethical goal just presented – that of achieving a wise, free will. Therefore, it is understandable that this sense of freedom is the one that most philosophers find in his writings. Commenting on the earlier Stoics that Epictetus is influenced by, Baltzly writes that the “Stoics [...] discuss a notion of freedom that is rather more moral than metaphysical. This sense of freedom involves ‘the power to live as you will’ (Cicero, *Stoic Paradoxes* 5, 34). It turns out [...] that only the Stoic wise man is truly free. All others are slaves”.³ Clearly, this sense of freedom is the one we expect to find in Epictetus, given the earlier Stoics’ elaboration of it.

As some have noted, Epictetus sometimes talks about the will being free in a different way than what Frede portrays. Dragona-Monachou, in discussing the lack of

¹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 77.

² Frede, *A Free Will*, 85.

³ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), "Stoicism", by Dirk Baltzly, 05.12.2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/stoicism/>.

discussion of the topic of compatibilism in Epictetus, writes that, although it was a Stoic principle, he may have been reluctant to bluntly state the truth of universal determinism, since “this would have included even his [*prohairesis*], which he considered by definition free». ⁴ Dobbin argues that “[t]he most characteristic thing about [*prohairesis*] is that it is free”. ⁵ If the will simply *is* free, or is free by definition, then it cannot easily fit with Frede’s account, since that account of free will is one that depends on the goodness of the will. If it is true that the will is free by definition, then it seems like every will should be called free even if it is good or bad, wise or unwise.

I will propose a solution to this puzzle by arguing that the many ways in which Epictetus characterizes the will as free can be put in two categories which I call *freedom of autonomy* and *freedom of wisdom* (chapter 3). ⁶ The autonomous freedom is a natural property of the will, while wise freedom is a normative goal.

The ethical goal of Stoicism is to live according to nature, or to accept the will of God. “One who has achieved virtue and excellence [...] submits his will to the one who governs the universe just as good citizens submit to the law of their city”. ⁷ Naturally, because of this emphasis, Epictetus is often interpreted in the context of the topic of compatibilism. For how can our will be free if we should surrender it to God? The interpretations differ widely. Some take him to show that the universal determinism of fate, which includes the human will, does not ruin the possibility of becoming wise. Based on other quotes, such as “[y]ou can chain my leg, but not even Zeus can overcome my power of choice”, ⁸ others take him to be carving out an uncaused space in the causal order of fate, where the human will rules on its own. If there is found a “problem of free will” in him, it is usually that we are not free if we are not uncaused, or that we are not *really* wise if we are ruled by fate, or not really morally responsible, or similar. Although this is not a focus of this essay, I want to note that I hope that my argument can shed some clarificatory light on those discussions. The first clarification is that there are different types of free will for Epictetus. Accordingly, there should be different implications for this debate for each type of freedom. If we believe we find a problem of free will in Epictetus, it is not *one* problem, but different problems for different notions of free will.

⁴ Dragona-Monachou, “Epictetus on Freedom: Parallels between Epictetus and Wittgenstein”, 125.

⁵ Dobbin, “*prohairesis* in Epictetus”, 132.

⁶ I will also call them ‘autonomous freedom’ and ‘wise freedom’.

⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.12.7.

⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.23.

As mentioned, Epictetus was a practical philosopher. He does not present in his thought a new theory of free will, but rather builds an ethical philosophy – ‘a way of life’, as Pierre Hadot put it⁹ – for his students based on Stoic assumptions elaborated by earlier philosophers. Therefore, it must be noted that the distinction I am making between two senses of freedom might not be a distinction that Epictetus intended to express or knew that he was expressing. It is not an explicit philosophical contribution to a discussion about free will made by Epictetus. Nonetheless, if one is interested in the conceptual development of free will in antiquity and thinks that Epictetus contributed with something in this regard, it is fun to see that he may have contributed with more than one might initially expect.

The main source I use in my argument is the English translation of Epictetus’ *Discourses* in *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook* translated by Robin Hard. During the course of the investigation, it has become clear that a knowledge of Ancient Greek – which I have not – is essential to understand the text. Some of the quotes (that I use as main evidence) that I have seen translated in other texts do not express the same ideas. Most importantly, there are differences in translation in specific quotes regarding whether the will *can* be free or *is* free. The same is true regarding specific characterizations of freedom. Given my limits, I have tried to make the argument not hinge on specific use of words, but rather on more general ideas and arguments that Epictetus puts forth.

Before I elaborate on and argue for the distinction between the two senses of freedom, I will present some concepts from Stoic psychology (chapter 2) which will put us in a position to understand what the will is and how it works, and what freedom means, for Epictetus.

2 The Will

The two senses of freedom that is found in Epictetus’ ideas are characteristics of the will (*prohairesis*). To understand these senses of freedom, therefore, one needs an understanding of what the will is, what it reacts to, and what acts it is involved in. In

⁹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

this chapter, I will present some central Stoic notions that Epictetus relies on in his reflections on the will.

2.1 Impression and assent

All animals, both human and non-human, perceive the world. The Stoics call the object of perception an impression, or an appearance (*phantasia*).¹⁰ Impressions may have a normative colouring that is added by the mind of the animal immediately, or simultaneously, as the impression arise. That is, these impressions are not only perceived as impressions, but as agreeable or disagreeable impressions. “Such impressions are called ‘impulsive’ [...] since they impel the animal to act”.¹¹ For a non-human animal, an impulsive impression that has a disagreeable character immediately gives rise to avoidance of the impression. Perception and action have a direct link in non-human animals.

The story is more complicated for human beings. For the Stoics, non-human animals do have a soul (*pneuma*) in which the perception arises, as do humans. But the human form of *pneuma* is a higher one than the animals have.¹² The human form of soul is reason (*logos*).¹³ Since all impressions arise in the soul, and since the human soul is rational, they all involve propositional content.¹⁴ An impulsive impression in a human is not only agreeable or disagreeable, but its normative character takes the form of a statement concerning the impression – a thought. This means that all impressions in rational adult humans are beliefs that may be true or false.

Examples of such propositions that can constitute impulsive impressions are “This chocolate looks good, I should eat it” and “This chocolate looks good, but I am very full and should *not* eat it”. Although the chocolate in itself might share some objective properties (such as brownness and size) in the way the impression is formed in our minds, the specific way the impression is formed in our minds also depend on our

¹⁰ Gill, “Introduction”, xiii.

¹¹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 36.

¹² Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 17.

¹³ Frede, *A Free Will*, 32.

¹⁴ Frede, *A Free Will*, 37. At least for adults. Frede notes that there is a continuity between children and adults, in that only impressions in adults involve propositional content. But if the reason impressions involve propositional content is because the human soul is a reason (as Bobzien also claims), it is not clear to me what distinguishes children from adults in this regard. Presumably, they are humans even though they are young, and should therefore also have the rational soul of a human. Frede explains reason on p. 35 as something that develops, which seems right, but if so, it is unclear whether children without reason are ‘human’. One suggestion is that one *becomes* a human through developing all the faculties characteristic of being human.

prior beliefs, our bodily and mental state at that moment, etc. We play some active role in the creation of the impression and its propositional content although it is not consciously created.¹⁵

Since our souls are rational and the impressions are thoughts, we have the capacity to evaluate or examine the impressions that arise in this propositional way.¹⁶ Although it may not seem like it, every impression that arises in our minds is examined by our minds before we decide whether it is a true impression, and whether we should approach it or avoid it, or care for it at all. This already points to a kind of freedom that Epictetus will put much emphasis on. Given our rational faculty, we are not simply guided by impulsive impressions like non-human animals. Rather, we have some capacity to take a step back and evaluate. This evaluation leads to a decision as to whether the current impression or a different impression is true. The act of deciding that an impression is true the Stoics call assent.¹⁷

Assent (*sunkatathesis*) means “agreeing or committing oneself to the truth of a proposition”.¹⁸ Importantly, assents do not need to be conscious. You don’t have to explicitly accept its truth (consciously agreeing).¹⁹ You also assent to a proposition simply by allowing it to guide your acts and behaviour, by relying on it “as” true (committing). But how do we judge a proposition to be true? It involves not seeing a contradiction between that proposition and other beliefs that we have already assented to. “[E]very rational mind is by nature averse to contradiction”;²⁰ “If something appears not to be the case, it is impossible for us to give our assent”.²¹ If the beliefs we hold consciously do not contradict each other, we take them to be true.

That does not mean, however, that we don’t hold contradictory beliefs. One reason could be that many of the beliefs that we rely on are not consciously scrutinized. This insight will play a large role in Epictetus’ ethics. It explains how we can live contradictory lives of suffering because we haven’t taken enough care to examine the impressions that guide us. But another reason we could hold contradictory beliefs is not because we haven’t examined the impression carefully enough, but because we fail to

¹⁵ Frede, *A Free Will*, 38.

¹⁶ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 17.

¹⁷ Gill, “Introduction”, xiii.

¹⁸ Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 399.

¹⁹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 42.

²⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.26.3.

²¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.28.1-2.

live up to our assents. We might examine an impression and assent to it but rely on (assent to) some other impressions in our actions. We then have two different assents at the same time. Presumably this is what happens for aspiring Stoics who agree with the ethical goals of Stoicism on a conscious, rational level, but have not yet trained the capacity to live according to it. Exactly how this is to be explained from a Stoic point of view is unknown to be, but a natural guess is that the explanation is the same; one *thinks* one assents to the right things and has the right beliefs, but in reality, there are unconscious beliefs that need more examination.

2.2 *eph' hēmin* and *prohairesis*

Before arriving at the notion of *prohairesis*, I will present another important notion that Epictetus relies on. The notion of *eph' hēmin* ('up to us', 'in our power', 'in our control') plays a central role in Epictetus' thought, and indeed in Stoicism in general. But this notion changes from the early Stoics to Epictetus. For the early Stoic Chrysippus, what was up to us was everything that needed an assent to be performed.²² To paraphrase and add to Frede's example; it is not up to me whether a car hits me or not, because that event does not depend on me assenting to it. However, it *is* up to me whether I will cross the street or not, because that event depends on me assenting to it – on me believing that it should be done. In this way, *eph' hēmin* was connected to the distinction of what I assent to or not. What is up to me is anything that depends on my assent, while what is not up to me is anything that does not depend on my assent. Epictetus challenged this conception of *eph' hēmin*.

For Epictetus, it is not up to me to cross the street. The reason is that, while me crossing the street does depend on my assent, me actually managing to cross the street can be hindered (for example by a car hitting me). Thus, while my assent depends on me, the fruits of the assent don't.²³ Epictetus uses *eph' hēmin* "to denote the realm within which we can do everything to attain our objective, and he relegates the actual achieving of the objective (or not, depending on the circumstances) to the sphere of that which does not depend on us".²⁴ What is up to us is narrowed down to what *only* depends on my assent, and not on anything else, because only those things that

²² Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 331.

²³ Frede, *A Free Will*, 45-46.

²⁴ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 334.

exclusively depend on my assent can in principle not be hindered by anything else. My choices are completely up to me, everything else is not.

Listen to what Diogenes says: ‘He [Antisthenes] taught me what is my own and what isn’t my own. Property isn’t my own; relations, family, friends, reputation, familiar places, conversation with others, none of these are my own.’ What is your own, then? ‘The proper use of impressions [*chrēsis tōn phantasiōn*]²⁵. He showed me that I possess that power free from all hindrance and constraint; no one can obstruct me; no one can force me to deal with impressions other than I wish.’²⁶

The things mentioned that are outside the proper use of impressions are not up to us because they either do not at all depend on our assent, or only in part depend on our assent. The different concepts used to translate and understand *eph’ hēmin* – depend on us, up to us, in our control – might be the source of some confusion here. Braicovich writes that “whereas for Chrysippus both an action and an impulse may or may not D [depend on us], Epictetus states that my opinions, assents, judgements, and impulses *always* depend on me; my actions *never* do”.²⁷ This is a bit strong. My actions do depend on me, for Epictetus, but they are not in the end up to me. The reason is that my body needs my assents to carry out its movements in the specific way it does, but it is not up to me whether those movements are hindered or not, and it is the possibility of hinderance that is important for Epictetus’ conception of *eph’ hēmin*.

Bobzien also sometimes uses the translation of ‘depend on us’; “He puts in the class of the things that depend on us [*eph’ hēmin*] primarily —or perhaps even exclusively—the ‘use of impressions’ [...] which for him means primarily our assents and the impulses and beliefs we have as a consequence of assenting”.²⁸ Unless assuming a strong dualistic view of mind and body – which the Stoics did not – it seems like there should be a dependence between assents and bodily movement. Bodily movement depends on assents to some degree, but the bodily movement of a person is not determined by the assent of the person.²⁹ Put differently, assent is necessary for bodily

²⁵ Frede, *A Free Will*, 46. Kahn, “Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine”, 252 writes that ‘use of impressions’ “is just a more vivid phrase for the rational testing of impressions to see whether or not they deserve our assent”.

²⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.68-69.

²⁷ Braicovich, “Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus’ *Discourses*”, 204.

²⁸ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 333.

²⁹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 44: “it is our *prohairesis* which determines how we behave”.

movement, but does not always fully determine it. Perhaps it would be fitting to use ‘depend on us’ about Chrysippus’ notion of *eph’ hēmin* – since for him, what was important was that the assent depended on us – and ‘up to us’ about Epictetus’ notion – since for him, what was important was that assent was only up to us.

With the notions of assent and ‘up to us’, we are now in a position to see the meaning of *prohairesis*. The notion of *prohairesis* is differently translated as both ‘capacity for choice’ and ‘volition’,³⁰ ‘will’, ‘moral choice’, ‘moral purpose’ and ‘rational agency’.³¹ It denotes “the moral personality of the agent”³² and “the kind of rational agency that is expressed in focusing on what is ‘up to us’ and in ‘examining impressions’”.³³ These translations all point in a certain direction and highlight different aspects of the term (and it might be that Epictetus uses the term to denote different aspects in different contexts). I will stick to ‘will’.

For Epictetus, the will is the only thing that solely is up to us.³⁴ In the same way that assents are completely up to us, our will is completely up to us. As such, the will is the faculty that deals with assent, the “proper use of impressions”.³⁵ The will is said to be something that we *possess*.³⁶ It is a portion of the divine that has been given to each human being,³⁷ an “ability to make choices”.³⁸ It is also said to be something that we *are*. “For you yourself are neither flesh nor hair, but [*prohairesis*]”.³⁹ This explains why Epictetus when expressing his views of freedom sometimes shifts between speaking about the will and the self.

Non-human animals do not ‘will’ to make choices and do things, but only have non-rational, impulsive desires that drives their behavior. They don’t choose using reason. But in the Stoic worldview, adult humans do not have non-rational desires. All human desires are rational, in the sense of being propositional; formed in reason and available for judgment by reason.⁴⁰ Therefore, human beings ‘will’ to do things because all their actions are chosen by reason.

³⁰ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), "Epictetus", by Margaret Graver, 03.01.2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/epictetus/>.

³¹ Gill, “Introduction”, xxiv.

³² Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 403.

³³ Gill, “Introduction”, xiii.

³⁴ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.7.

³⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.69.

³⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.41. Similar passage at *Discourses* 4.1.69-90.

³⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17.27.

³⁸ Frede, *A Free Will*, 48.

³⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.1.40.

⁴⁰ Frede, *A Free Will*, 42.

The freedom of this will that Epictetus emphasizes – the way in which it is solely up to us – has received much attention. But what this freedom consists in is not always clear. I will argue that Epictetus talks about freedom in two different senses. These two senses are used and somewhat discussed in the literature already, but it is not made explicit that they are different and can explain Epictetus' various talk of freedom. I will now present the concept of freedom in general, its historical origin, and then explicate the two senses of freedom in detail.

3 Two Senses of Freedom of the Will

The Ancient Greek word for 'freedom' is *eleutheria*. It was initially a political term that denoted the difference between living in a good society and living under a tyrant, and between being a citizen and a slave.⁴¹ The relevant difference that makes one side free and the other unfree seems to have been the constraints that are in place which affects the quality of people's lives. Although there are certain constraints on people in a good society, they are good constraints which give people the opportunity of living good lives. Bad constraints, on the other hand, removes the opportunity for people to live good lives. One is free if one lives under good constraints, a slave if one lives under bad constraints.

An important factor of these constraints is that they are all external, in the form of being legal or otherwise physical (in the form of force by other people).⁴² The relevant factors which determine the freedom (or lack thereof) of individuals are all factors external to them.

The Stoics turned this political notion of freedom on its head; it became a psychological notion of freedom, where all the relevant constraints were internal. As is clear, this springs from their notion of *eph' hēmin*. Specifically for Epictetus, the fact that the political slave lives under physical constraints does not make her unfree. (An interesting turn seeing as Epictetus himself was a slave). The reason is that the only

⁴¹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 9.

⁴² Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 338.

constraints that can hinder her in being happy are inside the sphere of what is *eph'* *hēmin*, inside the sphere of her will. What is outside of her will does not actually have any power to constrain her happiness (although most of us have not trained the ability to see this clearly). It is “psychological freedom [that] is regarded as a prerequisite for a good and happy life”,⁴³ not political freedom. Thus, the political slave can be psychologically free, while the political tyrant – being ruled by internal forces that are immoral and bad – is actually a psychological slave. Although the tyrant may look happy, they are actually unfree, unwise, and suffering.

As Bobzien stresses, neither political nor psychological freedom is defined as involving anything metaphysically special⁴⁴ (although the psychological freedom might seem like that sometimes). What characterizes freedom are relevant kinds of constraints that either hinder or enable us in living a good life.

I have now explained some historical development of the concept of freedom. In what way can this historical development be connected to the two senses of freedom that Epictetus uses? The basic development in the Stoic use of the concept is that of going from being political (or social in general) to becoming psychological. In the political sense, what is relevant for something to be free are external constraints. In the psychological sense, what is relevant for something to be free are internal constraints. This explains the development of Epictetus' wise freedom; it is the freedom you gain when you are ruled by the right internal constraints. But his autonomous freedom does not obviously fall out of this development. The specific type of autonomous freedom in Epictetus is not characterized by being about something psychological, nor about constraints. It is about being self-ruled in principle; about being autonomous and unavailable for hinderance by anything else in the world.

A suggestion for where Epictetus may have gotten this conception of autonomous freedom is proposed by Dobbin. He argues that Epictetus is characterizing the will as autonomously free in the same way that earlier Stoics characterized fate (*heimarmene*); as “‘free from restriction’, ‘free from hindrance’ [and] as being immune to forces outside of it”.⁴⁵ It is not surprising if Epictetus transferred these properties of fate to the will, given the Stoic tendency to equate the notions of God, fate, reason, nature, and mind. Writing about the Stoics, Diogenes Laertius tells us that “God and

⁴³ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 338.

⁴⁴ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 338-339.

⁴⁵ Dobbin, “*prohairesis* in Epictetus”, 132.

mind and fate and Zeus are one thing, but called by many different names”.⁴⁶ *logos*, as the fundamental metaphysical principle of rationality that shapes the passive substance of matter, is the same as God.⁴⁷ Fate was also, in the same way as *logos*, called “a rational principle according to which the cosmos is managed”;⁴⁸ “a power capable of moving matter”.⁴⁹ As I have already discussed, *logos* is also the form of the human soul. Also, for Epictetus, our *prohairesis* is made by a piece of the divine will.⁵⁰ If fate is the same as God and reason, and if our individual wills are parts of the will of God (or fate), then it is natural for him to think that our wills should be free in the same sense as God’s will is free. From this perspective, Epictetus has not made a new philosophical contribution to Stoic metaphysics by claiming that our will is autonomously free in the same sense as God’s will is free. Rather, he has explicated the notions that were already there.

Before I present the first kind of freedom found in Epictetus, I must make a preliminary remark regarding interpretation. The basic claim of this essay is that Epictetus uses freedom to refer to two different things in different contexts. In one context, “the will is free” means that the will is autonomously free by nature. In another context, “the will is free” means that the will is wise and not controlled by bad forces or false beliefs. Every human will is free by nature, but few human wills are wise. The meaning of wise freedom is pretty clear; it is to choose only according to what is up to you. But the meaning of the natural autonomous freedom is disputed in the literature.

The debate can be divided into two general interpretations: causal and logical. In the causal interpretation, what autonomous freedom means is that the will is free from the causal order of fate. In the logical interpretation, what autonomous freedom means is that the will is logically free from hinderance by anything else (this is compatible with it taking part in a universal causal determinism). I will soon return to a discussion of these interpretations (p. 14), but the point for now is that although the general distinction between autonomous and wise freedom is compatible with either of the specific interpretations of autonomous freedom, I fail to manage to present autonomous freedom in a “neutral” way that doesn’t take a stand on the debate between causal and

⁴⁶ Diogenes Laertius 7.135, quoted in Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 133.

⁴⁷ Diogenes Laertius 7.134, quoted in Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 132.

⁴⁸ Diogenes Laertius, 7.149, quoted in Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 136.

⁴⁹ Theodoretus *Graecarum Affectionum Cura* 6.14, quoted in Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 180.

⁵⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17.27.

logical interpretations. As soon as I try to say anything about what autonomy means to explicate the notion, I must choose an interpretation. Therefore, the following presentation of autonomous freedom is not about causality and the relationship between will and fate, but about the natural constitution of the will (the logical interpretation). All the quotes from Epictetus will firstly be presented through that interpretation before I discuss them both.

3.1 Freedom of autonomy

The autonomous freedom found in Epictetus is the freedom that we have already met in the description of the *prohairesis* itself. It is a property of the will that is constitutive of it. The will is “free by nature”,⁵¹ in the way it functions. By its nature it is inviolable and autonomous. I call it autonomous freedom because it is about being self-governed (*autonomon*)⁵² in the literal sense. (Wise freedom, while it also can be expressed as being self-governed, is really about being ruled by your higher self). Both good and bad (wise and unwise) wills are free in the autonomous sense because they both are *wills*. This freedom is something that we *possess*, not something that the will must acquire.⁵³

Epictetus expresses this freedom sometimes in relation to God; “[y]ou can chain my leg, but not even Zeus can overcome my power of choice”.⁵⁴ Even though God may have given me a will and determined the nature of it, that doesn’t change the nature of it. Once made free, the will is free – even from God’s intervention. “For if God had so created that portion of his being that he has detached from himself and given to us that it would be subject to hindrance or compulsion, whether from himself or from another, he would no longer be God, nor would he be taking care of us as he ought”.⁵⁵

He also expresses this freedom in relation to the nature of assent. In a passage in *Discourses* 1.17.21-26 this is expressed through the words of a diviner. The will is here said to be “secure by nature from hindrance and compulsion, [...] immune from [...] constraint, and obstruction”. This is not a security from badness which makes us all wise and happy, but a security from hindrance in the faculty of willing. This security consists in the fact that no one else but the will itself can assent to what it believes to be

⁵¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.15.1.

⁵² Rutherford, «Freedom as a Philosophical Ideal: Nietzsche and His Antecedents», 515.

⁵³ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.41. Similar passage at *Discourses* 4.1.69-90.

⁵⁴ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.23. Similar passage at 4.1.82.

⁵⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17.27.

true. Further, it cannot help but not assent to what is false, and no one can change this at any moment. This is an expression of its natural freedom.

“But what if someone threatens me with death,’ someone says, ‘for he is constraining me then’”.⁵⁶ This question touches on the second kind of freedom I will present later, but for the purpose in this part, I will highlight Epictetus’ answer, which is about freedom of autonomy. The answer given is that it is not a correct description of the causal picture to say that you are threatened by the threat itself. In response to the threat (impulsive impression), you have produced a certain judgment that it is scary, or bad for you, to have this threat, and it is this judgment that does the “constraining” – not the threat itself. “[I]t is your judgment that has constrained you, or in other words, your choice has constrained itself”.⁵⁷ It is clear from this that Epictetus has a strong view of a certain autonomy of the will. No matter how strongly it might seem like it is controlled by outside forces, it is always in the end controlled by itself.

Although this autonomy of the will is not always characterized by Epictetus as a ‘freedom’, he does it sometimes.⁵⁸ Making the same point from the previous paragraph in a different place in the *Discourses*, he says “What is it [...] that disturbs and frightens the majority of people? The tyrant or his guards? [...] In no way at all. It is impossible that that which is *by nature free* should be disturbed or impeded by anything other than itself. No indeed, it is our own judgements that disturb us”.⁵⁹ Further, he says “[c]onsider who you are. First of all a man, i.e., you have nothing more authoritative than your [will] and all else is subordinate to it, but it itself is free and independent”.⁶⁰ The will is free because it is autonomous and cannot be ruled by anything else. Further, “[w]hat is your own, then? ‘The proper use of impressions. He [Antisthenes] showed me that I possess that power [of will] free from all hindrance and constraint; no one can obstruct me; no one can force me to deal with impressions other than I wish”.⁶¹ It is up to the person to deal with impressions in whatever way they like, completely unhindered by anything else. If they are wise, they are self-ruled. If they are unwise, they are also self-ruled. “[I]t is entirely up to us what we shall think in reaction to the impressions

⁵⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17.25.

⁵⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17.26.

⁵⁸ I think the quotes I have presented so far express the same concept of ‘freedom of autonomy’ even though the word ‘free’ is not explicitly used.

⁵⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.19.7-8. My italics.

⁶⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.10.1, quoted in Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 233.

⁶¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.68-69.

that we receive; what we will think depends entirely upon what we find it reasonable to think in the light of our impressions”.⁶² In the end, all choices come down to the will autonomously making the decision. “Here, man, you can see that you have something in you that is *free by nature*”.⁶³

This is Epictetus’ strong conception of free will as freedom of autonomy. It regards descriptive properties of the will, characteristics of its nature. This conception of freedom is not expressed as being about having a choice between different alternatives, or being uncaused, or about not having its nature made (and in that way being ruled or forced) by something else (such as God). Autonomous freedom is a property of the will itself, regardless of how the world is otherwise constituted. The will is autonomously free because some things are *only* and *exclusively* in its power.

3.1.1 Causal and logical interpretation

I have now presented the logical interpretation of autonomous freedom. But as mentioned, the details of what autonomy means in this context is debated (and a topic that could be researched further). Without going too deep into this issue, I will present what I think is the two most common ways of interpreting this autonomous freedom in Epictetus; the causal and logical interpretation. I will argue that the evidence favors the logical interpretation.

Epictetus has been thought to be aiming to define an area, that of our capacity to control our thoughts and motives, especially by ‘examining our impressions’ before giving ‘assent’, which is immune from the broader pattern of causal determinism. Epictetus sometimes characterizes this capacity in terms of ‘freedom’[,] although he does not himself present this move as constituting a theory about ‘free will’.⁶⁴

This is a comment on the causal interpretation, in which one reads Epictetus’ statements about autonomous freedom to be about its relation to causality. The central claim is that terms such as autonomy, inviolable, hindrance, compulsion, constraint, and obstruction, in this context is about the relation between will and fate, and that what it means for the will to be autonomously free is for it to be outside of the causal network of fate. In this interpretation, the will is autonomously free because fate cannot violate, hinder, compel,

⁶² Cooper, «Stoic Autonomy», 28.

⁶³ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.41-42. My italics. Similar passage at *Discourses* 4.1.69-90.

⁶⁴ Gill, “Introduction”, xvii-xviii.

constrain, or obstruct, the will.⁶⁵ The will is by nature free from the causal determinism of fate.

Quotes such as “[y]ou can chain my leg, but not even Zeus can overcome my power of choice”⁶⁶ and “[God] has commended me to myself, and has brought it about that my choice should be subject to myself alone”⁶⁷ are central to that interpretation. What would it mean for God to overcome my power of choice in a causal sense? Presumably, it would mean that God changed my choice to something other than what I wanted or made a choice with my will that I simply did not agree to.⁶⁸ In the causal interpretation, God cannot intervene in this way because the will is not a part of the causal determinism of physics.

Opposed to this, the logical interpretation does not take Epictetus’ autonomy to be about causality, but to be about the necessary, constitutive characteristic of the will. It is not that the will is autonomously free because it is not constrained by fate. Rather, it is free because it is always, in the way that it works, ruled by itself. It can only make the choices that it sees fit to make, given its own beliefs. It might be determined by fate, but it still cannot help but make choices based on its own understanding of what it should do.

On this interpretation, what Epictetus means when he says that God cannot overcome our power of choice is simply that God is constrained by rules of logic. “He could not cause a person to be born before his parents (1.12.28–29), and he could not have made volition execute any choices but its own (1.1.23, 1.17.27)”.⁶⁹ And God cannot make anyone assent to something else than what they think is true; “no one can obstruct me; no one can force me to deal with impressions other than I wish”.⁷⁰

I presented the logical interpretation of autonomous freedom because I, like Bobzien, find no explicit evidence of Epictetus challenging the long-standing causal determinism of Stoicism, and therefore see no reason to attribute that thought to him.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Dobbin, “*prohairesis* in Epictetus”, 121.

⁶⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.23. Similar passage at 4.1.82.

⁶⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.12.12.

⁶⁸ I am not sure if this even makes sense conceptually. In that case, it is a problematic interpretation - although, it might just be a lack of imagination on my part.

⁶⁹ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), "Epictetus", by Margaret Graver, 03.01.2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/epictetus/>

⁷⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.69.

⁷¹ As noted by Bobzien, *Determinism, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility*, 207, n. 47: “The passages in which Epictetus says that even god cannot prevent or hinder us in the case of things that depend on us (e.g. *Diss.* 1.6.40) cannot be invoked to back up the claim that Epictetus deals with free choice. God’s ‘inability’ to interfere does not mean that, say, I can give assent to some impression although god does

The way Epictetus talks about hinderance is not in terms of causality. Epictetus is not a philosopher of metaphysics. He is a practical, ethical thinker. A worry for the causal interpretation is that we are drawing out metaphysical implications and commitments from practical statements. As Dobbin argues, while earlier Stoics like Chrysippus were involved in metaphysical speculation about the external world, Epictetus is laying out the ethical life of a Stoic from his internal perspective, “describing man’s unmistakable sense of personal autonomy”.⁷² So, to say that what he is committed to when he says that “God cannot overcome my choice” is that “*prohairesis* is outside the realm of fate” may not be fair. “We should not, because we find implications in a philosopher’s thought, make the mistake of reading into his thought his own acknowledged acceptance of those implications”.⁷³ It may only mean that as a practical matter, from the internal perspective of a human being, nothing can overcome my will. It is only up to me what I will assent to.

However, “[e]qually we should not, because we cannot find in [a philosopher] acceptance of [some implications], make the mistake of denying that he was committed to them”.⁷⁴ It is of course possible that both interpretations are true. Logical autonomy is compatible with both the will being causally free, and with it being determined in the causal order of fate. But I see no reasons based on Epictetus’ texts to argue that he is talking about causality. Firstly, Epictetus has no reason to involve causality in his philosophizing; it’s not necessary for his practical point to be true. Secondly, he doesn’t say that he is proposing a radical shift in Stoic metaphysics, away from universal determinism to a radical view of an uncaused will; he doesn’t present his discussion as a theory about free will in the metaphysical sense. He is not explicitly trying to solve that problem. He is simply pointing out that the will is free to assent to impressions as it wants. (It must be said, though, that although Epictetus may not have had the causal meaning in mind, it may nonetheless have influenced later thinkers who read him that way).

not want me to but is unfortunately unable to prevent me. The point is rather (as usual) that assent and intention, on the ground of their very nature, cannot be subjected to coercion or force, which includes possible coercion or force exercised by god”.

⁷² Dobbin, “*prohairesis* in Epictetus”, 121-122.

⁷³ Cross & Woozley, *Plato’s Republic*, 132-133.

⁷⁴ Cross & Woozley, *Plato’s Republic*, 132-133.

3.2 Freedom of wisdom

The second type of freedom expressed in Epictetus builds on the autonomous freedom. It is an additional property of the already autonomously free will.⁷⁵ This property I think is best captured by the word ‘wisdom’ and is a moral property.⁷⁶ The will that is wise and free is virtuous, “free, contented, happy, invulnerable, magnanimous, reverent”,⁷⁷ and peaceful.⁷⁸ Freedom when used in the context of wisdom is “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”.⁷⁹ It is not sufficient to be autonomous for the will to be free in this second sense. What is required is a goodness of knowledge and choice that is aligned with nature, not resisting the order of fate. The will that is wise is in a way “more” autonomous than the will that is only free in the first sense, since the unwise “must inevitably be subject to constraint and hindrance, and be enslaved to those who have power over the things that he admires and fears”.⁸⁰

Wise freedom can be cultivated through practice (*askēsis*).⁸¹ In a passage in *Discourses* 3.22.43-44, the freedom by nature leads the way to the freedom of wisdom. After having made the case that the will is free by nature, the related wise freedom is argued for:

Now who among you can desire something, or feel an aversion from it, or feel a motive to act or not to act, or make preparations for something, or set something for yourself to do, without first forming an impression of what is to your advantage or what isn’t fitting for you? – ‘No one can.’ – Here, too, you can see that you have something in you that is beyond hindrance and free; cultivate that, you wretches, pay attention to that, and seek your good there.⁸²

The fundamental moral choice as to how one *should* assent is up to the will, and choosing right is an ability that can be cultivated. When the will chooses rightly, the

⁷⁵ Epictetus uses free in this second sense both about the will itself and about people (selves), just as he does with the first sense. I will stick to the language of ‘will’ for simplicity.

⁷⁶ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 342.

⁷⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.7.9.

⁷⁸ Bobzien, *Determinism, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility*, 210.

⁷⁹ Braicovich, “Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus’ *Discourses*”, 211.

⁸⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.7.10.

⁸¹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 44. On cultivation leading to wise freedom of the will, see Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.4.18 and 3.5.7.

⁸² Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.43-44.

will can be said to be free in this second sense, because it is free from bad determinations. “That person is free who lives as he wishes, who can neither be constrained, nor hindered, nor compelled, whose motives are unimpeded, and who achieves his desires and doesn’t fall into what he wants to avoid”.⁸³ Who cannot fall into what they want to avoid? Only the wise who have a correct understanding of what is in their control and what is not in their control. Only with this understanding can one have the right goal in mind and not meet hindrance in the form of things that one wants to avoid. The wise will is free because it only chooses according to the right goals that is based on a correct understanding of what is up to it. As Bobzien says, “you possess freedom [of wisdom] if, knowing what depends on you, you do not ever desire or deplore anything that does not depend on you”.⁸⁴ She boils this freedom down to having the right beliefs.⁸⁵ For Aristotle, one was free in this sense if the reasoning part of our souls managed to overrule the desiring parts.⁸⁶ For the Stoics, however, all cognitive content is at bottom propositional. Even passions and desires are beliefs. It is in that way that wise freedom for the Stoics consists in having the right beliefs. When all desires and goals are inside the sphere of the will, and the will only sticks to these, one is wise and free.

Unwise wills, on the other hand, are not free in this sense. “No one who is of bad character lives as he wants, and accordingly, he isn’t free either”.⁸⁷ If Epictetus only used the conception of ‘freedom of autonomy’, this sentence would not make sense, since according to that sense, everyone lives as they want to. But unwise people don’t live as they want in a moral sense because of *akrasia* (lacking self-control).⁸⁸ Most people are not free in the sense of ‘freedom of wisdom’. While everyone has an autonomously free will, only some wise people have a wise free will. “For someone is free if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice and no one else is able to impede him”.⁸⁹ For the unwise, a lot of things comes about that is disagreeable to them, since some things do not come about in accordance with their will. But the wise are free of this trouble.

⁸³ Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.1.

⁸⁴ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 342.

⁸⁵ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 340-341.

⁸⁶ Frede, *A Free Will*, 23.

⁸⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.3.

⁸⁸ Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 403.

⁸⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.9.

3.3 Objections to the distinction

I think there are two general objections that can be made to the distinction, that overlap to some degree. The first is that Epictetus did not express freedom in these two different ways, in the way I have argued. The second is about conceptual coherence; that although the two senses of freedom can be found in Epictetus, they interact with each other in interesting ways. I'll start with the first.

I will present an argument by Braicovich from his essay "Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus' *Discourses*". Although it is not entirely clear to me, I think his task in that paper is to show that the only sense of freedom in Epictetus is freedom as wisdom. He relies on a passage in Epictetus which seems to support it. I will quote the passage in full so the context is clear.

One who has achieved virtue and excellence [wise, free person], after having examined all these questions [about the gods], submits his will to the one who governs the universe just as good citizens submit to the law of their city. [8] And one who is still being educated should approach his education with this aim in view: 'How may I follow the gods in everything, and how can I act in a way that is acceptable to the divine administration, and how may I become free?' [9] For someone is free if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice and no one else is able to impede him. [10] 'What, is freedom madness, then?' Heaven forbid! For freedom and madness are hardly compatible with one another. [11] 'But I want whatever I wish to happen indeed to happen, regardless of how I arrive at that wish.' [12] You're crazy, you're out of your mind! Don't you know that freedom is a precious and admirable thing? But for me to desire arbitrarily that things should happen as I arbitrarily decide risks being not merely far from admirable, but even exceedingly reprehensible.⁹⁰

Braicovich's argument is this. Equating freedom with having a *prohairesis* (self-determination, autonomy) is to acknowledge that even mad, irrational people are free. But this cannot be true, because it is clear that mad, irrational people who are not wise are not free.⁹¹ He thinks that this is pointed out by Epictetus in the previous quote (when Epictetus answers that freedom and madness are not compatible with one another). Braicovich reconstructs Epictetus' argument with many premises that I take to be unproblematic. I will only explicitly deal with the one that I think is crucial for his

⁹⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.7-12.

⁹¹ Braicovich, "Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus' *Discourses*", 212.

argument. In his reconstruction of Epictetus' argument, he writes that "freedom cannot be simply equated to self-determination because: [...] (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".⁹² I think this is the crucial claim of the argument; that the will is not equal in all rational beings. It is thought that because of this, freedom cannot be equated with simply having a will, because freedom would in some sense lose its meaning. Braicovich concludes:

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* [...]. 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.⁹³

I think it is true that the freedom at stake *here* in the specific passage quoted by Epictetus is indeed freedom of wisdom, and that Braicovich gives an account of why freedom of wisdom consists of having a rational will. But it has not been sufficiently argued that Epictetus therefore does not have another sense of freedom which is a natural characteristic of the will.

As mentioned, the sense of freedom that is discussed in this passage is freedom of wisdom. Opposed to the wise, free person is the person "who is still being educated", and this unwise, unfree person is given an advice for what the aim of education (leading to wisdom, wise freedom) should be. What this unwise person is wondering is "how may I *become* free?".⁹⁴ To this Epictetus answers that "someone is free if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice and no one else is able to impede him".⁹⁵ This is misunderstood by the listener, who thinks that one is free if one simply does things unimpeded, like a madman raving the streets doing whatever he wants, and because of this responds; "What, is freedom madness, then?".⁹⁶ This question is in effect "is wisdom the same as madness?". To this, it is understandable that

⁹² Braicovich, "Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus' *Discourses*", 212.

⁹³ Braicovich, "Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus' *Discourses*", 213.

⁹⁴ My italics.

⁹⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.9.

⁹⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.10.

the answer is; “Heaven forbid! For freedom [of wisdom] and madness are hardly compatible with one another”.

This is clear if the freedom discussed here is, as I think both Braicovich and I believe, freedom of wisdom. The listener misunderstands “no one else is able to impede him” to imply that it means that one rushes out in the street and does whatever one wants without being stopped. Because of that the listener replies, is *this* freedom? And surely, the response is ‘no’; being wise and free is not the same as being mad. That’s not what being ‘unimpeded’ means in this context of discussing wisdom and its relation to freedom. In this context, ‘unimpeded’ means choosing only according to what is up to you, and in that way making your will something that cannot be impeded. What is rejected in this passage is not freedom of autonomy. What is rejected is that freedom of wisdom is the same as doing things out in the world without being hindered by anyone. It is a rhetorical way of presenting a misunderstanding so that one can better understand what being unimpeded really means in the context of wisdom.

Braicovich reads the advice “someone is free if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice and no one else is able to impede him”⁹⁷ with freedom of autonomy in mind. But that is not what the discussion in that passage is about. The unwise listener is wondering how she may become wise and free, and to this Epictetus responds by describing how one achieves freedom of wisdom.

In his paper, Braicovich clarifies why ‘freedom’ is used about wisdom at all, since that term on its own might point to different aspects of the will. The conclusion is that wise freedom consists in having a good will (rational *prohairesis*), not any kind of will. But this does not show that Epictetus does not have a different sense of freedom – freedom of autonomy – which he uses to highlight different characteristics of the will in other contexts. I think Braicovich rules out this possibility by claiming in premise (d) that the will is not equal in all rational beings, implying a stronger claim, namely that the will is not equal *at any level* for any rational beings. This I think Epictetus would not accept, based on the quotes I have given. For Epictetus, there is some fundamental characteristic of the *prohairesis* in itself that makes it free, namely that it rules over itself, and cannot in principle be ruled by anything else. (It may be objected that the unwise are ruled by things outside of their control; they are forced or compelled to choose as they do because of external circumstances. As already mentioned, Epictetus

⁹⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.9.

thinks this is not the case, although we talk like that on a practical level. Talking about wise freedom, we might say that the unwise are ruled by things outside of their control. But in reality, according to autonomous freedom, they are still ruled by their own wills; it is not the things outside of their control that rule unwise people, it is their beliefs about those things). Therefore, I argue, contrary to Braicovich, that freedom *can* be considered to be mere self-determination, if the freedom referred to is freedom of autonomy. Freedom cannot, on the other hand, be mere self-determination, if the freedom referred to is freedom of wisdom; in that case freedom is “the self-determination of a rational *prohairesis*”, as Braicovich concludes.⁹⁸

The second objection to the distinction between autonomous and wise freedom is that although Epictetus talks about the freedom of the will in the two ways I have argued, the two senses interact. Therefore, it is a bit misleading to portray them as distinct. This objection is somewhat based on a misunderstanding, but I will nonetheless present it as a way of clarifying the concept of autonomy.

The objection is that if you are unwise, you are not autonomous. When the will is ruled by things that are not in its control, it is not autonomous anymore. Long claims this when he writes that for Epictetus “[*prohairesis*] is our God-given capacity to achieve autonomy [only] if we internalize the doctrine that genuine freedom is entirely a function of our mental disposition”.⁹⁹ According to this notion of autonomy, we are only autonomous if we are wise.

I have not seen the word ‘autonomy’ used in Epictetus (though its Greek counterparts might of course be there in the original Greek). But in the earlier Stoics, freedom was defined through autonomy, that is “having the ability to act on one’s own, [...] to act independently”.¹⁰⁰ And one of the paradoxes of Stoicism as formulated by Cicero was that only the wise are free, while the unwise are slaves – meaning that only the wise are autonomous since they exercise rational control over their wills, while the unwise are slaves to their passions, lacking control. Given this historical emphasis in Stoicism on autonomy and freedom as rational control, and Epictetus’ focus on the same, it is understandable that one might think that a lack of rationality destroys autonomy as such. But given the two senses of freedom that Epictetus uses this is not the case.

⁹⁸ Braicovich, “Freedom and Determinism in Epictetus’ *Discourses*”, 213.

⁹⁹ Long, *Epictetus*, 207.

¹⁰⁰ Frede, *A Free Will*, 67.

The two senses of freedom can be understood as the following two different types of autonomy. The autonomy connected to autonomous freedom is an absolute and natural autonomy. It is the autonomy we all have since our wills are by nature self-governed. The autonomy connected to wise freedom is a relative and acquired autonomy. This is the autonomy we typically call self-control. By our very natures, we are all autonomous in the first sense, but we only have a *capability* of being autonomous in the second (wise). Being autonomous in the second sense involves moral work and commitment, and as such, it is a higher sense of autonomy. Nonetheless, I think Epictetus' view is that the first kind of autonomy is what makes the second type of autonomy possible at all, and therefore no less important. It is not wisdom that is given to us by God, but the will as an autonomous capacity.¹⁰¹ It is only given our God-given autonomous natures that we are capable of evolving into even higher autonomous beings. The initial objection was that a lack of wisdom destroys autonomy as such. I have argued that this is wrong, and that on the contrary, natural autonomy is what enables the acquisition of autonomy through wisdom.

4 Concluding remarks

In the lectures collected in *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, Frede pursues the question “When in antiquity did one first think of human beings as having a free will, why did one come to think so, and what notion of a free will was involved when one came to think of human beings in this way?”¹⁰² He argues that Epictetus expressed the first notion of a free will in the history of Western philosophy. The specific notion of free will he finds in Epictetus is this: “It is a notion of a will such that there is no power or force in the world which could prevent it from making the choices one needs to make to live a good life or force it to make choices which would prevent us from living a good life”.¹⁰³ This is wise freedom. Given that understanding of the notion, few human beings are free. “[H]uman beings become compulsive about things and thus lose their freedom”.¹⁰⁴ Since this freedom is acquired through making the right

¹⁰¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17.27.

¹⁰² Frede, *A Free Will*, 1-2.

¹⁰³ Frede, *A Free Will*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Frede, *A Free Will*, 77.

choices, “[i]t is not an ability to make choices which no sane person would want to make”.¹⁰⁵ It is not an ability to simply choose freely – like a madman – but an ability to choose the good choices.

Sometimes, though, Frede expresses the meaning of Epictetus’ quotes to be that freedom “is a matter of the will’s not being prevented from making the choices it sees fit to make, of its being impossible to force it to make any choice other than it would want to make”.¹⁰⁶ This is a description of autonomous freedom. Yet he says that according to this freedom, you are unfree if your choices are forced by “presumed goods or evils”.¹⁰⁷ But even if you are “forced” by presumed goods or evils, he acknowledges that “the person himself by his own doing has enslaved himself in this way so as to act henceforth under compulsion”.¹⁰⁸ But Frede doesn’t see that this is a kind of freedom.

Even though he wrote about it indirectly at times, and even though the quotes he refers to are clear expressions of it, he overlooked the notion of autonomous freedom found in Epictetus. Why? I have three suggestions for possible reasons. Firstly, he seems to put too much weight on the Stoic claim that “only the wise are free, others are slaves”.¹⁰⁹ With this notion of freedom in mind, it is easy to find it, and only it, in Epictetus. Secondly, he seems to read Epictetus through the glasses of a Stoic metaphysics that emphasizes God’s good nature and the problem of predetermination.¹¹⁰ For the Stoics, God set up our world in a way that does not hinder our wills in becoming free.¹¹¹ It is in this context that Epictetus, according to Frede, expresses his understanding of free will. While this may be true to some degree, I don’t see it expressed in Epictetus as an especially important thing. This focus leads Frede to discuss the compatibility between wise freedom and predetermination, as if that was a problem that Epictetus was trying to solve with his notion of free will.

The third reason might be too simple but should be mentioned as a possibility. It concerns Frede’s understanding of the historical origin of the concept of *eleutheria* as it was used in politics (the same story told by Bobzien). For them, this notion of freedom

¹⁰⁵ Frede, *A Free Will*, 85.

¹⁰⁶ Frede, *A Free Will*, 76.

¹⁰⁷ Frede, *A Free Will*, 68.

¹⁰⁸ Frede, *A Free Will*, 68.

¹⁰⁹ Origen in Frede, *A Free Will*, 68.

¹¹⁰ Frede, *A Free Will*, 77-85.

¹¹¹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 14.

is not simply about being self-governed, but about being free to live the good life. Frede's notion of freedom is based on that original notion; the will is free because it is not forced to live under bad constraints. With this starting point for the investigation of the concept, Frede might have had too narrow a focus – looking for *that* freedom.

Even if this did not influence him, it opens an interesting door. Crucial for that notion of freedom, when applied to the will, is the following: if the will is not forced to live under bad constraints, but nonetheless does live under bad constraints, those constraints must be self-imposed. This Frede sees, and it is a big point for Epictetus. But Frede doesn't see it as a 'freedom', like Epictetus sees it. That is, the will is free to choose between living under good or bad constraints. When we use the original, political notion to describe the will, we see that the notion of autonomous freedom is implicit in it. But this is a notion quite different from the original, political notion as it is presented by Bobzien and Frede. This notion of (autonomous) freedom is not about constraints, but about being principally self-governed.

I argued that it is plausible that Epictetus got the autonomous notion of freedom from earlier Stoics' characterization of fate. But if the political notion of *eleutheria* was the starting point for thinking about freedom, it is not clear to me where this autonomous notion came from for the earlier Stoics to use it at all. The political notion was about not being forced to live a bad life. The autonomous notion is about being self-governed, regardless of morality. It doesn't seem like this is derived from the political notion. Presumably – although not necessarily – the earlier Stoics got that autonomous notion of freedom from an earlier source in order to give such a property to God/Fate. Perhaps there was such a notion of autonomous freedom around in antiquity that was used in a different way than the political notion (perhaps a notion from a religious context), and that the presentation of the historical origin of *eleutheria* is not the whole story. This is a topic that could be further researched.

Lastly, I will return to Frede's original questions. As to the first, I am not in a position to argue for the claim that Epictetus was the first thinker to talk about humans as having a free will, since that is not what I have investigated. I take that as an assumption. But as to his last question – “what notion of a free will was involved when one came to think of human beings in this way?”¹¹² – I have argued that there were in fact two notions of free will expressed by Epictetus, one of which has not been

¹¹² Frede, *A Free Will*, 2.

appropriately acknowledged. The notion of wise freedom has received much attention in the literature. The notion of autonomous freedom has not. So, to focus on autonomous freedom, why did Epictetus come to think that not only the wise are free, but that all human beings have an autonomously free will?

I have already speculated about him having derived the notion of autonomous freedom from the properties of God/Fate. Since our wills are parts of God's will, it is natural that they should share properties. It is also a natural continuation of Chrysippus' understanding of assent as expressed in the example of the cylinder and the cone.¹¹³ Chrysippus held that our assents were up to us because any specific assent, although caused by an earlier cause, depends on the nature of our minds at that specific time, just as a cylinder and a cone when pushed will roll differently because of their constitution. But in addition to this, Epictetus might have had a practical reason for thinking about human beings as having an autonomously free will.

Frede portrays the introduction of free will into the philosophical vocabulary as having been introduced to account for the presumed fact that we are morally responsible for our actions.¹¹⁴ I believe this is true for Epictetus, but the morality at stake for him is not blameworthiness. The development of *eph' hēmin* from the old Stoa to Epictetus is described by Bobzien to move from an orientation towards the past to an orientation towards the future. The early Stoic conception of *eph' hēmin* is more about what has already happened, while Epictetus' conception is future oriented. "[I]n Chrysippus and the old Stoa it primarily was a backwards perspective [...] concerned with the attribution of responsibility and with the moral assessment of actions".¹¹⁵ If the action could be seen as depending on your assent, you were morally responsible for that action.

Epictetus is more concerned about how we should act in the future. While the historical notion of responsibility is included in Epictetus' thought, the emphasis is changed from "who can be held responsible?" to "how can we be happy?" – from "did it depend on them?" to "what is up to me?". Autonomous freedom was introduced by Epictetus not to legitimize blame, but to encourage people to take responsibility for their intentions and actions; to give us the tool to become wise. He pointed out that we are always free, yet we autonomously choose to be slaves. With the introduction of an autonomously free will, he could convince people that no matter how affected they

¹¹³ Cicero *On Fate* 42-43, quoted in Gerson and Inwood, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 187-188.

¹¹⁴ Frede, *A Free Will*, 3.

¹¹⁵ Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, 333.

seem to be by the outside world, they are always only affected by themselves. This gives a theoretical grounding and practical motivation for the ethical goal of making wise decisions and living according to nature. As such, his notion of autonomous freedom is an expression and continuation of Stoic compatibilism.

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