

Studies on Ancient Moral and Political Philosophy 1

What is Up to Us?

Studies on Agency and Responsibility in Ancient Philosophy

von

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Academia Verlag St. Augustin bei Bonn 2014

Verlag C.H. Beck im Internet:

www.beck.de

ISBN 978 3 89665 634 6

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schnell und portofrei erhältlich bei beck-shop.de DIE FACHBUCHHANDLUNG

Introduction

Pierre Destrée, Ricardo Salles and Marco Zingano

The present volume brings together twenty contributions whose aim is to study the problem of moral responsibility as it arises in Antiquity in connection with the concept of what depends on us, or is up to us, through the expression *eph' hêmin* and its Latin synonyms *in nostra potestate* and *in nobis*.

The notion of *what is up to us* begins its philosophical lifetime with Aristotle. However, as the chapters by Monte Johnson and Pierre Destrée point out, it is already present in earlier authors such as Democritus and Plato, who clearly raise some of the issues that were linked to this notion in the later tradition. In Aristotle, the expression *eph' hêmin* is frequently used in the plural to denote the things that are up to us in the sense that they are in our power to do or not to do. It plays a central role in his action theory insofar as the scope of deliberate choice is specifically the set of these things (we deliberate about how to bring about things that it is up to us to achieve). But it is not yet a technical term, or at least not as technical as it will be in later authors. In any case, even though Aristotle uses the expression, he does not define it anywhere in his (extant) works. According to some interpreters, Aristotle's use implies the idea of alternate possibilities: if, given certain conditions, doing an action *x* is 'up to me', then these conditions do not necessitate that I do *x* and, therefore, given these conditions, I may well do an action *y* instead of *x*. Such reading is, apparently, incompatible with determinism. However, according to a different line of interpretation, which was first proposed by Richard Loening at the beginning of the 20th century, no such incompatibility arises: when Aristotle says that a given action is up to us he intends to mean, not that the conditions in which we act do not necessitate the action, but merely that these necessitating conditions do not always obtain and, accordingly, that we sometimes do *x* and sometimes do *y* instead of *x*. This reading, in contrast with the previous one, is clearly compatible with determinism.

In the present volume, all the chapters dealing with Aristotle uphold a deterministic, or at least an anti-indeterministic, reading. Dorothea Frede surveys the main issues surrounding the problem of free-will in Aristotle. According to her, there is no explicit notion of will in Aristotle and *a fortiori* no conception of free-will. However, when Aristotle's theory comes to deal with deliberation and choice regarding particular actions in particular situations, the problem of whether we can act otherwise clearly surfaces. We have thus to get a clear idea of what are Aristotle's commitments towards our deliberating about the means to achieve an end, and how these commitments break a path to a sound notion of freedom in action, or

go in the opposite direction, making any attempt to find a notion similar to that of free-will unsound. According to Dorothea Frede, individuals must have the disposition to choose the right ways and means to achieve those aims that seem to be good and desirable according to their own conception of life. Freedom in the sense of moral indifference would have been inconceivable for Aristotle, and this seems to be fatal to any notion of having the power to act otherwise in the sense of being able to do x or $not-x$ for the very circumstances surrounding the action. But not all acting by oneself is thus rejected. For, although there is no term designating will in Aristotle, there are other related notions, such as wish, desire, and choice, that delineate in their complex inter-relations a not too vague notion of acting by oneself under some constraints. One of these notions is character or disposition, and it is decisive to get a better understanding of Aristotle's psychological determinism and its limits in a theory of action about how one is supposed to construe his notion of disposition.

Susanne Bobzien deals with the problem of free choice by taking the bull by its horns. In her chapter, she examines in detail the well-known passage of *EN* III, 1113b7-8, according to which, where we are free to act, we are also free to refrain from acting, such that where we are able to say "no" we are also able to say "yes". This passage is often taken as providing indisputable support to indeterministic interpretations of Aristotle. Bobzien argues against this reading and claims that, on the contrary, there is good reason for reading it in the opposite direction. The principle of alternate possibilities is also discussed in by Susan Sauvé Meyer. Focusing on *Eudemian Ethics* II 6, she argues that Aristotle stresses the two-sidedness of what is *eph' hêmin*: what is up to us to do is also up to us not to do. The problem appears when one construes it as an invocation of a principle of alternate possibilities. This principle emphasises the possibility of non-actual alternatives to our actions, whereas Aristotle is concerned to show that our actions, and not just their alternatives, are up to us. In this sense, presenting Aristotle's point here as an affirmation of the contingency of human actions may be misleading. It is true that Aristotle thinks that what is up to us is also contingent (in some sense of being contingent), but this is not what is at stake when he introduces the notion of what is up to us. The claim that something is up to us to do or not to do is intended to establish, rather, that we have control over our actions, which in itself neither implies nor rules out determinism.

Javier Echeñique takes a different direction, as he claims that Aristotle is both a compatibilist and an incompatibilist. He is a compatibilist in connection with the conditions for praise and blame or "ethical appraisals", which are Aristotle's main concern in his *Ethics*. But he is also an incompatibilist in connection with accountability, that is, the desert of punishments and rewards. Javier Echeñique argues that this double position is defensible and well supported by most of the key passages in Aristotle dealing with the concept of what is up to us. In particular, he takes *EN* III 5 as good evidence for a proto-incompatibilist position, given that, in this chapter, Aristotle is specifically concerned with accountability.

After Aristotle, the discussion of what is up to us, or depends on us, involves two main parties: the Aristotelians, on the one hand, and the Stoics, on the other. The Stoics attempted to preserve moral responsibility within a causally determined world by means of a re-interpretation of the notion itself of what it is for something to be *eph' hêmin*. The chapter by Katja Vogt studies the case of a Stoic agent who moves herself to action by assent to a thought about what she should do. Assent to “take the umbrella”, for example, sets off the impulse to take the umbrella, and if there is no external impediment, the agent takes the umbrella. For any given agent at any given time, there is just one assent she can and will give, and thus just one action she can and will perform. The agent assents as the cognizer she is, with a given state of mind. Moreover, the assent she gives is the same assent she gave in earlier world-cycles. Accordingly, the Stoic agent will do what she will do, and she will do what she did. What, then, does it mean that assent is up to the agent? First, it means that one assents as the cognizer one is; second, it means that the agent is able to adhere to norms of assent. Vogt shows that this latter point is the crucial difficulty in Stoic theory. For it aims to explain how agents are genuine sources of causality; how impressions and assent move the mind; and how it is within one’s power to become a better assenter. But Vogt argues that these matters are best not put in terms of freedom and determinism, given how deeply Stoic physics and theory of causality diverge from later accounts, and that the thought that one shall do what one shall do is frustrating only for the imperfect reasoner. For the wise person, it is perfectly fine to have only one option: she will do what is best.

The present volume includes, in addition to Vogt’s paper, five papers on individual Stoics. Two on Chrysippus, Head of the Stoa in the 3rd century BC, one on Panaetius, the main representative of Middle Stoicism in the 2nd century BC, and two on Imperial Stoicism in the 2nd century AD: one on Epictetus and one on Marcus Aurelius. Laura Gómez focuses mainly on the strategies that Chrysippus adopted to argue for the compatibility between Stoic fate and moral responsibility. She attempts to reconstruct Chrysippus’ theory on the basis of how he reacted to specific objections that were raised against Stoicism and that he sought to refute. The paper by Jean-Baptiste Gourinat also concentrates on Chrysippus. Whereas Gómez deals with Chrysippus’ compatibilist theory as a whole, Gourinat focusses upon a particular, but central, element in the evidence we have for his theory: the term *in nostra potestate* in the Latin sources for Chrysippus. According to Gourinat, *in nostra potestate* may not be a translation of the Greek *eph' hêmin* and, therefore, these sources are not necessarily evidence that Chrysippus ever used in Greek the expression *eph' hêmin*.

Starting from Panaetius’ rejection of the Stoic theory of conflagration (which seems to reduce the influence of the universal *logos* on the life of individuals and to extend the scope of human responsibility), Emmanuele Vimercati introduces Panaetius’ interpretation of the Socratic-Platonic theory of self-knowledge, which is based on *oikeiôsis*. *Oikeiôsis*, self-knowledge and responsibility seem thus to be strictly linked to one another, in a genuine, and original, Stoic approach to moral life. Vimercati also discusses Panaetius’ theory of the four *personae*, particularly

the third and fourth. These, according to Panaetius, depend, respectively, on the *casus aut tempus*, which is somehow free from early Stoic determinism, and on our *iudicium* or *voluntas*, which is in some way up to us. A passage of Nemesius, that preserves the only Greek occurrence of *eph' hêmin* in Panaetius' fragments, serves as a confirmation of his notions of 'self', *prohairesis* and responsibility.

In his contribution, "Epictetus and the causal conception of moral responsibility and what is *eph' hêmin*", Ricardo Salles takes issue with an influential interpretation of Epictetus nowadays according to which the idea that the actions that are *eph' hêmin* are those of which we are the cause – the causal conception of what is *eph' hêmin* – is found in Chrysippus but not in Epictetus. One salient feature of this causal conception is that the concept of the *eph' hêmin* does not presuppose alternative possibilities. This conception is, therefore, congenial to determinism and compatibilism. As Salles indicates, there is strong evidence in Epictetus' *Discourses* for this conception and there is, in this respect, a close proximity between Epictetus and Chrysippus. Salles complements his treatment of this issue with a discussion of two standard philosophical objections against causal conceptions of the *eph' hêmin* and examines how Epictetus may reply to them.

The notion of what is up to us figures also prominently in Marcus Aurelius. In his paper, Marcelo Boeri asks what are the function and the value of such a notion in Marcus' works. He argues that the connection between the present and what is indifferent proves to be crucial for a sound understanding of the notion of what depends on us in Marcus. The value of belief and one's own power to decide what to believe are highlighted in his analysis. Boeri contends that Marcus endorses the idea that our mind is what bestows 'reality' on something external, such that the individual's mind, in depending upon one's own self, is able to give value or disvalue to external objects for the practical life of the human being.

Indeterminism has also its champions, and Alexander figures prominently among them, as he struggles to give life to Aristotelianism in a philosophical context strongly influenced by Stoic terminology. Marco Zingano revisits Alexander's theory of action and character, and tries to show that Alexander's libertarianism can be made compatible with a rigid notion of psychological determinism based on the notion of character. He distinguishes in this sense between the liability to act otherwise (in the strong sense of being able to do *x* or *not-x* in the very circumstances in which the agent acts, where *x* and *not-x* are contraries in the same sense in which good and bad are contraries) and the possibility of acting differently (in the sense of being able to do slightly different actions, without being liable to do contrary things). In both cases the agent has the possibility of doing opposites, *antikeimena*, but the wise person can only do 'opposites' in the sense of slightly different things, and certainly not in the sense of contrary things (for they cannot do something mean). This disposition is supposed to harbour a psychology of character the most salient trait of which is that character determines action, provided that character be acquired by means of actions regarding which the agent could have done otherwise in the strong sense of choosing between contraries. Epicurus too was deeply involved in presenting a doctrine of freedom for human beings as

moral agents. Pierre-Marie Morel tackles directly this point by showing how this interest evolved into an articulated theory. First of all, there are issues concerning the so-called Epicurus' *demonstration* of freedom. As a matter of fact, no extant text has an explicit demonstration of the *eph' hêmin* thesis. But, according to Pierre-Marie Morel, this should not surprise us. According to the Epicurean, the existence of things that are *eph' hêmin* needs no demonstration: it is something primarily evident. Stefano Maso investigates the Epicurean doctrine from a novel angle: Cicero's interpretation of Epicureanism and his use of it to develop his own position regarding on 'free will' and 'free choice'.

Lloyd Gerson takes a very specific approach to see what Plotinus has to say about moral responsibility. He endeavours to gather Plotinus' thoughts on this matter by means of a discussion of an argument recently presented by Galen Strawson, which runs against such a notion. Even though Plotinus has nothing to say about moral responsibility, at least insofar as he does not have the precise concept of moral responsibility, he does deploy a good number of different terms related to the concept of moral responsibility. None of them matches exactly what Strawson takes for granted in his paper, but examining all those related notions may provide us with what would count as a Plotinian answer to this issue, or so Gerson argues. In close connection to Plotinus' philosophy, Daniela Taormina investigates how Porphyry addresses the question of the autonomy of the individual in a series of extracts preserved by Joannes Stobaeus in his *Anthologion*. Here Porphyry reads the Myth of Er in the light of Hellenistic reflections on causality and responsibility. Within this context, Porphyry formulates a specific problem: given that the lives of individuals appear to be determined and made necessary by forces external to them, how can Plato claim that virtue has no master? In order to answer this question, Porphyry adopts a sophisticated semantic strategy based on the use of logic. Then, within this framework he determines the specific meaning of the terms traditionally used to describe individual autonomy: choice, self-determination, and what is in our power. This intricate path of enquiry reveals the influences to which each individual soul is subject. By restricting the *eph' hêmin* to man, however, as a capacity of the rational part of the soul, Porphyry solves the aporia and safeguards the possibility for individuals of freely exercising virtue and accomplishing virtuous actions.

The issues raised by Plato in his Myth of Er, discussed by Destrée and Taormina, are also examined by Mauro Bonazzi, who studies what were the reactions of later Platonists to the problem through their crucial notion of "hypothetical fate". When Platonists turned to endorse a doctrinal interpretation of Plato after the Hellenistic Academy, they had to face new problems which were not adequately addressed by Plato, but which had become central in the philosophical debates of the time. Bonazzi shows that one of these was fate, and how the view that everything is determined is compatible with the belief that human beings are however responsible for their actions. Platonists tried to show that the solution to the problem was in Plato's dialogues, thus claiming for the superiority of Platonism as opposed to the Hellenistic schools, and to Stoicism most notably. The doctrine of

hypothetical fate raises some good points against Stoic theology insofar as it keeps distinct human actions and divine providence. But, as Bonazzi concludes, it is debatable that their solution was capable of definitely setting the issue: it can perhaps account for single actions and decisions, but probably not for their mutual relations.

The concept of what depends on us plays no crucial role in Augustine's writings. However, as Christoph Horn argues, it is clearly present in an indirect way, since Augustine works with a similar notion, that of a free will. Horn shows that the Augustinian *liberum arbitrium* has precisely the function of describing what is in our disposition; to this extent, it is an equivalent of the *eph' hêmin*. But it goes beyond it insofar as it also describes the range of moral responsibility of an individual agent. We are thus facing a new world – the world of free will, at the dusk on Ancient times, and the dawn of a new era. Similar conclusions are drawn by Carlos Steel and by Christian Wildberg in their chapters, devoted respectively to Proclus and Simplicius, who provide us with with a glimpse of what is about to come in the conceptual domain of human agency and its power to act differently.

Finally, a note on the closing paper, Michael Frede's account of the concept of what is up to us in Ancient philosophy. Frede was particularly interested in the notion of free-will, as his 1997-98 Sather Lectures, published posthumously in 2011, testify. In 2007, he published in a Greek philosophical journal a paper devoted to this topic in Ancient philosophy as a whole. This is the paper that we reproduce here by permission and we are thankful to Katerina Ierodiakonou for her help and to Susan Meyer for her editorial work on the original version. By what is *eph' hêmin*, Frede argued, Aristotle means what is in our power in the sense of what is not a mere function of our nature and, generally, what is not settled by factors outside our control. In particular, his use of the term is not intended to mean that we are free to do or to choose in an indeterministic sense. According to the early Stoics, who held that all actions are due to assent (*sunkatathesis*), our actions are *eph' hêmin* insofar as they depend on our assent, by which they clearly do not mean that we could have done or chosen otherwise in the same circumstances. Later Stoics such as Epictetus refined this notion, claiming that it is not the action as such but the assent that is *eph' hêmin*. This comes very close to the notion of a free will, Frede contends, and later thinkers like Justin the Martyr and Tatian took it to be incompatible with the Stoic thesis of fate. The later Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias reads such a conception of free will back into Aristotle's notion of the *eph' hêmin*, but this reflects later philosophical developments, rather than Aristotle's own position. Given the importance of Frede's reflections to our understanding of Ancient Greek philosophy, we decided to reprint his paper, making it thus more easily available to all readers interested in this topic, as well as in the hope of paying tribute to him and to his exceptional contribution to so many current scholarly debates on Ancient philosophy.

Changing our minds: Democritus on what is up to us

Monte Ransome Johnson

Some of the most influential studies of Democritus' ethics have accused the Abderite of "naïveté" in mishandling the so-called "great problem" of the compatibility of free will and determinism. The same studies seem to ignore his treatment of the problem of what is 'up to us' (*eph' hêmin*), a problem that relates to virtually all the most important maxims and fragments attributed to Democritus that have survived.¹ Other studies that have concentrated not on what Democritus failed to say about free will and determinism, but on what he did say about agency and responsibility, character formation and reformation, autonomy and compulsion, seem to me to have produced more charitable, more interesting and more satisfactory interpretations of Democritus' philosophy as a whole, especially with respect to the issue of the relationship between his physics and ethics.²

Determinism is a doubtful concept in application to Democritus' natural philosophy, especially if one has in mind a quasi-Laplacean picture,³ as do most of those contemporary philosophers who address the ethical implications of determinism.⁴

¹ Bailey: "by the time of Democritus this great question was apparently not even simmering and he proceeds to lay down his directions for the moral life with a simple naïveté, unconscious of the problem which he himself had raised by insistence on the supremacy of 'necessity' in the physical world. His moral precepts are given on the assumption that man is free to act as he will" (1928: 188). After quoting this, Barnes comments: "But by Democritus' time the 'great question' was simmering. [...] I incline to the somber conclusion that physics and ethics were so successfully compartmentalized in Democritus' capacious mind that he never attended to the large issues which their cohabitation produces" (1979: 535). See also: Greene 1936: 125-126; Luria 1964: 7; Huby 1967: 353-362; Edmonds 1972: 357; and Brumbaugh 1981: 83-85.

² I have found the following studies most useful for the issues discussed in this paper: Natorp 1893, Langerbeck 1935, Stella 1942, Vlastos 1945 and 1946, Havelock 1957, Guazzoni 1969, Zeppi 1971, Ferwerda 1972, Kahn 1985 and 1998, Konstan 1987, Farrar 1988, Salem 1996, Morel 1996 and 2003, Warren 2002, and Annas 2002.

³ See, e.g., Sfondoni-Mentzou 1983: 220-231. Balme 1941 argues correctly that the early atomists' failure to understand inertia rules out for them any commitment to determinism of a Laplacean sort. Morel 2003: 21-35, rightly distinguishes between Democritus' commitment to the thesis that every effect has a cause, and the Laplacean thesis that all causes past, present, and future are fixed and can in theory be predicted or computed.

⁴ Dennett and Taylor 2001 suggest that "the average educated person's causal working assumptions about the cosmos still resemble the Democritean account, and philosophers traditionally rely on nothing more sophisticated when exploring the implications of determinism and indeterminism, causation and probability" (274). But many working philosophers seem to have in mind a Laplacean conception that defines determinism in terms of a given state of the universe (usually in the remote past) combined with the laws of nature (e.g. Quine 1969; Dennett 2003: 29; Van Inwagen 2003: 39, 45).

Further, it has been shown that the metaphysical problem of free will in relation to determinism has its origin in much later ancient philosophical concerns.⁵ It is possible that as early as Epicurus Democritus' emphasis on necessity was criticized for threatening human agency and implying fatalism.⁶ Nevertheless, there is a risk of anachronism in interpreting and evaluating Democritus as a philosopher by means of the highly problematic categories of free will and determinism.⁷

In the present essay I focus instead on developing a positive interpretation of Democritus' theory of agency and responsibility, building on previous studies that have already gone far in demonstrating his innovativeness and importance to the history and philosophy of these concepts. I do not claim originality for my interpretation of the individual fragments. The interpretation will be defended by a synthesis of several familiar ethical fragments and maxims presented in the framework of an ancient problem that, unlike the problem of free will and determinism, Democritus almost certainly did confront: the problem of the causes of human goodness and success. I summarize his view as follows. Luck and the gods are causal factors not up to us, but they are not decisive causes of doing well or poorly. (Democritus may go so far as to eliminate luck as a cause of good or bad things altogether.) Nature is not fixed but docile. An individual human's nature is not re-ducible to its genetic or congenital or racial nature, but is largely a function of his or her mind and way of thinking, and can thus be reformed by learning and argument. (In fact, Democritus envisions using the plasticity of human nature to reform his auditors by "changing our minds", in a quite literal sense.) Training, thought, and education play the most important role in most human success. In particular, Democritus emphasizes teaching (*didachê*, B33, B172), thought or judgment (*gnômê*, B35, B119, B175, B191, B223), intellect or understanding (*nous*, B35, B175; *dianoia*, B191), intelligence (*phronesis*, B119), wisdom (*sophia*, B197); right thinking (*eut-hugnômos*, B181, B191), and reasoning (*logismos*, B181, B187, B290) as the keys to human goodness and success.⁸ Democritus also lays great stress on deliberation: "For humans, bad grows out of good, if one does not know how to guide and drive it smoothly. It is not right to judge such things in terms of their bad effects, but in connection with their good ones. And if someone deliberates (*boulomenôî*), good

⁵ Bobzien 1998: 133-175; cf. 2000: 287-337.

⁶ Bailey 1928: 318; Sedley 1983. The key primary evidence is Diogenes of Oinoanda 33.2 and *Ep. Menoec.* 134. I agree with Furley, who remains "not quite convinced. [...] I doubt if Democritus was really a 'fatalist' in any recognizable sense: his ethical views do not seem to me consistent with a belief in fatalism. Epicurus may, however, have thought that fatalism followed from Democritus' physical theories. But it is possible he had others in mind" (1967: 175).

⁷ In response to those critics who have suggested that these concepts are trans-historical and present a unique problem for Democritus, I have (2009) defended what I take to be a plausible account of the compatibility of agent responsibility with Democritean causal necessitation. I went so far as to argue that, given the threat of causal indeterminacy to personal responsibility, something like a Democritean view of "spontaneity" might be more of an ally than an enemy to a robust account of human responsibility and freedom.

⁸ See also Kahn 1998: 35, quoted below. Fragments of Democritus are cited by reference to Diels/Kranz section 68.

instruments can be used as a safeguard against bad things” (68B173).⁹ Ignorance and its associated vices are represented as failures to properly deliberate or reason, and are blamed on those he calls “fools” or “senseless” (*anoêmones*, literally “those acting without *nous*”), who are treated as the causes of their own misery, failures, and doing of bad things (e.g. B197, cf. B119). Given this network of evidence, Democritus’ account of the virtues and success is naturally interpreted as an intellectualist one, as I will argue. His focus on our intellectual powers as the source of our own agency and cause of our success led him to remarkable breakthroughs in moral psychology, including the development of a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy for stress and anxiety, and the proposal of an autonomous source of moral sanction.

An *aporia* about the possible causes of goodness and success

Since we lack any context for the fragments and maxims of Democritus’ ethics, it is necessary to look elsewhere for a framework in which they can be interpreted as a whole. Aristotle supplies the least anachronistic and most directly comparable framework for interpreting Democritus’ ethics. Early on in both versions of the *Ethics*, he raises the “*aporia* of whether *eudaimonia* comes about by learning (*mathêton*), habituation (*ethiston*), or some other kind of training (*allôs pôs askêton*) or whether it comes in accordance with some divinity (*kata tina theian*) or through luck (*dia tuchên*)” (*EN* I 10, 1099b9-11). In the *Eudemian Ethics*, he treats it first among “the controversies about the nature and causes of *eu-daimonia*” (1214b24).

First we must investigate in what the good life consists and how it is acquired, and whether it is by nature (*phusei*) that all those men to whom the term is applied come to be happy (as we become tall people and short people and different colored people), or due to learning (*dia mathêseôs*) so that happiness will be a kind of knowledge, or due to some kind of training (*dia tinos askêseôs*). For many things happen neither in accordance with nature nor learning (*oute kata phusin oute mathousin*), but by habituation (*ethistheisin*) for humans; poor things if they are habituated poorly, good if well. Or do men become happy in none of these ways, but either, like those humans the nymphs and deities possess, by being looked after by a some personal destiny (*epipnoiiai daimoniou tinos*), like those who are inspired, or due to luck (*dia tuchên*), since many people say happiness and good luck to be the same thing? What is clear is that it is in all or some of these ways that people become happy. (*EE* I 1.1214a14-26; tr. Kenny, adapted)

For Aristotle, any and all of these causes can influence whether or not one becomes happy. But they are not all equally important causes, nor are they all causes in the same way. The role of luck, in particular, is highly problematic: Aristotle seems to conclude that not only may bad luck undermine happiness, but also that

⁹ Stobaeus 2.9.2. “It is better to deliberate (*probouleuesthai*) before action than to regret it afterwards” (Democritus 31 = 68B66); “One’s enemy is not the man who does wrong, but the one who deliberates about it (*boulomenos*)” (Democritus 55 = 68B89); “A man is reputable not only on the strength of what he does, but also of what he deliberates about (*bouletai*)” (Democritus 33 = 68B68). “Democritus” refers to a collection of maxims collected under that misnomer (= DK 68B35-115).

some people may turn out happy as a result of a kind of moral luck.¹⁰ The extent to which learning could possibly be a cause of happiness also presents enormous difficulties. At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that although teaching can influence and exhort certain kinds of people to become good, for the majority teaching is not sufficient, because many are motivated by fear, not shame (*EN X 9, 1179b4-13*). Aristotle does not deny that teaching can influence the development of moral and intellectual virtues – but he does call attention to the limitations of teaching, something Isocrates had previously accused the sophists of failing to admit to their students and clients.¹¹ For Aristotle, only some students have the talent and aptitude such that their character can be shaped by teaching, and this natural talent or aptitude seems to be what is meant by regarding nature as a cause of success, whether in the learning of skills, or in other kinds of activities, including living well in general. Aristotle directly says that what is due to nature is not up to us, in contrast to argument and teaching, which unfortunately work only on certain kinds of students.

Some think we become good by nature (*phusei*), some by habit (*ethei*), and others by teaching (*didachêi*). Nature's contribution is clearly not up to us (*ouk eph' hêmin*), but it can be found in those who are truly fortunate (*eutuchesin*) due to some divine cause (*dia tinas theias*). Argument and teaching, presumably, are not powerful in every case, but the soul of the student must be prepared beforehand in its habits, with a view to its enjoying and hating in a noble way, like soil that is to nourish seed. (*EN X 10, 1179b20-26*)

From the gloss on how nature is a cause in *EE I 1* (“as we become tall people or short people or differently colored people”), we can see that Aristotle is referring to genetic or congenital endowment, particularly with reference to the capacity to use reason and to control one's appetites.¹² Being born with a superior nature of this kind happens to the fortunate or lucky (*eutuchesin*) due to some divine cause (*dia tinas theias*) and is therefore not up to us (*ouk eph' hêmin*), which also shows that luck and divine providence are not up to us. The same causes determine the limits of personal responsibility:

Since virtue and vice and the works that are their expressions are praised or blamed as the cause may be (for blame and praise are not given on account of things that come

¹⁰ Johnson 2015. Cf. Kenny 1988 and 1992.

¹¹ On the limits of exhortation according to Aristotle, see Hutchinson and Johnson 2014. Isocrates says: “These capabilities – both for speeches and all the other works – have come about in those with natural talent (literally: “those with a good nature”, *tois euphuesin*) and who have been exercised by experience. And education makes these people more skillful and more resourceful at research; for it teaches them to take from a handier source that which they now happen upon fortuitously. But education cannot produce good debaters or speechmakers out of those that have a relatively inadequate nature (*tous katadeesteran tèn phusin exhontas*), although it can guide them towards these skills, and make them more intelligently disposed in many respects (*polla phronimôtêrôs diakeisthai poiëseien*)” (Isocrates, *Adv. Soph.* 14-15).

¹² “One of our natural sources of action is reason, which is present is development proceeds without being stunted and another is appetite, which is an attribute present from the moment of birth. Roughly speaking, these are the two marks by which we define what is natural to us; it is either an attribute of everyone at birth, or something that comes to us if development proceeds normally, such as grey hair and old age and the like” (*EE II 8, 1224b29-35*; tr. Kenny)

about by necessity or luck or nature (*ex anagkês ê tuchês ê phuseôs*), but on account of things that we ourselves are cause of, since if someone else is cause of something, it is he gets the blame and praise), it is clear that virtue and vice have to do with matters where the man himself is the responsible source of his actions. (*EE* II 6, 1223a9-15; tr. Kenny, adapted)

Aristotle later mentions these causes in making an almost desperate plea for recognition of the reality of human agency:

If a noble life is something that comes to be due to luck (*dia tuchên*) or due to nature (*dia phusin*), it would be a hopeless dream for many people; its acquisition would be beyond their powers no matter how strenuous their endeavors. But if it is something in their own power and in accordance with their own activities (*ei en tôi auton poion tina einai kai tas kat' auton praxeis*), then it will be a good both more widespread and divine. (*EE* I 3, 1215a12-17; tr. Kenny, adapted)

This point is further supported by what Aristotle says in his attempt to define the objects of deliberation (*boulesis*) in terms of actions that are ‘up to us’:

We deliberate (*bouleometha*) about what actions are up to us (*tôn eph' hêmin praktôn*), what we can do; these things are what remains to be done. For nature (*phusis*), necessity (*anagkê*), and luck (*tuchê*) do seem to be causes, but so also do sense or intellect (*nous*) and everything that occurs through human agency (*to di'anthropou*). (*EN* III 5, 1112a30-34)

Democritus’ ethical maxims and fragments discuss each and every one of these causes (nature, necessity, luck, the gods, training, teaching, intellect) as causes of “becoming good” (B242), “doing good things” (B35), and of *euthumia* (*euthumiê*, B191). It has been established that such fragments are best interpreted as part of a eu-daimonistic or teleological account similar to the kind presupposed by Democritus’ peer Socrates, and their successors Plato, and Aristotle,¹³ as already suggested by Arius Didymus, who wrote: “Democritus and Plato agree in placing happiness (*eudaimonia*) in the soul. Democritus writes like this: ‘Happiness does not dwell in flocks or gold; it is the soul which is the home of a person’s *daimon*’ (=B171). He also calls it *euthumia*, *euestô*, *harmonia*, *summetria*, and *ataraxia*. He says that it consists in distinguishing and discriminating pleasures, and that this is the finest and most advantageous thing for humans”.¹⁴ This laundry list of terms for Democritus’ end indicates, however, that *eudaimonia* was not the only term, and probably not even the focus, of Democritus’ ethical writings.¹⁵ It is significant that the term more frequently found in our fragments, and in the most important one (B191), is *euthumia*, because this refers to a good state of something internal to the human body (the *thumus*), and thus something suitable for treatment by materialist psychology. One should compare not only the term *eudaimonia*, preferred by Plato and most subsequent moralists, but also the term *eutuchia*, preferred by popular

¹³ Zeppi 1971 interprets Democritus’ ethics as eudaimonistic (508, 511, 525); cf. Stella 1942: 245. Dudley 1984 argues that *eudaimonia* is the fundamental term of Democritus’ ethics (377). Annas 2002 presents the strongest case for reading Democritus’ ethics as eudaimonistic. For concerns about the anachronism of the eudaimonistic interpretation, see: Kahn 1998: 36-37.

¹⁴ Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.52.13-53.20; tr. Annas 2002: 172.

¹⁵ The only other fragment directly referring to *eudaimonia* is Democritus 6 (= B40).

thought (as Aristotle tells us).¹⁶ Both *eutuchia* and *eudaimonia* are terms that, etymologically at least, refer to causes that Aristotle, as we have just seen, considers not up to us, whereas Democritus explicitly connects *euthumia* with something that is up to us, namely changing one's mind. So although it seems clear that Democritus' ethics is in some way teleological, there is a very good reason not to neglect those aspects in it that are not particularly eudaimonistic.

Nevertheless, Aristotle does say that "most people agree about what it is called, since both the masses and sophisticated people call it *eudaimonia*, understanding *eudaimonia* as equivalent to living well and doing well" (*EN* I 2, 1095a17-20; tr. Crisp, adapted), and this is certainly strong evidence that Democritus can be interpreted along eudaimonistic lines. In the opening *aporia* of *EE* I 1, Aristotle treats the two questions, of what the good life consists in, and of what the causes of the good life are, as part of one and the same inquiry. If Democritus explicitly addressed the question of the causes of the good life (operationally defined as living well and doing well), then he will have necessarily answered the question of what the good life consists in.

Democritus' approach to the *aporia* of the causes of the good life

Let us begin the examination of Democritus' position on the *aporia* raised and discussed by Aristotle with the following statement: "More people become good (*agathoi ginontai*) out of training (*ex askêsios*) than from nature (*apo phusios*)" (B242).¹⁷ The claim brings to mind the encouragement of the athletic trainer, who has every reason to say that more people become good runners or wrestlers due to exercise, training, and practice (i.e. following the advice of the trainers), than as a result of some inherited nature, such as body, strength, and reflexes given by genetic endowment. Democritus is a kind of moral coach or even physician who encourages us to overcome our natural deficiencies with training and practice: "medicine heals diseases of the body, but wisdom removes the sufferings of the soul" (B31).¹⁸ What is this "training" that Democritus (and later Aristotle) refers to? The answer is that it is a kind of teaching which aims to reform the very nature of the student. "Nature and teaching (*hê phusis kai hê didachê*) are nearly like. For teaching also reforms (*metarusmoi*) the person, and by reforming it produces a nature (*phusiopoiei*)" (B33).¹⁹ On this view, a human nature is not fixed or determinate, but can be reformed by teaching and reasoning.

Democritus is not talking about a radical transformation from the nature of a human being to some other kind of animal or god along Pythagorean or Empedoclean lines, but rather a more prosaic and limited transformation from one kind of human being to another, that is, a change of personality or character. This is made clear by the following thought: "The senseless (*anoêmones*) are formed (*rusmoun-*

¹⁶ Von Fritz 1963: 34-35; Farrar 1988: 230.

¹⁷ Stobaeus 3.29.66.

¹⁸ Clement, *Paed.* I.6; cf. B36, B187, B290.

¹⁹ Clement, *Misc.* 4.15; cf. Stobaeus 2.31.65.

tai) by the gains of luck, but those who are experienced in these things by the gains of wisdom (*sophiês*)” (B197).²⁰ Numerous fragments of Democritus discuss the unfortunate behavior of the foolish, and such diatribes set the stage for a fragment which appears to advertise Democritus’ overall purpose for issuing ethical precepts in the form of thoughts (/judgments, *gnomai*): “These thoughts of mine (*gnômeôn*), if anyone follows them with sense (*tis epaioi zun noôî*), he will do many things worthy of a good man, and not do many bad things” (B35).²¹ The purpose of the ethical fragments of Democritus is thus to counteract the foolish tendencies that he so frequently decries by reforming the auditor and improving his nature, creating a different nature that will then go on to do many good not bad things.

These claims about the power of education to reform the students’ natures utilize terminology native to Democritus’ physics.²² According to the now standard interpretation of the fragment (originally advanced by Vlastos), the idea is that the cluster of soul atoms that animate the human body may be physically reconfigured, “formed” (*rusmountai*) or “re-formed” (*metarusmoi*) through training and education, and the rearrangement constitutes a new individual nature. Thus the idea that one’s nature is fixed or determinate at birth by genetic or congenital factors is rejected by Democritus, who holds that one’s individual nature may be reformed, and not only into a single “second nature” but more or less constantly reformed.²³ This rejection does not exclude, but rather embraces the much more obvious point that our individual nature influences the extent to which we are susceptible to being reformed by teaching, as Aristotle stresses. But Democritus’ radical idea of creating new natures through education is his own original application of the profound idea that the mind and its material configuration exhibit “plasticity”, permitting the modification of habits, as is possible to a much more limited extent in some other animals but not at all in inanimate matter. The atomistic origin of this idea was recognized by William James when he defined the term “plasticity” in his *Principles of Psychology*.²⁴ Plasticity is by now a major hypothesis of cognitive psychology. It has important therapeutic implications for stress-reduction and anxiety relief. A fascinating recent study, for example, has shown that “mindfulness training” (a form of meditation) can alter the grey matter of the brain in regions associ-

²⁰ Stobaeus 3.4.71.

²¹ Democrates 1.

²² Vlastos 1945/1946; Luria 1964; cf. Tortora 1984. Taylor 1967 rejected this, but reconsidered his reservations in 1999.

²³ Tortora 1984: 395.

²⁴ “The habits of an elementary particle of matter cannot change (on the principles of the atomistic philosophy), because the particle is itself an unchangeable thing; but those of a compound mass of matter can change, because they are in the last instance due to the structure of the compound, and either outward forces or inward tensions can, from one hour to another, turn that structure into something different from what it was. [...] *Plasticity*, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits. Organic matter, especially nervous tissue, seems endowed with a very extraordinary degree of plasticity of this sort; so that we may without hesitation lay down as our first proposition the following, that the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed” (James 1890: 104-105).

ated with “emotional regulation” and “perspective taking”.²⁵ Democritus seems to have understood the fact that certain ways of thinking could influence the physical configuration of the mind and body, thus: “it is fitting for humans to produce reasoning (*logon poieisthai*) about the soul more than about the body. For perfection of soul corrects badness of dwelling (/body), but strength of dwelling without reasoning does not make the soul any better” (B187).²⁶

Plasticity, in fact, is essential to any theory of habit, and specifically to the idea of reforming the habits of a living thing. Although Aristotle must accordingly accept the theory of plasticity in his own account of habituation, he is surprisingly pessimistic about the power of teaching to reform people (or at least certain kinds of people). This reserved or conservative position, expressed also by Isocrates and Plato, may have been justified in response to the excesses of the so-called sophists in advertising the benefits of their teachings. But Aristotle probably has Democritus specifically in mind when he uses unmistakably atomistic terminology in reiterating the point: “what argument could reform (*metarruthmisai*) people like this? For displacing by argument what has long been entrenched in people’s characters is difficult if not impossible” (*EN X 10, 1179b16-18*; tr. Crisp).²⁷

Democritus, by contrast, is much more optimistic about the power of education to reform: if you follow his ethical advice, he promises, you will do many things worthy of a good person and not do many things worthy of a bad one. But if learning the sayings of Democritus “with sense” (*zun noôî*) is up to us, and if in doing this one may reform one’s nature, then doing many good or bad things would be up to us. Thus the issue of what is up to us turns out to be central to Democritus’ philosophy, as Charles Kahn recognized when he wrote that, for Democritus, “moral wisdom is conceived essentially as psychological prudence. He is the first proponent of what is known today as cognitive therapy”²⁸.

Nature, then, is not the only cause of whether one does good or bad things, because human nature is docile, and individual nature may be reformed by teaching so that, in combination with certain acts of attention, good sense, and right reasoning, the agent will do many good things and not do many foolish things. What about luck? Democritus harps on the unreliability or insufficiency of luck in several fragments: “Luck provides an extravagant table, but temperance a self-sufficient one” (B210); “Luck gives great gifts, but it is unreliable, while nature is self-sufficient. For this reason it defeats the greater object of hope by being lesser but reliable” (B176).²⁹ This implies that Democritus accepts that luck is, in some

²⁵ “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), one of the most widely used mindfulness training programs, has been reported to produce positive effects on psychological well-being and to ameliorate symptoms of a number of disorders. Here, we report a controlled longitudinal study to investigate pre-post changes in brain gray matter concentration attributable to participation in an MBSR program. [...] The results suggest that participation in MBSR is associated with changes in gray matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking” (Hölzel et al. 2011: 36-43).

²⁶ Stob. *Flor.* III t. 1; cf. B36.

²⁷ Luria 1964: 16.

²⁸ Kahn 1998: 35.

²⁹ Stobaeus 3.5.26 and 2.9.5.

cases or to some extent at least, a factor in human success and failure. But Democritus harshly criticizes those who offer bad luck as an excuse for lack of intelligence:

Humans have fashioned an idol of luck (*tuchês*) as an excuse for their own lack of sense (*anoiês*). For by nature thought (*gnômê*) and luck conflict. And this very enemy of intelligence (*phronêsi*) itself they say to be in control (*kratein*). Moreover, repudiating and erasing intelligence, they set down luck in its place. For they do not sing the praises of intelligence as good luck, but of luck as the most intelligent of things. (B119)³⁰

Thought, intelligence, good sense, and so forth are considered causes up to us, and so the failure to reap their benefits is considered blameworthy; the excuse that luck is the cause of one's failures is accused of being an appeal to a false idol. Intelligence and thought should be considered to be in control instead of luck. This is an extremely important point, because it is reasonable to see moral luck as a greater threat to personal responsibility than causal necessity. For this very reason, Democritus may have tried to eliminate luck as a cause of good and bad things.³¹ Democritus takes a similar position with respect to the gods.

The gods have given to humans all the good things, both in olden times and now. But not bad and harmful and unprofitable things: these the gods have given to humans neither in olden times nor now, rather *they bring them upon themselves* through blindness of sense and ignorance (*dia nou tuphlotêta kai agnômosunên*). (68B175)³²

Humans pray to the gods to cause them to be healthy, not realizing *they have the power for this in themselves* (*tautês dunamin en eautois*). But through weakness of will, acting contrary to this by excessive indulgence, they give up their health to their own desires (*epithumiêisin*). (68B234)³³

Humans destroy their own health and bring bad things upon themselves “through blindness of intellect and ignorance” – causal factors that we have seen are considered up to us. Democritus explicitly says that these causes, unlike the will of the gods or luck, are “in their own power” (*tautês dunamin en eautois*). But as with luck, humans attribute bad things to false causes by blaming the gods for disease, and by appealing to them as the cause of health, when the cause of one's own ill health is actually in oneself. The same example is used by Democritus to make a different point about human responsibility.

If the body were to bring a suit against the soul for all the pain it felt and bad things it had suffered while alive, and one were to become a judge of the complaint, one would happily vote against the soul, on the grounds that the soul had destroyed part of the body through negligence, and dissolved others with strong drinks, and corrupted and ripped it up through the love of pleasures, just as if holding responsible (*aitiasamenos*) the careless user of an instrument or tool in a bad condition. (B159)³⁴

³⁰ Eusebius, *Praep. Evangel.* XIV.27.5; cf. Stobaeus 2.8.16.

³¹ If it is right to interpret Democritus, as many commentators do, as the object of Aristotle's criticism in *Physics* II 5, 196a1-6; e.g. Simplicius' commentary on this passage 330.14-20.

³² Stobaeus 2.9.4.

³³ Stobaeus 3.18.30.

³⁴ Plutarch, *De libid. et aegr.* 2; cf. *De sanit. praec.* 24.

This fragment resonates with the idea that “perfection of soul corrects badness of dwelling, but strength of dwelling without reasoning does not make the soul any better” (B187, discussed above). As Kahn noticed, “what is characteristic of Democritus is to make the soul causally responsible for the condition of the body”.³⁵ Democritus’ soul has ultimate agency, and the report of Arius Didymus (quoted above), that “Democritus places happiness in the soul”, indicates not so much Democritus’ commitment to eudaimonism, as his commitment to the power up to us as individual agents that can cause our own living well and doing well.

With these fragments, we have now seen Democritus take a position on each and every one of the causes mentioned by Aristotle as candidates for causes of human goodness and success. Democritus downplays luck and the gods as causes, much more so than Aristotle (who accepts that luck is a major factor in causing *eudaimonia*, and who even accepts by the end of the *Eudemian Ethics* that some people are happy as a result of a certain kind of luck and divine oversight). Democritus holds human nature to be docile and modifiable by training and learning, and he is notably more optimistic about teaching as a cause of human improvement than Aristotle. On the Democritean picture, anyone’s nature may be transformed by thought (provided they pay attention, think with sense, etc.) so that one avoids senselessness and becomes wise. Thus Democritus downplays precisely those causes Aristotle (later) said not to be up to us, at the same time that he emphasizes those causes that Aristotle (later) said are up to us.

The power to change your mind

The account I have just presented has been at the very general and abstract level of causes like nature, luck, the gods, training, teaching, and intellect. But now I want to look at a concrete case of how Democritus thinks that by changing the way we think about things – changing our minds, so to speak in literally materialist terms – we may affect whether we lead a tranquil and placid life, or one full of painful emotional instability and unsatisfied desires.

The first example deals with an analysis of the causes of two different outcomes: whether we remain satisfied with what we have, or resort to criminal activities motivated by jealousy and greed. The example is contained in the longest continuous fragment of Democritus’ ethics and is of paramount importance for the interpretation of his moral psychology. The fragment is well known, and I will only briefly discuss it, divided into two parts (a-b).³⁶

(a) For humans, *euthumia* comes about with moderate joy (*metriotêti terpsios*) and a balanced way of life (*biou summetriêi*); excesses and deficiencies (*elleiponta kai hyperballonta*) like to fluctuate (*metapiptein*) and induce great changes in the soul; and among those souls that change over great intervals (*diastêmatôn*) there is neither stability (*eustathees*) nor *euthumia*. Therefore upon the things that are in one’s power (*epi tois dumatois*) one should hold the thought (*dei echein tèn gnomên*), and be content with

³⁵ Kahn 1998: 34.

³⁶ B191 = Stobaeus 3.1.210.

what one has, having few memories or thoughts (*oligên mnêmên echonta kai têi dianoiaî*) of those who are admired and envied and not paying attention to them (*mê prosdreuonta*). (B191)

The expression *epi tois dunatois* (“the things in one’s power”) is here used conventionally with reference to one’s capabilities or powers relative to those of others, especially rivals. It is only because I am not able to do certain things that others are capable of doing (e.g. possess more wealth, power, or beauty) that my dwelling on such things causes psychic distress, afflicting my soul with unrealistic desires and appetites that I cannot fulfill and that would be harmful if I could. Thus the expression “in our power” is not used universally, as above when Democritus insisted that those who blame the gods for their poor health ought to consider “the power over this to exist in themselves” (*tautês dunamin en eautois*, B234). However, the imperative in B191 for the students to consider carefully the things “in their power” (*epi tois dunatois*) implies that at least this re-commended thought process is up to us (any of us) to do so, at least any of us who listen to what Democritus is saying with *nous*. The prescription is part of Democritean cognitive-behavioral therapy, a piece of concrete advice: do not obsess about (“have little thought or memory of”) your rivals – do not even pay attention to them (*mê prosdreuonta*). If one only changes the focus of one’s attention, one can influence one’s psychic tranquility and even bodily health. In line with this, the continuation of the Democritean fragment goes into much greater detail about how one should think, and what about, and suggests that those changes of mind (of soul) will have positive affects on the body (or remove harmful affects).³⁷

(b) But one should observe (*theôreein*) the lives of those who are in distress, concentrating (*ennooumenon*) on the grievous things they suffer, so that the things one has and already possesses will seem great and enviable, and no longer would you be afflicted in the soul by appetites (*epithumeonti*). For the man who admires those who have and are deemed blessed by others, and in his thought and memory at all hours is dwelling upon them, is always compelled (*anagkazetai*) to find new opportunities and to overshoot, and because of the appetite (*epithumiên*) to do wrongs which the laws forbid. That is why by not dwelling so as to doubt certain things, but dwelling upon such things so as to have *euthumia*, by comparing one’s own life with those who do worse, and by deeming oneself blessed (*makarizein eôuton*) by keeping in mind (*enthumeumenon*) the things they suffer, one does and fares much better than they do. For by holding fast to this thought (*gnômês*), you will live with more *euthumia*, and will drive away those not small distresses in one’s life: jealousy, envy and malice. (B191)

This part of the fragment is important not only because of what it says is up to us, but also what it says by way of contrast: that some kinds of misdirected think-

³⁷ A condensed version of the same argument appears in another fragment: “The person trying to have *euthumia* needs neither to do many things (whether in public or private) nor, whatever he undertakes, to chose beyond his capabilities and nature; but he must be on guard so as to – when struck by luck and his thoughts run to getting more for himself – put it down and not apply himself beyond what he is capable of. For the right amount is safer than a huge amount.” (Stobaeus 4.39.25 = 68B3; cf. Plutarch, *Tranq.* 465c).

ing can constrain or compel (*anagkazetai*) one to act in a certain way. By dwelling on those who have more money and power, our minds are deformed by excessive desires we are likely unable to fulfill, causing continual psychic distress or anxiety. These desires produce intense appetites that become compulsive, in effect forcing or compelling (literally “necessitating”) one to engage in vicious or criminal behaviors in order to fulfill those desires. This very appearance of the idea of an agent being “compelled” into a set of criminal or vicious behavior by a certain way of thinking implies that the same agent is *not* compelled to embrace that very way of thinking that caused this state of affairs – on the contrary, the whole point of the fragment is to encourage the student to reject that way of thinking and embrace a different, more realistic, more tranquil, more moderate way of thinking and living. In his view *euthumia* is ultimately up to us, since it is in our power to turn our attention away from the causes of envy and jealousy that cause psychic turbulence, towards objects of moderate desires which when obtained (and even when not obtained) do not cause significant psychic disturbance. Our *euthumia* is up to us because what we think about, including what we deliberate about, is up to us.

The misapprehension of necessity

The plasticity of human nature allows us to improve ourselves by choosing what thoughts we seize on, and then focus or dwell on, and finally act on. But it is equally possible for plasticity to work in a harmful way, since it allows not only for a reformation to a better nature, but also a deformation to a worse one. Thus there arises the possibility of misunderstanding one’s own nature, for example one’s natural needs: “The needy animal knows how much it needs, but the needy man does not realize this” (B289); “It is irrational not to yield to the necessities in accordance with one’s way of life” (B198).³⁸ The other animals, not being capable of acting rationally, are not capable of acting irrationally in this particular way – failing to yield to necessities or knowing what is really needed. This kind of confusion is entirely a product of human agency.

Democritus thus assumes that thinking rationally or irrationally, and realizing the real extent of our needs, is up to us. If even things that really are necessary we need not accept as necessary (as madness and delusion show), then the mere appearance of necessity cannot necessitate a certain way of thinking, much less of acting. Psychological necessitation, in the strict sense, is impossible. We may be inclined to interpret the purpose of the imperative to “yield to the necessities in accordance with one’s way of life” to be to impress on the student the importance of undertaking necessary work that one might otherwise be inclined to slack on, and there are some fragments that function in this way: “those who undertake work voluntarily (*ekousioi*) prepare themselves more easily for involuntary work” (B240).³⁹ But in the long fragment B191 above, Democritus’ emphasis is not really on the failure to perceive things that are needful, but rather on the misapprehension

³⁸ Stobaeus 4.44.64 and 3.4.72.

³⁹ Stobaeus 3.29.63.

of things as necessary or compulsory that in reality are not: “that which the habitation (/body) needs is readily available for everyone, without trouble and toil; but the things needing trouble and toil, and which bring hardship to life, these the habitation does not crave, but the bad habituation of thought does (*hê tês gnômês kakoêthiê*)” (B223).⁴⁰ Therefore the misapprehension of necessity is due to a certain way of thinking that can be changed and is thus up to us.

A suite of fragments offers a very concrete example of the kind of changeable thought process that Democritus describes as up to us. Consider the decision whether or not to have children. Democritus points out that, despite appearances, this is not in fact a necessity. “It does not seem to me that one needs (*chrênai*) to have children; for in having children I see many and great risks, and many pains, but few fruits and these poor and feeble” (B276).⁴¹ But it appears to many to be a necessity, and a certain flawed way of thinking about this has by now become customary.

To humans, it seems to be one of the necessities (*tôn anagkaiôn*) to produce children, by nature and some original instinct. And it seems clear also from the other animals. For they produce offspring in accordance with nature but in no way for the sake of any advantage. But when they are born they endure hardship and struggle to nourish them as much as each is able, and they are very fearful when they are small and if the children suffer anything they grieve. This is the nature of every kind of thing that has life. But among humans a custom (*nomizon*) has been made up so that some people even expect to gain from their offspring. (68B278)⁴²

The apparent necessity to have children undoubtedly compels many people to have children, but this is not in reality a necessity, at least not absolutely or for any particular agent. But by changing how one thinks about these things, for example by dwelling not on how successful my neighbors’ children are, but instead on the pains and risks of rearing children, I become the cause of whether or not I have children. As Aristotle says in his own discussion of voluntary human action: “the human is a first principle or begetter of his actions as he is of his children” (*EN* III 6, 1113b18-19). The decision whether or not to have children is a paradigm of something that should be considered up to us, even though it customarily is not. The unexamined assumption that I must have children, so that I can gain prestige and pride from their successes, is a kind of deformation or perversion of nature (as the contrast with the instinctual actions of the other animals shows). Fortunately there is a remedy in changing my mind about these things by reasoning about the real nature and extent of my needs.

If this interpretation of Democritus is right, then thinking, intelligence, and good sense should be understood as causes of individual decisions such as whether to have children. These causes are not in turn determined by other causes like nature, luck, or the gods. We have seen concrete examples of how changing one’s

⁴⁰ Stobaeus 3.10.43. Accepting the reading *kakoêthiê* (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1925: 306) instead of *kakothigiê* (as in the text of Diels).

⁴¹ Stobaeus 4.24.31.

⁴² Stobaeus 4.24.33

thinking can transform one's nature, one's desires and passions, and then one's actions as a result: by focusing on the less instead of the more fortunate I may avoid excesses of desire and surfeit that cause psychic disturbance; by recognizing that the natural necessity to have children is illusory I may avoid many pains and risks. All of this is within our power, and should be considered up to us.

Self-government, shame and law

The above fragments show Democritus concerned to limit the power of necessity over us: the second part of B191 shows that the psychological compulsion to commit criminal acts may be avoided by changing what one thinks about and concentrates on; the fragments about children show how what is conventionally viewed as compulsory can be understood as a matter of individual choice following Democritus' thought. In some other fragments, Democritus also suggests that compulsion in the form of the law has limited power. For example, "oaths which were taken under compulsion (*en anagkêisin*) by the base are not upheld once they escape" (B239).⁴³ Compulsion can make one take an oath, but nothing can compel the inner conviction of the agent. For this reason moral exhortation is said to be more effective than political laws:

For the sake of virtue, utilizing exhortation (*protropêi*) and persuasion by argument (*logou peithoi*) is evidently stronger than law and necessity (*nomôi kai anagkêi*). For he will likely do wrong in secret who is kept from injustice by law, but he who is led to what must be done by persuasion will not likely do something wrong, whether in secret or in broad daylight. That is why by comprehending (*sunesei*) and also by knowing (*epistêmêi*) of right actions one becomes courageous and right thinking (*euthugnômos*). (B181)⁴⁴

This point of view is directly contradicted by Aristotle, as we saw, when he denies that exhortation and teaching are sufficient, asserting that laws and especially punishments are inevitably necessary to habituate the majority to virtue (*EN* X 9, 1179b4-13). A crucial point of contention is about the relative effectiveness of external psychological necessitation arrived at through a process of legislation, and persuasion arrived at through a process of education. Even the law itself, Democritus argues, is most effective when it persuades the agent to do something as being beneficial for his way of life: "The law intends (*bouletai*) to benefit the way of life of human beings. And it is able to do so, when they intend to be affected well. For to those who are persuaded (*peithomenoisi*) it indicates its unique virtue" (B248).⁴⁵

Recognizing that plasticity of human nature allows for reform and habituation, and that not only compulsion but also persuasion shapes people and changes behavior, and in general that one can change one's own fortune by changing one's thinking and reasoning, Democritus made an enormous breakthrough by conceiving of an autonomous source of moral sanction. Commentators have rightly cred-

⁴³ Stobaeus 3.28.13.

⁴⁴ Stobaeus 2.31.59.

⁴⁵ Stobaeus, *Flor.* IV 1, 33.

ited him with anticipating a notion that we find returning to a prominent place in ethics in Immanuel Kant.⁴⁶

No one should feel more shame in front of other people than himself, nor be more prepared to do bad things whether no one or everyone will know; but he should be most ashamed of himself, and institute this law for his soul (*touton nomon tēi psuchēi kathestanaī*), with the result (*hōste*) that he will do nothing unseemly. (B264)⁴⁷

I read the last clause as a result of the institution of the law, and not a specification of the content of the law. If the latter reading were required, then the fragment would issue into an empty imperative that one do nothing unseemly. On the proposed reading, the fragment is another expression of Democritus' conception of thought itself as a cause of actions. The law that should be self-imposed is the imperative: feel no less shame before oneself than before others. The result of this thought (/judgment) is that one's nature will be transformed in such a way that one will not desire to do things that are bad or ugly. Democritus argues that this inner source of moral sanction is necessary for moral reform: "The man who does shameful things must first feel shame before himself" (B84).⁴⁸ Self-sanctioning is more effective than compulsion by another agent or the law. In support of this interpretation is the fact that Aristotle expresses skepticism about being able to reform most people's natures through argument and teaching specifically because people are motivated by fear, not shame. According to Aristotle, the sense of shame cannot possibly be used to habituate people into being good, much less a self-imposed sense of shame.⁴⁹

Democritus, to the contrary, considers the self-imposed sanction of shame to be potentially so effective that conventional laws would be unnecessary provided one's actions do not harm others. "The laws or conventions (*nomoi*) would not prevent each one living according to his own will (*kat'idiēn exousiēn*), if one man did not harm another. For envy prepares a source of strife (B245)."⁵⁰ The second sentence expresses the concern to avoid envy or jealousy as a motivation for criminal activity, by shifting one's own thought from a focus on the more fortunate towards the less fortunate, as we read in fragment B191. Since that act of attention or exercise of thought is up to us, the whole sequence of actions that follow from either adjusting one's thought or not is understood to be up to us.

The person who follows Democritus' teaching with *nous* can autonomously enact the moral sanction of shame on themselves, and thus avoid bad actions all together. The moral sanction is a law, but one imposed on us by us, because it is our own thought, and so is up to us. For such an autonomous person, conventionally or externally imposed laws are redundant and irrelevant. By living freely, such a person voluntarily does good things. This seems to be the meaning of the somewhat cryptic remark attributed to Democritus that "the laws are a bad invention

⁴⁶ Natorp 1893; Kahn 1985, 1998.

⁴⁷ Stobaeus 4.5.46.

⁴⁸ Democrates 50.

⁴⁹ *EN* X 9, 1179b4-13; cf. in general *EN* IV 9.

⁵⁰ Stobaeus 3.38.53.

(*epinoian*), and it is not needed for the wise man to obey laws but to live freely (*eleutheriōs*)” (A166).⁵¹

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⁵¹ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Adv. Haer.* 3.2.9.

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How can our fate be up to us? Plato and the myth of Er¹

Pierre Destrée

If one wants to try and reconstruct what Plato's views on responsibility might amount to, one important place to focus on is undoubtedly the famous, yet quite obscure, myth of Er which ends the *Republic*. True, Plato does not use in a philosophical way any expression *epi* plus the dativ of the person in the way Aristotle will do when fixing the expression *eph' hēmin* in the context of responsibility. But there is one famous, and without any doubt, crucial passage in the myth of Er where such an expression quite obviously may have been used, – that is the famous word, – it is called a *logos* –, uttered by a *prophetes*, that is, literally, the spokesman of Lachesis, who presides over the allotting of destinies to the souls that are to be reborn in our world:

The word of Lachesis, maiden daughter of Necessity: Ephemeral souls (*ephemerai psuchai*), – the beginning of another death-bringing cycle for mortalkind! Your daimon will not be assigned to you by lot: you will choose it! The one who has the first lot will be the first to choose a life to which he will be bound by necessity. Virtue has no master (*aretē adespoton*): as he honors or dishonors it, so shall each of you have more or less of it. The chooser's responsibility – the god is not responsible. (*Rep.* X, 617d-e)²

As James Adam notes in his commentary to the *Republic*, “The whole of Lachesis' speech is frequently quoted or referred to by later Greek writers, and these words in particular became a kind of rallying-cry among the champions of the freedom of the will in the early Christian era” (*ad loc*). And indeed the contrary would have come as a surprise: with its strong emphasis on choice and responsibility, this short but vivid ‘word’ from the goddess Lachesis couldn't but be taken over as the best possible motto for such a view. And if one turns to more modern

¹ I read a first draft of this paper at the UNAM, Mexico City, in October 2011, and a second draft of it at the University Ca' Foscari, Venice, in November 2011. I would like to thank Ricardo Salles, and Carlo Natali and Stefano Maso for inviting me to these venues. I am very grateful to these two audiences, and esp. to Carlo Natali and André Laks for their remarks and suggestions, as well as to Susan Sauvé Meyer for the written comments she offered me. A (slightly different) French version of this is simultaneously appearing in the *Festschrift* in honour to Carlos Steel, *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought*, with Leuven University Press.

² Ἀνάγκης θυγατρὸς κόρης Λαχέσεως λόγος. Ψυχὰι ἐφήμεροι, ἀρχὴ ἄλλης περιόδου θνητοῦ γένους θανατηφόρου. οὐχ ὑμᾶς δαίμων λήξεται, ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς δαίμονα αἰρήσεσθε. πρῶτος δ' ὁ λαχὼν πρῶτος αἰρείσθω βίον ᾧ συνέσται ἐξ ἀνάγκης. ἀρετὴ δὲ ἀδέσποτον, ἦν τιμῶν καὶ ἀτιμᾶζων πλέον καὶ ἔλαττον αὐτῆς ἕκαστος ἔξει. αἰτία ἐλομένου· θεὸς ἀνάτιος.

examples, Jean-Paul Sartre's famous sentence, "L'homme est condamné à être libre" ('Man is condemned to be free'), is very likely to be seen as a the perfect reformulation of Lachesis' paradoxical word, urging these souls to realize that they have no other choice but to choose their *daimon*, that is their destiny.

And yet, as every careful reader may easily notice, such an apparently clear-cut case for responsibility and liberty of choice is in fact far from clear. As I have just indicated, it is, paradoxically enough, one of the three goddesses of necessity who makes such an announcement. And even more strikingly, besides the repeated words of choice and responsibility, Plato never tires of insisting on the theme of necessity, with the no less repeated words *tuchê* and *anangkê*. There are, so to speak, necessity upstream, and necessity downstream.

There is first of all necessity downstream, for which Plato uses the word *anangkê*. When each of the souls will have chosen her new life, she will be bound to it by necessity, which means that they will necessarily perform each and every action that is part and parcel of that 'pattern of life'. And this implies that none of these future actions will be 'freely chosen'; quite to the contrary, each one will be bound to happen, or be acted out, according to a strictly determined, that is necessary, causation. As the first chooser clearly makes us readers realize: if this soul freely chose the pattern of a tyrant's life, she certainly did not choose to eat her own children, which is one part of that pattern of life! But how can we make sense of a theory of, say, free choice if the actions we are going to perform are not at all dependent on us, that is on our own choices? You may reply in an Aristotelian way that at least the choice of your character was free, and the actions are only the expression of it, which may imply that these too, at least indirectly, were freely chosen, or up to us. But here Plato presents this choice happening in another world, before one's birth, and even more disturbingly, before being reborn in our world, each soul is forced to drink from the river Ameles which renders her oblivious of her choice of life (621a). Isn't it the case that by this Plato wanted to indicate that such a choice can't really depend on us, in the strong sense of the word?

Upstream, there is also an (apparently) inevitable *tuchê*, that is, chance – good chance, or bad chance – before such a choice of life: as Plato has the soldier Er describing the scene of the choice, the souls will be allotted by necessity a rank number according to which they will have to queue up and one by one in turn make their choice of a new life. Since this number of lives is limited, and every life is different, no such choice is totally open and free then, as it will at least in part depend on a certain degree of chance. And more importantly, Plato also strongly emphasises the fact that in many cases, the souls will make their choice in following the character and habits they had in their previous lives (620a), which makes their choice look more like, as a recent commentator strongly says, an 'automatic reaction' (McPherran 2010, 136) than a real, active and free choice. So, one might wonder, where is that alleged liberty of choice? And where is our full and clear responsibility?

Now there is a second challenge any serious reader of the myth of Er must also face. In his own tackling of the problem of choice and responsibility, Aristotle

vigourously attacks Socrates and Plato for uttering, or at least suggesting, what Susan Sauvé Meyer has called the ‘asymmetry thesis’ (Meyer 2011). In saying that no one is voluntarily immoral, or that one is immoral only by mistake, or lack of knowledge, Socrates and Plato implied that responsibility did not really apply to the wicked, because he simply didn’t know, or understand what he chose, or did. Responsibility only applies to the morally good person. And indeed, doesn’t Plato clearly and loudly proclaim, in a famous passage from the *Timaeus* (86b-87b), that the wicked are not to be blamed, but only their educators? And also that wicked persons are to be considered as ill people who need to be cured? You didn’t choose your educators, nor to get ill; so why would you be taken as blamable, and responsible, for your wicked *hexis*, or immoral constitution? But as Aristotle rightly objects, such a position would be paradoxical: why should we praise morally good persons while not blaming wicked ones? If being a morally good person depends on a choice that makes them praiseworthy and responsible for their good *hexis*, why shouldn’t it be the case with wicked persons?

Given these two sets of difficulties, it is no wonder that most recent interpreters, from Julia Annas (Annas 1982) to Mark McPherran (McPherran 2010), complain that Plato doesn’t offer any clear and consistent view, and that he in fact was not able or willing to defend the view he has put into the mouth of Lachesis’ spokesman.

In this paper, I would like to address these two sets of difficulties, and by doing so, try and show that Plato is much more consistent than he might seem at first sight, and that he in fact did defend a quite sophisticated view on responsibility which might well be still of interest for us today.

Let’s first start with some remarks on that Lachesis’ word.

One first difficulty is about the whole setting of the scene related by the soldier Er, as it is reported by Socrates. Where is this scene supposed to take place? Ancient readers as well as most modern interpreters linked this story to the metempsychosis theme we find in other places in Plato’s work. And as Plato himself alludes to in the beginning of Socrates’ report, it is the case that he did not completely invent this story, but basically rewrote it from the *Nekuia* we find in the *Odyssey*. And indeed, we find a lot of other clear hints at this famous Homeric tale throughout Er’s narrating. And yet, as some recent interpreters have rightly seen, this world, which is very vaguely referred to as being *ekei*, ‘there’, by Plato, is quite obviously described as if it were in fact our very world.³ The oxymoron *ephemerai psuchai*, – an oxymoron because these souls are supposed to be immortal – is one clear sign that Plato gives to his readers, especially given the fact that Homer himself often refers to human beings as *ephemeroi* in contraposition to the immortal gods. And a second sign of this is the way Plato indifferently uses the feminine, for *psuchê*, and the masculine for man (or more generally, human being) throughout the passage.

³ See Dorter 2003, Halliwell 2007, and Ferrari 2009.

And finally, and more importantly, it is to be noticed that these ‘souls’ are not, as we would have expected from what Plato usually says about immortality, just ‘reason’, or ‘*logistikon*’, which is the only part of the soul that is immortal. As we can see from the insistence that many souls choose from their previous habits, this must imply that they are like us, incarnated and mortal souls, with an epithumetic, and a thumoeidic part as well. This rewriting of the *Nekuia*, thus, is best seen as a mirror of our own lives, and we may suppose, of the way we usually make our choices.

My second remark is on our expression ‘up to us’. Whatever the reasons why it is only with Aristotle that this expression began to be used in a philosophical context, it is, I think, pretty obvious that Plato could perfectly well have used such an expression here, or to put it in other words, it is clear that we don’t have any good reason to think that Plato had any good reason for avoiding such an expression here. If one takes the passages in Greek literature where it is commonly used, it is noticeable that the expression is very close to the adjective *kurios*, and that the context is very often, literally or metaphorically, the context of ruling or mastering.

One good example of this is a passage at the beginning of Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus asks the first man he encounters upon arriving near Colonus: “Is there someone here to rule them, or is speaking (*logos*) up to the masses (*epi to plētei*)?” The man replies: “The masses are ruled/mastered (*archetai*) by the king of the city”. “And, – Oedipus asks further – who is this man who rules/masters by his word and might?” (*OC* 66-69). One understands that the *logos*, that is, in a democratic, Athenian, context, the power you have in an assembly, is not up to the masses, but to the king, and that in fact, the destiny of the masses is up to the king who is the ruler or master.

So when Plato says that virtue is *adespoton*, that is without master or ruler, he must be meant to be saying that virtue does not depend on pure chance, or any *daimôn*, but does depend on men only. And so it comes as no surprise that, when much later Plotinus quotes this expression (which is the only words he cites from the myth of Er in his treatise 39, *On the Voluntary and the Will of the One*), he takes *adespoton* to be a pure and simple synonym for the expression ‘up to us’: “In what sense are we going to say that being good is up to us (*eph’ hêmin*) and that virtue is without master?” (VI 8, 30-31). Thus, in emphatically saying that “it is not you that the *daimôn* will choose, but you will choose the *daimôn*”, and adding that virtue is without any master, it is difficult not to hear Plato clearly saying that virtue, that is the choice of virtue, is really up to you: it is you who are going to choose your fate, and it only depends on you whether your life will be virtuous or not.

Now – and this is my third remark –, if the whole tale is in some ways a rewriting of Homer’s *Nekuia*, one might also wonder what this crucial Lachesis’ ‘word’ might allude or refer to. Quite curiously, to my knowledge, this is a question no interpreters have ever posed. But, it seems to me, we should have every reason to see this word as a sort of reply against another conception, or another world view. Indeed, this word is expressed in the way of a contraposition, and strikingly so in the sentence I have just quoted: “It is not you that the *daimôn* will

choose, but you will choose the *daimôn*". If you look at Plato's work, you may note that this literally opposes one passage from the *Phaedo*, in a similar context, where Socrates says to Simmias that "according to the tradition, each *daimôn* of each dead person – a *daimôn* that has been allotted to her when she was living – is in charge of guiding her into [...] Hades" (107d). So in our *Rep.* passage, Plato is clearly opposing this Lachesis' word to a more traditional view. But what view exactly?

There is a quite evident world view Plato wants to oppose here, and which he has opposed all along in the *Republic*: this is the tragic world view that typically takes human happiness to be hopelessly beyond reach, and also subject to an external fate. Perhaps one of the most brilliant and famous texts comes from Pindar's eight *Pythian* which expresses the core of the tragic world view that we also find in *Homer* and the great tragedians:

But the delight of mortals grows in a short time, and then it falls to the ground, shaken by an adverse thought. Creatures of a day (*epameroi*). What is someone? What is no one? Man is the dream of a shadow. But when the brilliance given by Zeus comes, a shining light is on man, and a gentle lifetime. (92-98)

Here is the typical way of using the Homeric word, *ephêmeros* (or *epameros* in Pindar's Dorian Greek): human beings are just mortal beings who not only don't last long, but also get their happiness, or only some portion of sweet time, from the gods' willingness. As 'Creatures of a day', human beings are essentially frail and their happiness essentially depends on the gods. As Pindar has said, just a few lines earlier:

For if anyone has noble achievements without long toil, to many he seems to be a skillful man among the foolish, arming his life with the resources of right counsel. But these things do not depend on men (*ep' andrasin*). It is a god (*daimôn*) who grants them; raising up one man and throwing down another. (73-76)

I don't want to mean that Plato had exactly these passages in mind when he wrote this Lachesis' word, but one cannot but be struck by some obvious similarities. According to Pindar, even the 'noble achievements', that is virtues or virtuous actions in Plato's vocabulary, are not up to us, human beings; it is a *daimôn*, be this the general name for fate or god, who grants all this, that is allows us to live a happy, or morally good, life or not. It is difficult not to see Lachesis' word as a sort of anti-Pindaric, or more generally anti-tragic rallying cry: no, says Plato, contrary to what you are used to hearing in your previous life from the tragic poets of the Greek city you lived in, you mortal beings are in charge of choosing your *daimôn* and virtue is up to you, not up to an external and imposed *daimôn*. And therefore, contrary to so many passages in *Homer* or *Sophocles* where the heroes reject the cause of their own tragic deeds on fate or the gods, Plato so vividly says: "the responsibility is of the chooser; god is not responsible". And by this, we must suppose, don't we?, that god is not responsible for you not choosing to act virtuously, or for not choosing a virtuous *daimôn* that would allow you to commit virtuous actions.

Now before offering my suggestion as to how one may, or perhaps should, read Plato's myth of Er, let's first elaborate a little more on the libertarian reading that Proclus has suggested in his commentary on the *Republic*, and let's have a closer look at the *Timaeus* passage I alluded to.

Clearly in the line of his neoplatonic predecessors, like Porphyrius who is reported to have defended Plato against deterministic readings of this myth, Proclus offers a very passionate defence of what we would call a libertarian defence of responsibility. Let's quickly review some of his claims. After quoting the expression 'Virtue has no master', he immediately adds the proposition "It is therefore possible for us to participate more or less in virtue according to the degree we honour it", and he adds a little further: "And vice too is without master, for choice is between the contraries; and we say [Proclus adds to what Plato says here] that vice is without master in the sense that it is up to us" (*In Remp.* II 276.1-4 Kroll). In other words, we are responsible for our virtues and vices because we have the very choice between them: I do have the choice between being courageous or coward, or, more precisely acting courageously or cowardly which will make me a courageous or coward person. And this is what he emphasises again when commenting on the expression 'The chooser's responsibility – the god is not responsible.': "With this, he [= Plato] very clearly indicates that one should not accuse the god for the evils that happen but ourselves. For he has established ourselves master (*kurios*) over the bad and the good choices" (277. 9-12). Here again, Proclus is very clear and cut: We human beings have been established by the god with the very possibility of choosing between virtue or vice; thanks to the god, we are 'master' of our choices, – these are up to us, and therefore we are fully responsible for them. Virtue and vice are without master means for Proclus: virtue and vice are up to us, that is, we have the very possibility of choosing one way or the other, and therefore we are responsible for being virtuous, and therefore happy, or vicious, and thus, miserable. And it is this reading that, very naturally, serves as the background for Proclus' interpretation of the examples of the choices of lives that Er reports from Hades.

Let's focus on the first, and I think, paradigmatic case:

When the spokesman had told them that, Er said, the one who drew the first lot came up and immediately chose the greatest tyranny. In his foolishness and greed, you see, he chose it without adequately examining everything, and did not notice that it involved being fated to eat his own children among other evils. When he examined the life at leisure, however, he beat his breast and bemoaned his choice, ignoring the warning of the spokesman. For he did not blame himself for these evils, but chance, daimons, and everything except himself. He was one of those who had come down from heaven, having lived his previous life in an orderly constitution, sharing in virtue through habit but without philosophy. (*Rep.* X 619b-c; transl. Reeve)

Very naturally, given what he has just said about the previous passage, Proclus interprets this in a very strong way: the first chooser, Thyestes, is completely and totally responsible for his bad choice, even though he does not recognize this and accuses the fate and the god "instead of himself although the choice (*hairesis*) was

up to himself (*eph' autô(i)*)” (291. 23-24). In other words, Thyestes has no excuse whatsoever: he fully knew that his choice was to be irreversible, he just heard Lachesis’ spokeman to warn him that virtue was up to him, and that it would be stupid to accuse the god or the fortune for his own choice. Even though Proclus does not say so, we could perhaps even go so far as to add, as a libertarian would do, that Thyestes is fully responsible for his choice given the fact that he really could have chosen otherwise.

At first sight, such a reading just makes explicit what Plato seems to indicate in the strong word of Lachesis: Thyestes, as well as the rest of the people choosing their lives are fully responsible of their choice, since virtue was up to them, while the god is *anaitios*, not responsible for their choices. And yet, this is, I think, a very unlikely reading.

First of all, Plato very much emphasises that Thyestes ‘immediately’ chose this pattern of life without examining it. And he made his choice ‘in his foolishness and greed’. As Plato will explicitly say a little later, “a lot of souls made their choice according the habits of their previous lives”, and foolishness and greed are likely to be seen as part and parcel of these habits. One might be tempted to interpret this in a very weak way, and say: well, poor Thyestes made his choice because he was influenced by his habits, but this would not have prevented him to take some sort of critical distance from these, and reflect on how he would choose in this particular case. But this is hardly what Plato implies: he clearly wants to mean that on the very contrary Thyestes does not pause for a second, and that he literally rushed on this pattern of life without any reflection at all. What Plato wants to mean, I think, is that Thyestes simply couldn’t have made another choice than the one he eventually made; he was determined by his habits to make that bad choice. For him, and given his previous habits of foolishness and greed, virtue was simply not an available choice. Virtue was not really up to him. As McPherran rightly says, Thyestes’ choice is not an active choice, but simply an “automatic reaction”: he is determined by his foolishness and greed to choose the way he does.⁴

This may sound like a paradox given what Plato seems to have warned us against with the word of Lachesis. But in fact, this shouldn’t come as a surprise given what Plato repeatedly say in other dialogues, especially in the *Timaeus* which, it is worth remembering, is meant to be read just after the *Republic*. In the 86b-87b passage, Plato repeats once more the Socratic motto, ‘No one is voluntarily evil’, and very straightforwardly explains how one should understand this: vices, he there says are illnesses coming, or depending on some somatical dispositions. His example there is sexual intemperance, so a disposition quite close to greed. People though, Plato adds, wrongly think that such a bad man with such a disposition is not ill but willingly so: “The severe pleasures and pains drive him mad for the greater part of his life, and though his body has made his soul diseased and witless, people will think of him not as sick, but as wilfully evil.” And given

⁴ McPherran 2010: 136.

that being sick is not a willing state, it is wrong to reproach them for being so: “It is not right to reproach people for them [their vices], for no one is willingly evil.” And Plato goes further: “A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing.” In other words, since neither the constitution of your body is up to you nor is your first upbringing, there is no reason to blame you, that is, to make you responsible for your vices.

A little further, Plato gets back to the problem of upbringing, and his position is even stronger: “Further more, when men whose constitutions are bad in this way have bad forms of government where bad civic speeches are given both in public and in private and where, besides, no studies that could remedy this situation are at all pursued by people from their youth on up, that is how all of us who are bad come to be that way – the products of two causes both entirely beyond our control (*akousiôtata*).” Which allows the conclusion: “It is the begetters far more than the begotten, and the nurturers far more than the nurtured, that bear the blame for all this” (87b). So here clearly, nature, or natural constitution, and early education are on the very same level: if you can’t be held blamable, that is, responsible, for your nature, you can’t be so either for your early education which clearly did not depend on you.

Given the very strong words that Plato uses in describing the reaction of Thyestes, and given the very fact that Plato himself suggests that we must read the *Timaeus* just after the *Republic*, it seems that we must read this description in connection to what he says here when reinterpreting the Socratic motto: Thyestes can not be fully responsible for his bad choice. In his case, the choice of virtue was simply not an available option. Thus, Proclus’ ‘libertarian’ reading cannot be right.

Now one might be tempted to argue against this straightforward opposition with two arguments. Firstly, one could say that in fact, the *Timaeus* doesn’t entirely reject any and every responsibility. After the passage I lastly quoted: “It is the begetters far more than the begotten, and the nurturers far more than the nurtured, that bear the blame for all this”, Plato adds (and in Greek this is the same sentence): “and even so, one should make every possible effort to flee from badness, whether with the help of one’s upbringing, or the pursuits of studies one undertakes, and to choose its opposite, – but that is the subject of another speech” (87b). And indeed as Plato will forcefully argue for a little later, the god has given reason to each man, he says, adding that this higher part of our soul is to guide us like a *daimôn* in us (90a). So isn’t it the case that despite a bad upbringing and bad first educators, we still have the very possibility to improve ourselves by undertaking the right sort of education of our desires? And, as an additional argument, one can also add that this may be why Plato here and again in the *Timaeus* emphasizes that the god is *anaitios* for any *kakon* that may occur to human beings? For this is why the god has given us reason: by providing human beings with reason, the god leaves to human beings the charge of their responsibility so to speak. Or put it in other words, now that we human beings do have a faculty which should enable us to reflect before acting, we are responsible for our choices.

And yet, I don't think that despite the appearances, such a reading will do. For the problem with Thyestes is that, as Plato emphasizes, he comes from a well-governed city that does not practice philosophy, or the right education of reason. In the last quoted sentence of the *Timaeus*, Plato suggests that even in case one has not received a morally good education, one should try and improve oneself thanks to dedicating oneself to philosophy. But what if, as is the case with Thyestes, philosophy is simply not available?

Now, the reading of these two main passages from the myth of Er I would like to suggest is this. I am suggesting that we read the main difficulty of this text with these three remarks in mind. The main difficulty, I think, is the straightforward contradiction between Lachesis' word on the one hand, which emphasizes the fact that virtue is up to us, and the description Plato has Er give of the souls choosing their next life, where quite obviously they are simply not able to choose virtue.

As I mentioned, Plato clearly says that Thyestes 'immediately' chose this pattern of life without examining it because he had previously lived without philosophy, that is, he didn't learn how to examine things carefully before acting. As Plato will explicitly say a little later, "a lot of souls made their choice according the habits of their previous lives", which means, in our case, that Thyestes simply couldn't have made another choice than the one he made; he was determined by his habits to make that bad choice. For him, virtue was simply not an available choice. Virtue was not really up to him. I think this reading, and thus, the apparent paradox it creates in the text, is prepared by Plato himself when he has Socrates say, a little bit earlier, that only philosophy is apt to make a person "able, by considering the nature of the soul, to reason out which life is better and which worse and choose accordingly"(618d). And, Plato continues, it is only when "holding this belief with adamant determination" that, when arriving in Hades, "he won't be dazzled by wealth and other such evils, and won't rush into tyranny or other similar activity" (619e). Without philosophy, that is, and without that sort of adamant belief, one is simply not able to make the choice between good and bad lives; one is sheerly determined by his habits to grip tyranny or a similarly bad life. Thus, the only thing Thyestes is really able to do is to make a 'reactive' choice, indeed, which is hardly what we would call a choice at all.

So again, how to solve this apparent discrepancy between Lachesis' word, urging the souls in front of her to make their choice, and this description of many or most souls being unable to make a real choice? I would like to suggest that this is perhaps exactly what Plato wants us readers to get puzzled about. I said (that was my third remark) that Lachesis' word is to be taken in opposition to Pindar, and more generally to a tragic way of seeing fate as being our *eudaimonia* dispenser. But to be more precise, what Plato is actually doing is drawing a picture of just that sort of world. As Plato repeatedly says in using words like the noun *thea* or the verb *horan*, Er's report is first of all the report of a spectacle he has attended, and the way Socrates narrates it makes Glaucon (and also, us readers) attend this spec-