

Reviewed by:

Susanne Bobzien
Yale University

Michael Frede. *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, edited by A. A. Long with a foreword by David Sedley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. pp. xiv, 206.

This magnificent book presents the partially revised version of Michael Frede's 1997-8 Sather Lectures. Frede died tragically in 2007 before having completed his revisions, whose intended scope will remain unknown. In between, Frede authored three papers on aspects of free-will in antiquity upon which the book barely touches. The book itself is written in Frede's own inimitable style, making complex philosophical and historical ideas widely accessible by presenting them in deceptively simple language. As was Frede's habit later in life, no secondary literature is cited; no footnotes are added; and often no references are given for the ancient texts he draws on. Rather, the reader is presented with a theory resulting from years of research, told almost in the manner of a story; a story that features famous figures like Aristotle and Augustine, as well as numerous rarely read writers.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the main questions the book pursues: when and how the notions of a will and a free will originated; what sort of notions they were. Chapter 2 explains why Aristotle's conception of choice presupposed no notion of a will. Chapter 3 finds the beginnings of the notion of a will in early Stoic psychology; and its full manifestation in Epictetus' description of the will as an ability of the mind to make choices. Chapter 4 explicates how Plato's and Aristotle's admittance of irrational elements in the soul were the reason why later Peripatetics and Platonists modified Epictetus' notion of the will. Chapter 5 places the emergence of a notion of *free-will* in the first century CE, with Epictetus' shift of emphasis from assent to choice and his joining of the Greek notion of freedom (*eleutheria*) with that of a will (*prohairesis*): A person's will is free when her choices are rational and wise and no external circumstances can thwart them. Chapter 6 considers Platonist and Peripatetic responses to the Stoic theory of free-will and its compatibility with divine providence and causal determinism. The main focus is on Carneades and Alexander of Aphrodisias. Alexander is singled out as the only ancient philosopher who proposed an indeterminist notion of free-will, as the ability to choose to act or not to act, given identical circumstances. Chapter 7 traces early Christian notions of a will, with emphasis on Origen, whose view Frede argues to be at base Epictetan, and, where it differs from the Stoics, to rely on Platonist elements. Chapter 8 contends that Plotinus' theories of god and free-will were not based on Judaeo-Christian thought, but rather strongly impacted by Stoic philosophy, with some Platonist elements. Chapter 9 argues that Augustine's notion of

free-will is based on later Stoic theory to an even greater degree than those of Origen and the early apologists.

Much of chapters 2 to 6 is in agreement with publications from the last twenty years; so e.g. Frede's points that neither Aristotle nor the Stoics had a notion of free-will; that in Epictetus (for the first time) the notions of freedom and will were combined; that an indeterminist notion of free-will occurs first in Alexander. The achievement of these chapters lies in the way Frede carefully joins them together and uses them as a basis for some substantive criticism and rewriting of the history of free-will regarding late antique Pagan and Christian authors, in particular Plotinus, Origen and Augustine.

Frede emphasizes that he considers his enterprise as purely historical. As such, his target is twofold. He proposes a thorough revision of the prevalent idea of free-will among theologians and historians, championed by Albrecht Dihle in his 1974 Sather Lectures, as capturing a common non-philosophical concept and originating with Augustine, impacted by Judaeo-Christian thought – which also influenced Plotinus. Frede replaces this theory with one in which the notions of free-will in early Christians, Plotinus and Augustine are largely variations of Epictetus' notion of free-will, with Platonist adjustments as needed. Second, Frede argues that Dihle's favored account of free-will, as unpre-determined sheer acts of volition, is central neither to Augustine nor to any ancient writer besides Alexander. Frede's own declaration notwithstanding, he also offers some incisive philosophical analysis of the notion of free-will: he argues emphatically that no coherent account can be given of Dihle's conception of free-will, or of its ancient cousin, Alexander's indeterminist notion of free-will.

The volume has been admirably edited by Tony Long. In a preface, he details his editorial contributions. His occasional "smoothing" of the language does not prevent those who knew Michael Frede from hearing him speak while they read. Long's most important addition are seventeen pages of footnotes that help the reader find passages to some of Frede's references, provide some of the secondary literature on which Frede relies, and furnish explanatory detail at the few occasions where the text appears inscrutable.

With its focus on the influences on ancient Christian theories, Frede's book will be of special interest to historians of theology. This said, *anyone* interested in the conceptual history of free-will will find this book most rewarding. It is enlightening and thought-provoking. It is informed by extraordinary learnedness stretching from Plato to Plotinus in philosophy, in Christian theology from its beginnings, via Origen to Augustine and beyond. The learnedness is matched by the author's philosophical acuity and judgment, and, besides, the book is eminently readable.