

ON SOME RHETORICAL-PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES IN EPICETUS' DISCOURSES CONCERNING PROAIRESIS

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to clarify some features of Epictetus' specific usage of the concept of proairesis throughout his Discourses. This will be done by suggesting that a number of problematic expressions concerning proairesis and its freedom should be understood as rhetorical-pedagogical expressions of Epictetus' intellectualism. I will mainly focus on a series of problematic passages that have been discussed by several commentators concerning the concept of proairesis, and I will suggest that those passages are best interpreted as rhetorical or, better, pedagogical expressions of Epictetus' strictly intellectualist approach to the psychology of action. The interpretation I will propose does away with the need to resort to certain interpretations of those passages that threaten to obscure the otherwise clear picture of human action offered by Epictetus' intellectualism concerning the psychology of action.

KEYWORDS

Epictetus, proairesis, freedom, intellectualism, rhetoric.

RESUMEN

El artículo tiene por objetivo clarificar algunos aspectos del uso específico que realiza Epicteto a lo largo de las *Dissertationes* del concepto de proairesis. Esto se realizará sugiriendo que ciertas expresiones problemáticas referidas a la proairesis y su libertad deben ser entendidas como expresiones retórico-pedagógicas del intelectualismo de Epicteto. Me concentraré fundamentalmente en una serie de pasajes problemáticos que han sido discutidos por varios comentaristas en relación con el concepto de proairesis, y sugeriré que esos pasajes deben ser interpretados como expresiones retóricas o, mejor, pedagógicas de enfoque estrictamente intelectualista de la psicología humana que propone Epicteto. La interpretación que propondré hace innecesario el recurso a ciertas interpretaciones de esos pasajes que amenazan con oscurecer el panorama claro de la acción humana ofrecido por la concepción intelectualista de la psicología humana defendida por Epicteto.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Epicteto, proairesis, libertad, intelectualismo, retórica.

ON SOME RHETORICAL-PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES IN EPICETETUS' DISCOURSES CONCERNING PROAIRESIS

1.

The concept of *proairesis* in Epictetus has been in the center of attention of many of his commentators for the last three decades, and for very good reasons: in the first place, it functions as the central axis around which the whole of his psychology and his ethical reflections revolve; in the second place, certain ambiguities and relative imprecision concerning the concept of *proairesis* sometimes seem to hinder a coherent reconstruction of his psychology of action, which makes the endeavor of reaching and accurate definition of the term clearly worthwhile; lastly, the overall picture that we may construe of Epictetus' philosophy will vary perceptibly depending on the particular reading we adopt of the concept of *proairesis*¹.

Fortunately, we have come a long way in the understanding of Epictetus' psychology of action since, vg. the 19th century translations of *proairesis* as "free will", and a clearer and more accurate picture of Epictetus' psychology of action has emerged from a series of studies that have been published in the last two decades dealing (directly or indirectly) with the concept of *proairesis*. Although I doubt whether a single, unified definition of the term will ever be completely accurate, given the complexity of its semantic reference, I think that those studies have progressively put us in a better position to grasp the full dimensions of the term.

In what follows, I will focus on a series of problematic passages that have been discussed by several commentators concerning

¹ The problematic character of the concept of *proairesis* can be easily perceived by considering the numerous translations it has been given since the first Renaissance editions of the *Enchiridion*. A partial list of modern translations of the term can be found in Seddon (2005, p. 209).

the notion of *proairesis*, and I will suggest that those passages are best interpreted as rhetorical or, better, pedagogical expressions of Epictetus' intellectualist approach to the psychology of action. This will, I hope, bring to light the richness not only of Epictetus' intellectualism but also of some of the rhetorical-pedagogical strategies he puts into play throughout the *Discourses*.

2.

Epictetus' position on the value of Rhetoric, considered mainly as the question of style in writing and speaking (or lecturing), can be clearly grasped from the *Discourses*:

This faculty of speech and of the adornment of language, if it really is a separate faculty, what else does it do, when discourse arises about some topic, but ornament and compose the words, as hairdressers do the hair? But whether it is better to speak than to keep silence, and to do so in this way, or in that, and whether this is appropriate or not appropriate, and the proper occasion and utility of each action what else tells us all this but the faculty of *proairesis*? [...] When I say this, let no one suppose that I am bidding you neglect speech, any more than I bid you neglect eyes, or ears, or hands, or feet, or dress, or shoes. But if you ask me “What, then, is the highest of all things?”, what shall I say? The faculty of eloquence? I cannot; but rather that of *proairesis*, when it becomes a right *proairesis*. For it is this which uses not only that faculty of eloquence but also all the other faculties both small and great². (2. 23. 14-28)³

² ἡ δὲ φραστικὴ αὐτὴ καὶ καλλωπιστικὴ τῶν ὀνομάτων, εἴ τις ἄρα ἰδία δύναμις, τί ἄλλο ποιεῖ ἢ, ὅταν ἐμπέσῃ λόγος περὶ τίνος, καλλωπίζει τὰ ὀνομάτια καὶ συντίθησιν ὡσπερ οἱ κομμωταὶ τὴν κόμην; πότερον δ' εἰπεῖν ἄμεινον ἢ σιωπῆσαι καὶ οὕτως ἄμεινον ἢ ἐκείνος καὶ τοῦτο πρέπον ἢ οὐ πρέπον, καὶ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκάστου καὶ τὴν χρεῖαν τίς ἄλλη λέγει ἢ ἡ προαιρετικὴ. [...] ὅταν οὖν ταῦτα λέγω, μὴ τις οἰέσθω ὅτι ἀμελεῖν ὑμᾶς ἀξιῶ φράσεως· οὐδὲ γὰρ ὀφθαλμῶν οὐδ' ὠτῶν οὐδὲ χειρῶν οὐδὲ ποδῶν οὐδ' ἐσθῆτος οὐδ' ὑποδημάτων. ἀλλ' ἂν μου πυνθάνῃ ‘τί οὖν ἐστὶ κράτιστον τῶν ὄντων;’, τί εἶπω; τὴν φραστικὴν; οὐ δύναμαι· ἀλλὰ τὴν προαιρετικὴν, ὅταν ὀρθῇ γένηται. τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ κάκεινῃ χρώμενον καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις πάσαις καὶ μικραῖς καὶ μεγάλαις δυνάμεσιν·

³ I follow Oldfather's (1961) translation with minor modifications.

This is certainly not an attitude of theoretical contempt, but neither is it an encouragement to engage in rhetorical studies. Given that Epictetus reduces Rhetoric to the question of adornment of speech, its value can only be secondary⁴, and as such, it should not take up the little time we have in life (which should be devoted, first and foremost, to our moral/epistemic progress). Yet, one of the salient features of the *Discourses* is precisely the wide array of rhetorical devices that Epictetus puts into play in each of his interactions with either real individuals or fictitious characters. This is evidence enough that the question of style was by no means a secondary one to him. Given that his primary objective consists in *moving* (*kineō*) the audience in order to make them realize by themselves the correct path to freedom and virtue, and given that this can only be done through speech, the mastery of the different ways in which his listeners can be moved to assent to certain impressions is a task that is far from indifferent from the point of view of the effectiveness of Epictetus' pedagogical *praxis*. He is well aware that, when it comes to the issue of persuasion, his own speech must be able to adapt itself to the disposition of his listeners (cfr. 2. 12), which implies testing different variations in the form of addressing one and the same issue, resorting to rhetorical devices and even playing different parts in the interaction with his students. This need to resort to different persuasive strategies does not imply any contradiction with the passage quoted above: the secondary value assigned there to Rhetoric concerns the question of mere eloquence (the ornamentation of speech for aesthetic purposes, the selection of a certain already publicly acknowledged style of declamation, etc.). Epictetus' actual usage of rhetorical devices has nothing to do with eloquence or style,

⁴ One might even wonder if this is not merely a concession to his students. However, this is a frequent strategy in the *Discourses*: although X (be it the faculty of speech, certain external things, or our body) is indifferent to our virtue and happiness, it does have value (although a secondary one), and should not, therefore, be neglected (cfr. 1. 2. 37; 4. 11).

but with the overall pedagogical aim of his philosophy⁵. Taking into consideration this specific dimension, I suggest, can shed light on a series of Epictetus' problematic expressions concerning the notion of *proairesis*.

3.

Much more than is the case with Aristotle, Epictetus' concept of *proairesis* presents the reader with numerous interpretative difficulties. The most simple and pressing question springs inevitably after reading the *Discourses*: what is *proairesis*, and how does it relate to the other concepts involved in Epictetus' psychology of action? The difficulties one faces when trying to give a precise answer to this question can be briefly stated as follows: *i) proairesis* often seems to be directly or indirectly equivalent to the *hēgemonikon*; *ii) proairesis* appears to designate alternatively a single *act* of the soul and/or one of its *faculties*; *iii) proairesis* sometimes seems to be directly or indirectly equivalent to our opinions or beliefs (*doxa/dogmata*)⁶; *iv) proairesis* sometimes seems to be unconditionally free and sometimes not.

Although the last issue will be dealt with later, a few observations are in place concerning the first three difficulties. As regards (*i*), Anthony Long has offered a persuasive solution to the relationship between the *hēgemonikon* and *proairesis*:

Although they overlap in their referent, so far as human beings are concerned, *hēgemonikon* does not *mean* rationality; it is a

⁵ The relevance for Epictetus of this task becomes evident in I. 4. 26-7, where he admits that if deception were the only way to persuade him of the truth of the distinction between what depends on us and what doesn't, he would be willing to be deceived: "If indeed one had to be deceived into learning that among things external and independent of our *proairesis* none concerns us, I, for my part, should consent to a deception which would result in my living thereafter serenely and without turmoil".

⁶ "It is your opinion which compelled you, that is, *proairesis* compelled *proairesis* (οὗν τὸ σὸν δόγμα σε ἠνάγκασεν, τοῦτ' ἔστι προαίρεσιν προαίρεσις)" (I. 17. 25).

term that applies to the souls of animals who lack rationality as well as to human beings. [...] Rather than opting for synonymy, we should take *proairesis* to refer to the human mind in just those capacities or dispositions that Epictetus constantly maintains to be completely “up to us” and free from external constraint. [...] Epictetus chose the term *proairesis* to pick out the human mind in this more restricted aspect: “us”, so to say, in just those respects that are dependent on nothing that we cannot immediately judge, decide, and will, entirely by and for ourselves. (Long, 2002, pp. 212-213)

Considering the second difficulty, it must be admitted that our demand for clarification might be taken to be anachronistic, since in the Roman period there is evidence close to Epictetus that the need to distinguish between a single act of the soul and the capacity of the soul which is put into action was not considered mandatory, as can be seen in Seneca's or in Lucretius' use of *voluntas*. Although I believe that Gourinat (2005) has succeeded in distinguishing both senses in some key passages, I believe that some more clarification on this distinction (which is beyond my present objective) is still pending. What is clear, in any case, is that neither in the *Discourses* nor in the *Enchiridion* does *proairesis* designate *at the same time* a faculty and its actions, but rather that Epictetus uses the same term to designate now one, now the other (without specifying, regrettably, which one he is referring to).

Contrary to the relationship of *proairesis* and *hēgemonikon*, the relationship between *proairesis* and *doxa/dogmata* (iii), is not one of subsumption of one concept under the other, but rather a bi-directional relation: on the one hand, every opinion we hold (i.e., every act of assent to a certain impression) gives shape to the epistemic state of our *proairesis*; on the other, as has been frequently noticed, every act of assent is determined by the present epistemic state of our *proairesis*. In other words: while the workings of *proairesis* are a direct and inevitable *result* of the (set of) opinions we hold (or have held in the past), it is the epistemic quality of our *proairesis* (i.e., whether it is perverted, contrary to nature, etc.,

or not) which determines which opinions we will hold in the future. This explains, I believe, why Epictetus is at times relatively imprecise in establishing the relationship between both elements. What concerns me for the moment, however, is Epictetus' frequent indirect *identification* between both elements (our *proairesis* and our judgments), which I believe is aimed at emphasizing the epistemic element present in every single act of *proairesis*. As we shall see, Epictetus' endorsement of the intellectualist position inherited from the early Stoics is radical: opinions are not only a *necessary* cause for our actions; they are their only possible *sufficient* cause. Whether the rationality that these opinions constitute is perverted or not is not relevant to this point: even the most ignorant and uncultivated of individuals acts on the basis of rational considerations, which determine his actions in a necessary manner; if the individual's rational capacities are completely distorted, his actions will display that same defective quality, but they will, nevertheless, be the result of a rational process.

4.

Although the previous difficulties concerning the precise definition of *proairesis* (*i-iii*) can be explained as I have indicated, a few passages from the *Discourses* confront us with additional difficulties that have not been dealt with so far:

T1 What can overcome an impulse but another impulse? And what can overcome one desire or aversion but another desire or aversion? –But, says someone, if a person subjects me to the fear of death, he compels me (*anankazei me*). – No, it is not what you are subjected to that compels you, but the fact that you think it is better for you to do something of the sort than to die. Once more, then, it is your judgment (*dogma*) which compelled you, that is, *proairesis* compelled *proairesis*⁷. (1. 17. 24–27)

⁷ καὶ τίς ὁρμὴν νικῆσαι δύναται ἢ ἄλλη ὁρμὴ; τίς δ' ὄρεξιν καὶ ἐκκλισιν ἢ ἄλλη

T2 Nothing outside the sphere of *proairesis* can hamper or injure the *proairesis*; it alone can hamper or injure itself (*he blapsai aproaireton ei mē autē heautēn*)⁸. (3. 19. 2)

T3 What is by its very nature capable of hindering *proairesis*? Nothing that lies outside its sphere, but only itself when perverted (*autē d' heautēn diastrapheira*). For this reason *proairesis* becomes the only vice, or the only virtue⁹. (2.23.19)

All these passages seem to convey, when they are read *à la lettre*, the idea of a dialog or interaction between our *proairesis* and *itself* or between our *proairesis* and *our self*. In a recent article, Richard Sorabji (2007) has sought to solve this difficulty by arguing that these passages suggest that there is *more than one proairesis* (as there is also more than one *self*), one of them being correct and unperverted, and the other one perverted or impure¹⁰. Although I believe that this is a reasonable explanation (especially of T3), I believe that another approach is possible, which does not require that we relate the textual duplication of *proairesis* to their moral or epistemic quality, but rather to the pedagogical aim that that duplication is intended to fulfill. That this is so can be clearly seen by considering an additional passage that Sorabji has not considered:

ὄρεξις καὶ ἐκκλισις; ἄν μοι, φησί, προσάγη θανάτου φόβον, ἀναγκάζει με. ὄυ τὸ προσαγόμενον, ἀλλ' ὅτι δοκεῖ σοι κρεῖττον εἶναι ποιῆσαι τι τούτων ἢ ἀποθανεῖν. πάλιν οὖν τὸ σὸν δόγμα σε ἠνάγκασεν, τοῦτ' ἔστι προαίρεσιν προαίρεσις.

⁸ προαίρεσιν γὰρ οὐδὲν δύναται κωλύσαι ἢ βλάψαι ἀπροαίρετον εἰ μὴ αὐτὴ ἑαυτήν.

⁹ προαίρεσιν δὲ τί ἐμποδίζειν πέφυκεν; ἀπροαίρετον οὐδέν, αὐτὴ δ' ἑαυτὴν διαστραφεῖσα. διὰ τοῦτο κακία μόνη αὐτὴ γίνεται ἢ ἀρετὴ μόνη.

¹⁰ Sorabji partly bases this conclusion in the fact that T3 seems to complement T2.

T4 –I wish to control your judgments (*dogmaton*) also–. And who has given you this authority? How can you have the power to overcome another’s judgments? –By bringing fear to bear upon him–. You fail to realize that the judgment overcame itself, it was not overcome by something else; and nothing can overcome *proairesis*, but it overcomes itself (*autē heautēn*)¹¹. (1. 29. 12)

The argument that lies beneath this imaginary conversation seems to have two complementary aspects: in the first place, it establishes that nothing external can change the direction of our decisions. However, the idea that Epictetus means to stress is that whatever decision we make is determined by our holding a certain *belief* (or judgment or opinion) as to the appropriateness of that course of action. These two complementary ideas are jointly expressed through a frequent pattern throughout the *Discourses*: only *X* can impede, hinder or overcome *X*, where *X* stands alternatively for *opinion*, *proairesis*, *desire*, or *impulse*¹². I consider this to be a fundamentally rhetorical pattern: an impulse cannot overcome an impulse, *proairesis* cannot overcome *proairesis*, and so on, except if we consider them as the projections of our judgments (or beliefs or opinions)¹³. In other words, it is only judgments which can conquer or defeat other judgments, and that is the only possible source of conflict in the soul. This is due to the fact that, according to Epictetus’ intellectualist approach to the psychology of human action, for there to be an impulse to act, two events must necessarily take place within the mind: an impression has to appear to the mind stating that *X* is true or appropriate (in the case of hormetic impressions), and the individual must give assent to that

¹¹ ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν δογμάτων ἄρχειν θέλω. καὶ τίς σοι ταύτην τὴν ἐξουσίαν δέδωκεν; ποῦ δύνασαι νικῆσαι δόγμα ἀλλότριον; ‘προσάγων’, φησίν, ‘αὐτῷ φόβον νικήσω.’ ἀγνοεῖς ὅτι αὐτὸ αὐτὸ ἐνίκησεν, οὐχ ὑπ’ ἄλλου ἐνικήθη; προαίρεσιν δὲ οὐδὲν ἄλλο νικῆσαι δύναται, πλὴν αὐτὴ ἑαυτήν.

¹² Cfr., besides T1-T4, 1. 19. 7, 1. 25. 28, 4. 12. 12.

¹³ This is reinforced by Epictetus’ frequent identification of *proairesis* and *doxa*/dogmata, which I have already referred to.

impression (i.e., he must consider it as true, as stating a true state of affairs). No human action can possibly take place without the occurrence of those two mental events. In other words: no action can ensue unless we assent to the idea that it is an appropriate course of action.

This being so, how do we account for the problematic expressions we find in T1-T4? I believe that the recurrent pattern “only X can hinder (or impede or overcome) X” aims at pointing out, resorting to the language of war and of contests (cfr. *inter alia*, T5; 1. 1. 23-4; 1. 25. 28; 4. 4. 30; 4. 5. 26; 4. 7. 30; *Ench.* 19), that the soul is an arena where the only contestant is oneself. Neither the Caesar nor the whole Senate nor any of our closest fellows can possibly enter the battle, and only *we* will be held responsible for our failures¹⁴ and praised for our victories (4. 12. 7; 4. 13. 8). From the perspective of persuasion, this has a clear advantage: given that we are not fighting against others, since we (our judgments) are the only causes of our having strayed away from virtue and happiness, this is a battle that can be definitely won: all we need to do is to cast out the tyrants, i.e., to merely *realize* that nothing external to our *proairesis* can have power over us. In the broader context of Epictetus' pedagogical strategies, the two corollaries of this idea (“it is within you that *both destruction and deliverance* lie”; 4. 9. 17) give expression to the tension, brilliantly analyzed by Kamtekar, between two opposing but complementary strategies displayed by Epictetus: on the one hand, his reminder of “our god-like potential”; on the other, the recognition of our ignorance, of “our nearly worthless state” (Kamtekar, 1998, p. 154). Epictetus needs to point out to his students that they and they alone are the causes of their present miseries, but he also needs to make them aware of the fact that their wretched state is something that can be surmounted, and this he does by stressing that victory (which means, in this case, virtue and absence from perturbations) is

¹⁴ “No one comes to his fall because of another's deed” (1. 28. 33).

at hand. To be sure this is no different from saying (along with early Stoics) that the origin of every action lies in the movement of the soul through which it assents to the *lekton* (or *lekta*) that accompanies every *phantasia*, but the chances of persuading one of Epictetus' young students or an occasional passer-by through technical expressions are, compared to the rhetoric of war and contests, evidently low; too low to take the risk, considering that what is at stake is the possibility of moral progress.

5.

Two other passages from the *Discourses* which have been considered by Sorabji under the light of the distinction between perverted and unperverted *proairesis*, can be approached instead from the perspective of their persuasive function:

T5 If you are going to honor anything at all outside the sphere of the *proairesis*, you have destroyed/ruined (*apōlesas*) your *proairesis*¹⁵. (4. 4. 23)

T6 Only consider at what price you sell your *proairesis*. If you must sell it, man, at least do not sell it cheap¹⁶. (1 .2. 33)

It is obvious that *proairesis* is not something that can be sold or destroyed in a literal sense. What, then, does Epictetus have in mind? The most logical way to understand both passages is evident: whenever we honor something external, we are jeopardizing the natural freedom of *proairesis*; we are risking becoming *enslaved* by such externals. The second passage seems to imply,

¹⁵ πᾶν ὃ ἔξω τῆς προαιρέσεως τῆς σαυτοῦ τιμήσεις, ἀπόλεσας τὴν προαίρεσιν. Cf. also 1. 25. 3-6, where Epictetus repeats the structure substituting “proairesis” with “what is yours” (sautou).

¹⁶ Μόνον σκέψαι, πόσου πωλεῖς τὴν σεαυτοῦ προαίρεσιν. ἄνθρωπε, εἰ μὴδὲν ἄλλο, μὴ ὀλίγου αὐτὴν πωλήσης.

more importantly, that it is possible to sacrifice *knowingly and voluntarily* the natural freedom of our *proairesis* (in exchange for some other benefits, such as wealth, reputation, etc.). Whether this makes sense within the theoretical framework of Epictetus' psychology is what I will try to analyze.

That an agent can surrender the freedom of his decisions to the fluctuations of fortune (through surrendering to a beautiful woman, a young man, the Caesar, or the desire for honors and reputation) is well attested throughout the whole of Epictetus' discourses and has traditionally been considered one of the central motives in his teaching (cfr., besides T5 and T6, 4. 1. 56-57, 4. 4. 33-34). That is precisely what Long takes T2 to be stating (Long, 2002, 217). However, there is a decisive issue which has not been paid much attention concerning the relationship between two fundamental principles found in the *Discourses*: the first of them is Epictetus' insistence on *the natural freedom of proairesis*; the second is the principle we have just stated, i.e., that an agent can (knowingly or unknowingly) surrender the control he has over his decisions. This takes us back to the last problem (*iv*) that I initially marked as one of the difficulties one faces when trying to make sense of Epictetus' notion of *proairesis*: either *proairesis* is unconditionally free (in which case we cannot possibly surrender its control) or, on the contrary, its freedom *can* be sacrificed, sold, destroyed, etc. (in which case freedom is not an indelible feature of *proairesis* but rather a state, a disposition or quality that can be lost¹⁷). Both principles cannot be held together without contradiction. And yet, Epictetus certainly seems to do so. Alongside the frequent statements concerning the unconditional freedom of *proairesis*,

¹⁷ The core of this problem is also instantiated in the conflict that results between Epictetus' conception of freedom as a factum of *proairesis* (a gift from Zeus, etc.), and his conception of freedom as liberation, that is, as a process of rational purification of the soul through which the individual will hopefully attain eudaimonia, ataraxia, etc.

we find numerous expressions that suggest that that condition can in fact be lost:

T7 Who is your master? He who has authority over any of the things upon which you set your heart or which you wish to avoid¹⁸. (2. 2. 26)

T8 You ought to give up everything, your body, your property, your reputation, your books, turmoil, office, freedom from office. For if once you swerve aside from this course, you are a slave, you are a subject, you have become liable to hindrance and to compulsion, you are entirely under the control of others¹⁹. (4. 4. 33-4; cfr. also 1. 15. 18; 4. 1. 60)

Although both alternatives find support in the *Discourses*, I believe that the scale can be tipped to one side by appealing, once again, to the intellectualist basis of Epictetus' psychology of action: if it is true that the *only* possible source of action is an opinion, a belief, or the assent we give to an impression, the second alternative must be discarded. If we accepted, on the contrary, that certain individuals have surrendered control of their decisions, we would be forced to conclude that our actions can, in fact, be determined by external factors. But, as has already been stressed, external objects cannot possibly determine our actions. When we consider something external to be good or bad, it is precisely our consideration of them as such that determines our actions, not the goodness or badness inherent in the external thing itself:

T9 –We ought not to look for the reason anywhere outside of ourselves, but that in all cases it is one and the same thing that is

¹⁸ τίς δ' ἐστὶ κύριος; ὁ τῶν ὑπὸ σοῦ τινος σπουδαζομένων ἢ ἐκκλινομένων ἔχων ἐξουσίαν.

¹⁹ ἀφεῖναι σε δεῖ πάντα, τὸ σῶμα, τὴν κτῆσιν, τὴν φήμην, τὰ βιβλία, θόρυβον, ἀρχάς, ἀναρχίαν; ὅπου γὰρ ἂν κλίνῃς, ἐδοῦλευσας, ὑπετάγῃς, κωλυτὸς ἐγένου, ἀναγκαστὸς, ὄλος ἐπ' ἄλλοις.

the cause of our doing a thing or of our not doing it, of our saying things, or of our not saying them, of our being elated, or of our being cast down, of our avoiding things, or of our pursuing them the very thing, indeed, which has even now become a cause of my action and of yours; yours in coming to me and sitting here now listening, mine in saying these things. –And what is that?– Is it, indeed, anything else than that it seemed to us convenient to do this (*edoken hemin*)? –Nothing–. And supposing that it had seemed to us convenient to do something else (*allōs hemin ephanē*), what else would we be doing than that which we seemed convenient (*to doxan eprattomen*)? [...] It is neither death, nor exile, nor toil, nor any such thing that is the cause of our doing, or of our not doing, anything, but only our suppositions and opinions (*hypolēpseis kai dogmata*). [...] Very well, then, whenever we do anything wrongly, from this day forth we shall ascribe to this action no other cause (*aitiasometha*) than the opinions (*to dogma*) which led us to do it [...] And in the same way we shall declare the same thing to be the cause of our good actions. And we shall no longer blame either slave, or neighbor, or wife, or children, as being the causes of any evils to us, since we are persuaded that, unless we believe that things are thus-and-so, we do not perform the corresponding actions²⁰. (1. 11. 28-37)

We cannot, therefore, voluntarily abrogate our autonomy; we cannot even surrender it *involuntarily*. We are always, necessarily,

²⁰ οὐκ ἔξω που δεῖ ζητεῖν αὐτό, ἀλλ' ἐν καὶ ταῦτόν ἐστιν ἐπὶ πάντων τὸ αἴτιον τοῦ ποιεῖν τι ἡμᾶς ἢ μὴ ποιεῖν, τοῦ λέγειν τινὰ ἢ μὴ λέγειν, τοῦ ἐπαί ρεσθαὶ ἢ συστελλεσθαὶ ἢ φεῦγειν τινὰ ἢ διώκειν, τοῦθ' ὅπερ καὶ νῦν ἐμοὶ τε καὶ σοὶ γέγονεν αἴτιον, σοὶ μὲν τοῦ ἐλθεῖν πρὸς ἐμέ καὶ καθῆσθαι νῦν ἀκούοντα, ἐμοὶ δὲ τοῦ λέγειν ταῦτα. τί δ' ἐστὶ τοῦτο; ἄρα γε ἄλλο ἢ ὅτι ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν; { – } Οὐδέν. { – } Εἰ δ' ἄλλως ἡμῖν ἐφάνη, τί ἂν ἄλλο ἢ τὸ δόξαν ἐπράττομεν. [...] καὶ ἀπλῶς οὔτε θάνατος οὔτε φυγὴ οὔτε πόνος οὔτε ἄλλο τι τῶν τοιοῦτων αἰτιῶν ἐστὶ τοῦ πράττειν τι ἢ μὴ πράττειν ἡμᾶς, ἀλλ' ὑπολήψεις καὶ δόγματα. [...] οὐκοῦν ὅταν μὴ ὀρθῶς τι πράττομεν, ἀπὸ ταύτης τῆς ἡμέρας οὐδὲν ἄλλο αἰτιασόμεθα ἢ τὸ δόγμα, ἀφ' οὗ αὐτὸ ἐπράξαμεν. [...] ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τῶν ὀρθῶς πραττομένων ταῦτόν τοῦτο αἴτιον ἀποφανοῦμεν. καὶ οὐτ' οἰκέτην ἔτι αἰτιασόμεθα οὔτε γείτονα οὔτε γυναικα οὔτε τέκνα ὡς αἰτία τινων κακῶν ἡμῖν γινόμενα πεπεισμένοι ὅτι, ἂν μὴ ἡμῖν δόξη τοιαῦτά τινα εἶναι, οὐ πράττομεν τὰ ἀκόλουθα:

autonomous; we are always our own masters and we are, to put it in Sartrean terms, determined to be free²¹.

But if this is so, how do we account for Epictetus' emphasis on the surrendering of *proairesis*? I believe that Epictetus aims to emphasize that, although every action is the result of a certain judgment, there is one particular judgment that has decisive effects on our way of life, on our relationship with what lies outside the sphere of our *proairesis*, and it is the judgment that external things have an either positive or negative value. This is *the* judgment, so to speak; it is the Capitol. Although we cannot surrender our capacity to make a rational use of impressions, once we have assented to the idea that external things are good or bad in themselves, we plunge into a mechanism of illusion that redefines from within itself the whole of our ethical priorities. The act of assigning value to what lies outside the realm of *proairesis* (which is itself an act of our *proairesis*, i.e., a singular –conscious or unconscious– decision) becomes the primary principle (*dogma*) on which the whole of our future decisions will be taken. Although the Caesar's commands cannot possibly *cause* my actions (or passions), once I have agreed to consider wealth and honor as something to be sought, I will be forced to bow my head before him and obey his orders.

Moreover, the mechanism we put in motion whenever we consider external things are inherently good or evil is completely hermetic and cannot possibly overlap with the alternative path which is the proper care of our *proairesis*, since each of these alternatives represent no single, isolated actions and decisions, but

²¹ "It is my nature to look out for my own interest. If it is my interest to have a farm, it is my interest to take it away from my neighbor; if it is my interest to have a cloak, it is my interest also to steal it from a bath. This is the source of wars, seditions, tyrannies, plots" (1. 22. 13-14). "This is the nature of every being, to pursue the good and to flee from the evil; and to consider the man who robs us of the one and invests us with the other as an enemy and an aggressor, even though he be a brother, even though he be a son, even though he be a father; for nothing is closer kin to us than our good. It follows, then, that if these externals are good or evil, neither is a father dear to his sons, nor a brother dear to a brother, but everything on all sides is full of enemies, aggressors, slanderers" (4. 5. 30).

rather two fully divergent ways of life (4. 10. 25). If we start off from the consideration of external things as convenient or inconvenient, we will be forced to travel a path which leads us away from the objective of keeping our *proairesis* in accordance with nature.

The actual meaning and relevance of Epictetus expressions on *selling* or *destroying* our *proairesis* can only be grasped, then, I suggest, if we interpret them in terms of the powerful warning that it is not a particular decision that is at stake, but rather the moral quality of the whole of our subsequent actions, and thus, the very possibility of achieving happiness. Once again, the simple statement in technical terms of the intellectualist principle could hardly put across the moral implications of our decision to value externals that Epictetus manages to convey through the recourse to amplifications or *auxesis* such as the ones expressed by the image of selling or destroying our *proairesis*²². However, this is not only due to persuasive strength: the intellectualist principle states that every action is determined by the opinions or beliefs we hold, but it does not entail by itself there are certain judgments (such as the act of giving value to externals) that can define our whole approach to what lies outside ourselves and thus become the initial link in a chain that will necessarily lead to frustration and slavery. This is a corollary of the distinction between what depends on us and what doesn't, what should concern us and what shouldn't, and is independent of the intellectualist principle. The statement that by valuing externals we are destroying or selling our *proairesis* is perhaps an over dramatization (since we can at any moment recover ourselves by tearing down the mask of the tyrant), but it certainly succeeds in connecting both ideas in an extremely appealing manner and emphasizing the moral weight of our everyday decisions.

²² It is true that these amplifications run the risk of obscuring the fact that the vicious actions that derive from a wrong valuation of externals can be corrected by the mere reassessment of that valuation, to counter which Epictetus resorts to the strategy of stressing our innate resources and our kinship with God.

6.

I have attempted to shed light on a number of obscure or ambiguous expressions concerning the notion of *proairesis* in Epictetus' *Discourses* by analyzing them from a rhetorical-pedagogical perspective. Although neither his intellectualism nor the centrality of the notion of *proairesis* within his psychology are features that have not been carefully analyzed by other commentators, I believe that the interpretation I have proposed of the passages I have dealt with here does away with the need to resort to certain interpretations of those passages that threaten to obscure the otherwise clear picture of human action offered by Epictetus' intellectualism. Although this is a modest result, it brings to light not only how profound and systematic Epictetus' commitment to an intellectualist position concerning the psychology of human action was, but also that it is against the background of that position that his conception of freedom should be interpreted.

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