

***A Free Will. Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought. Sather Classical Lectures.* Michael Frede, ed. by A.A. Long, foreword by David Sedley. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2011.**

Philosophers tend to assume that, as agents, we hope to have a certain kind of freedom, a freedom that reflects that we are the sources of our agency: *we* think about it and decide to do such-and-such, and thus *we* set ourselves in motion when we act. Presumably, we would also like to be able to ascribe such agency to other people because we have an interest in holding others responsible for what they do. In accounting for these intuitions, many have employed the notion of a free will. Others take this notion to be mysterious and wonder whether the story about agency can be told without it. In raising this question, they sometimes look to the past. How did the notion of a free will arise? The search for beginnings often leads to Augustine. Augustine, it is said, discovered or invented freedom of the will. Which term – “discovered” or “invented” – is chosen reveals whether one thinks of this move as a step forward or as the beginning of a long-lived aberration in Western history. *A Free Will*, the *Sather Lectures* Michael Frede gave in 1997/98 at Berkeley and that have now appeared posthumously in print, aim to reframe these debates. Augustine, the hero of earlier reconstructions, is almost relegated to an afterthought. The Stoic idea that the wise person acts freely by assenting wisely takes center stage. Frede’s lectures involve analysis of roughly seven hundred years of thought, distilled into an intriguing story. They are at once a scholarly masterpiece and a polemic with multiple targets.

The publication of *A Free Will* has been much awaited. A. A. Long and David Sedley introduce the book in a way that will help those who did not know Michael Frede get a sense of this anticipation and the pleasure of seeing the book in print. As Sedley notes, Frede's many students and colleagues worldwide have been missing him greatly after his unexpected death and have felt the lack of his voice in their fields. *A Free Will* makes this voice heard in highly recognizable ways. Frede is not walking his audience through the exegesis of texts, but through the results of having thought about these texts. It is as if Frede was back in the room inviting others to think along and, in characteristic fashion, delineating a path that they might not have found on their own. This path points to further paths: some may want closer readings of particular passages; and there are different routes through the same material: others are sure to disagree on any number of matters. And yet, thinking one's way along with Frede is likely to change how one understands the issues.

Frede kept postponing the publication of his lectures; he continued to work on the issues. It is somewhat paradoxical to review a book that its author did not consider ready for publication. Inevitably, one wonders whether Frede himself saw deficiencies in his proposal. My discussion shall thus at times include references to articles Frede published after giving the *Sather Lectures*, and it shall have less the character of a review than it otherwise would – I'm approaching the book as an investigation that, though rich with proposals, does not pretend to offer complete or final answers.

Frede does not take a very pronounced position on the question of whether one should do away with the notion of a free will altogether. He does, however, side strongly with and against particular philosophical ideas associated with a free will. A long-standing proposal – that to have a free will means that, when one chooses to perform a given action, one could also choose not to perform it, or choose another course of action – is for Frede deeply flawed. Moreover, Frede has no patience with the intuition that free willing might consist in a “sheer act of volition,” an absolute choice that is not responsive to anything. This is an idea that, for Frede, comes “rather close to deluding oneself into thinking that one is God” (151-2). Frede’s sympathies lie with the opposite idea. A free will belongs to the person who wisely takes everything into consideration and chooses to do what is right. The “essence of freedom,” as Frede puts it toward the end of his analyses, is “the ability to do something because one wills or wants to do it oneself, rather than because something or somebody else makes one do it or even makes one want to do it” (148).

From today’s perspective, the notion of a free will might appear to address first and foremost metaphysical puzzles relating to physical determinism. So it seems reasonable to ask what ancient philosophers have to say about physical determinism. As Frede points out, this leads to predictable disappointment. Very little can be found that reads as if ancient philosophers addressed these matters. Instead, Frede suggests looking more closely at the framing assumptions of ancient physics. For example, one might think that

certain ancient physical theories are primarily concerned with the ‘natures’ of different kinds of entities. Such theories look at what stones, or trees, or human beings are like and what kinds of causes are involved in them being what they are – not at causal laws that might *connect* the behaviors of these entities. Further, for Aristotle the sphere in which human beings act is characterized by ‘*for the most part* regularities.’ In such a framework, puzzles about physical determinism and agency do not necessarily arise. Frede’s position, that Aristotle does not have and does not need a notion of the free will, is particularly plausible from the point of view of physics. Traditionally, scholars who discuss these matters focus on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The relevant concepts – in particular, *boulêsis* or rational willing, *prohairesis* or choice, and the distinction between *hekon* and *akon*, which Frede says aims at the distinction between “things we do for which we can be held responsible and things we do for which we cannot be held responsible” (24) – have been subjected to extensive reconstruction. It is not as if Frede had nothing to say on these matters, but he does not enter into any real discussion, and those who hold elaborate views on *NE* III will be disappointed.

In a (2002) article on John of Damascus, Frede rephrases some of his remarks on Aristotle.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, he talks more about an intriguing question, namely how one is to understand the verb “to will.” Anyone working in the history of philosophy has come across this verb. Indeed, it is easy to get so used to it that one loses the sense of

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<sup>1</sup> “John of Damascus on Human Action, the Will, and Human Freedom,” in: Katerina Ierodiakonou (ed.), *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

whether it is a word we still use today (a word one would understand if one were not immersed into past ways of speaking). What is it “to will” something? A way of glossing the difference between “to will” and “to desire,” for example, might be that willing is, one way or another, rational willing. This intuition is behind much of the complexity in assessing Aristotle: surely, Aristotle has a notion of rational desire, and Frede refers to the form of desire that is specific to reason as “willing.” One way of understanding the question, then, whether he has a notion of the will – and that is a point Frede makes (2002) – is to ask whether rational willing is located in a separate *faculty*, the will, or whether reason is conceived of as itself a faculty that has motivational power. The latter is, according to Frede, Aristotle’s picture.

The Stoics reject Aristotelian (and Platonic) tripartite or bipartite psychology and take themselves to return to a Socratic view according to which the soul is one and rational. For Aristotle, being hungry (say) could be enough to make you eat; for the Stoics, the agent must assent to the impulsive impression that she should eat. This is a crucial step towards the development of something like a notion of the will. For the Stoics, every action involves reason’s assent to an impression that says one should do such-and-such – for example, the thought that I should now eat this cookie. Every motivation is thus located in reason. Frede takes this to amount to the view that “when a person does not act by being forced or out of ignorance, the person acts voluntarily or willingly” (43).

For an agent to believe anything, or to act, she must have accepted an impression. This

acceptance is an active movement of the mind, not something the mind passively suffers. Frede seems right in pointing out that this is a major step towards a conception of the will (though it is not the idea that the will is a separate faculty): the mind now has the job to say “yes” or “no.” In order to appreciate what Frede has to say against his main target – the idea that a free will is about having real alternatives to choose from – it matters how precisely one understands this idea. To say “yes” or “no,” and that is, to accept or to reject an impression, is not something that one does, as it were, ‘at will.’ Instead, one accepts impressions based on one’s acquired attitudes and beliefs. Ideally, one would be in a position to accept them based on one’s knowledge. That is, though there is the ability to say “yes” or “no,” one does not have more than one option: one shall say what one shall say, given one’s current state of mind.

And yet, assent to a given impression, however strongly it moves the agent, is not necessitated. On Frede’s reading, Chrysippus’ notion of what is necessary and what is possible for A refer to A’s *nature*.<sup>2</sup> In the case of a human agent, that means these notions refer to human nature. It is not necessary for the agent to assent to a given impression insofar as there is no “law of human nature” to the effect that she does: it is not the case that any human being, by virtue of being a human being, will assent to this impression. It is up to the agent to assent, in the sense that it is her, as the very person she is, who assents (81-2). Suppose a foolish person assents to the impression that she should have

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<sup>2</sup> Susanne Bobzien discusses related ideas in *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 276-301.

this cookie, a thought that moves her greatly. As Frede sees it, her assent depends on her being the person she gradually became. Not everyone would assent, and in that sense it was possible for her to withhold assent. She is responsible for her action of eating the cookie: her assent reflects her state of mind. In the wise person, assent or lack thereof is equally a matter of the earlier formation of attitudes. In her state of wisdom, she cannot but assent or not assent as she does. This is not a lack of freedom. It is perfect rationality.

Add to this another consideration: the way in which, for the Stoics, God pervades the world and causes everything in it. With this view of causation, can human beings have the kind of standing that a robust notion of agency calls for? Frede does not develop his answer to this question, but it is briefly alluded to in the Introduction, and it is to my knowledge the best available answer (15).<sup>3</sup> As portions of divine reason, human rational souls *partake* in that which determines how things are going in the world. This idea is utterly alien to modern puzzles about physical determinism. And yet, it strikes me as quite likely that this is how the Stoics thought they could combine freedom and determinism.

Frede credits Epictetus with making the notion of choice – *prohairesis* – central to his philosophy. In earlier Stoicism, the phrase “up to us” (*eph’ hêmin*) attaches to assent. For

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. John M. Cooper, “Stoic Autonomy,” in *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good* (Princeton N.J.: University Press, 2004), 204–244, esp. 240; on the status of human reason within the cosmos, cf. Katja Maria Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City: Political Philosophy in the Early Stoa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 3.

example, it is up to me to cross the street, namely insofar as it is up to me to assent to the impression that I should cross the street. Epictetus develops this idea further by pointing out that whether I indeed cross the street – succeed in crossing the street – is not strictly speaking up to me. All kinds of things can prevent this. What is up to us is how we “use” our impressions, how we deal with them. This is what choice or *prohairesis* is about, and this is why one’s *prohairesis* reflects what kind of person one is.

Although philosophers of the 2nd and 3rd century C.E. return progressively to Platonic-Aristotelian psychologies, they retain the idea of assent. The term already used by Aristotle, *hekon*, now means “voluntary” or “willing” (49), and reason appears in two roles – as the reason of earlier divisions into parts of the soul, and as judge. But reason has to be cautious when moved to assent. The dangers of precipitate assent, important to Stoic normative epistemology, reconfigure as *temptation* (60). To indulge in fantasies is to give room to seductive powers. And now, it is but one small step to the idea that evil powers invade our minds and the hope that there is something inside of us – a will? – that cannot be invaded. As Frede emphasizes, the world of late antiquity is populated by various good and evil forces. Though one might suspect that thinkers like Augustine should reject these assumptions as forms of superstition, they do not. For Augustine, it is quite conceivable that daemons have access to our thoughts (64-5). As alien as it may sound today, Frede seems right in emphasizing that spirits and daemons are part of the story. If there were such powers, they might be able to make us do anything. The idea of a free will is plausibly the idea of something in our minds that these tyrannical forces do

not have access to.

Discussion of these matters is a rather unique feature of Frede's lectures. Frede's engagement with late antique texts is indeed nicely unconventional, almost to the extent that one wonders whether the better-known part of the story falls out of the picture. The free will, one might have thought, was not invented because there had to be a little corner of the mind that no evil spirit can usurp. Instead, a higher-level theological problem would appear to have fueled thought about a free will. If God is good, omnipotent, a creator and cause of everything, why is there sin? God should not be responsible for sinful action, a core topic of Augustine's *Confessions*, or for presumed bad outcomes of human interaction, a central preoccupation of the *City of God*. The origin of human action thus must lie, in some robust sense, in us. Though Frede discusses some more specific problems about God's goodness, he does not mention this problem. As far as Augustine is concerned, Frede focuses on *De libero arbitrio*, not on the *Confessions* or *City of God*. However, the traditional line of thought figures in his (2002) article, and one might speculate that, had Frede published a revised version of his lectures, it might have made its way into the text.

Frede further addresses the question of why later ancient authors often present the Stoic proposal in puzzling ways. According to Frede, Platonists and Peripatetics tended to disagree with basic Stoic assumptions. Accordingly, they did not care to get the details of Stoic determinism right. Frede mentions two figures, the skeptic Carneades and the

Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias, two thinkers who otherwise have rather little in common. As Frede argues, they both misconstrue Stoic philosophy, rephrasing the, *pace* Frede, plausible Stoic conception of freedom in ways that make it seem confused and unpalatable – an impression that was certainly long-lived.

Carneades qua Academic skeptic does not lay out a position of his own. He engages in the skeptical task of sketching a view that pulls one sufficiently away from the Stoic theory to prevent assent to it. Such skeptical arguments tend to involve a certain lack of charity in interpreting the opposing view. According to skeptic methodology, Carneades does as he should in construing Stoic theory unfavorably. Alexander, however, is a different matter. In a way that Stoa scholars who have to deal with Alexander's writings will find refreshing, Frede is rather direct in his verdict: Alexander fails to comprehend the subtleties of Stoic theory. If there is a villain in Frede's story, it is Alexander. Frede casts him as a forerunner of a view that today is associated with the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, that an action (and a choice) are free if the agent could have done otherwise.

Consider a distinction between “determinism from the outside” and “determinism from the inside” (97). The former is about the way in which objects do or do not force our assent; the latter is about the way in which *who we are* – what attitudes, etc., we have formed over the years – determines our assent. Aristotle thought that the virtuous person cannot act otherwise. Contrary to this, Alexander proposes that, under identical conditions (outside and inside), it is possible to choose and to act otherwise. Frede finds

this kind of will “mysterious”; its choosing is thought to be independent “not only of the external objects of desire but also of the desires and beliefs of the person” (98). Put in these terms, Alexander’s ancestor of the alternate possibilities approach sounds incomprehensible: how could one’s choice not reflect one’s attitudes, thoughts, and so on? And worse: why would such freedom of choice be at all a good thing?

Furthermore, Frede’s Alexander is confused on the relationship between choice and merit. As Frede sees it, when a child impresses us with a fine action, we praise her, thinking that she is remarkably far along for her age. In fact, *this* child might not have been able to do something nasty, and we do not praise her under the premise that she could as well have performed a nasty action. We praise her because we think highly of her for having come so far, performing a fine action. Alexander’s view, on Frede’s reading, is that there is no merit or demerit in what you did unless you could have done otherwise. The child in Frede’s example would accordingly appear to be without merit.

From Alexander, Frede moves to Origen, the first Christian philosopher to write in detail about free will. According to Frede, Origen defends a basically Stoic picture against astrology (understood as a deterministic view) and ideas today associated with Gnosticism. Both Origen and his opponents observe that human beings are born into drastically different circumstances, and they ask whether or how this is compatible with God’s goodness. The Gnostics seem to have thought that a good God would have arranged things differently. Origen argues that God created all human beings equally,

namely as intellects, and all differences, including those in our physiologies and such matters as where we are born, are our own doing (a position for which Frede doesn't mention much argument, and indeed, it is hard to see how the argument would go).

Origen departs from the Stoics in one important respect: he does not think that there is a state of wisdom in which a person would consistently make the right choices. Instead he suggests that intellects can get weary of concerning themselves with the true and the good, thus losing their focus and making mistakes. One might think that a Christian intuition is behind Origen's departure from the Stoics, namely that, wise or not, we are still human and thus subject to sin, so eventually even the best shall fail. But Frede argues convincingly that Origen invokes Platonic rather than Biblical arguments. Qua being created, intellects are subject to change, and thus they cannot be perfect over an extended period of time. Frede (2002) pursues the idea that these two explanations of human failing continue to compete and co-exist in early Christian thought: the long-standing Platonic view that everything that is 'made' must, *qua* being created, deteriorate on the one hand, and Biblical notions of original sin, which introduce a distinction between freedom in a pre-lapsarian state as opposed to slavery after the 'Fall' on the other hand.

Next comes Plotinus, a proponent of the Stoic line Frede finds compelling, namely that the free willing of the virtuous agent reflects her careful thought, her acquired desiderative attitudes (the right ones), and her knowledge. In Plotinus, this proposal is reformulated within a larger theory that conceives of intellects, souls, and embodied souls

as displaying progressively more shadowy versions of freedom, with the highest level – the One or the Good – as ultimate source of these images. The world’s dependence on God’s will, Frede concludes, has been wrongly classified as a specifically Judeo-Christian idea (150); it is part of Plotinus’s proposal.

What, then, does Plotinus say about the freedom of human beings? The intellect’s freedom is limited by the fact that human souls are attached to bodies and thus constantly tempted to act as the desires of the body would have it. That is, the fact that the embodied person could act otherwise is a limitation, not a mark, of her freedom. Moreover, the virtues respond to features of the bodily world that we would wish to be different. The conscientious doctor does her best to heal; but surely, she would prefer the world not to be full of diseases. Similarly, as Frede puts it, it would be perverse to wish for wars so that you can be courageous (140). The way the world is thus presents a challenge to the view that the virtuous person is free. In a sense, her virtue is forced upon her.

Finally, Frede turns to Augustine. Augustine’s picture is gloomier than Origen’s. He seems to be less worried about the injustice of people being born into different kinds of circumstance than about the evil that surrounds all of us. Augustine follows the Stoics, as Frede sees it, in holding the view that once we have sinned we have lost our freedom (170). In Augustine, this view aims to explain why our lives are beset with evil. It must be punishment for original sin. It must be the case that, in Adam, ‘humankind’ sinned, and we are punished collectively. By having sinned initially, we have lost freedom;

human agents as we know them do not have a free will. But they *had* a free will, prior to the Fall.

This is the end of Frede's story: a Stoic reading of Augustine. Received wisdom has it that, for Augustine, each cognition involves the will, and that this is a major move away from pagan philosophy. On this count (as on others), Frede disappoints the lover of Augustine. As Frede sees it, Augustinian cognition is a mere variant of the Stoic proposal that cognitive activities like perception, belief, etc., involve the mind's assent. For him, the Stoic notion of the will even leaves "ample room" for believing something on trust or on faith (159). Frede's example is that the Stoics believe in oracles and divination, which he takes to imply that, for the Stoics, "you ought to choose to believe what the god tells you" (159). Here Frede seems to go too far. Stoic views about divination are not about faith. As far-fetched as this may appear today, they are straightforward components of Stoic philosophy: the wise person understands nature; nature is pervaded by divine reason; to understand it involves being able to 'read' it.

Both Aristotle and Augustine, well-established protagonists in the history of thought, end up playing comparatively small parts in Frede's account. The philosophical substance of his discussion lies elsewhere: Hellenistic and late antique thought, and the beginnings of Christian philosophy. Frede's analysis is driven by the puzzle of what, if anything, the will could plausibly be, and the questions that arise in the wake of this puzzle – most importantly, the question of whether it would even make sense to value a capacity 'to

choose otherwise.’ To do so appears, in Frede’s discussion, as the rather strange wish to be able to act in a way that is unrelated to one’s beliefs and commitments. And yet, Frede might underestimate the intuition that freedom has something to do with the ability to go for this *rather than that* option. For Frede, an agent is responsible for acquiring her beliefs, affective states, and so on, from which particular actions then flow as reflecting ‘who she is.’ I wonder whether, on Frede’s picture, all one can say to an agent who wants to perform a horrible deed is “you shall do what you shall do.” One would hold her responsible, and one would locate her agency in her, rather than in something external that enslaves her. One would attribute control over what she does to her thoughts and assents. But what does this amount to? Would one not also hope that she can stay away from the horrible deed?

Indeed, one might wonder whether one could turn one of Frede’s arguments against him. With respect to the idea that a free will involves some kind of absolute spontaneity, Frede says that those who ascribe such an ability to human beings come rather close to deluding themselves into thinking that they are divine. *Contra* Frede, one might think that the idea that human freedom has something to do with real choosing is respectable precisely because it does not make this kind of mistake. Perhaps it is the God of early Christian thought who has a will, but does not choose (cf. Frede 2002, 73). For an ideal being, there are no options to consider and no pulls into several directions; the ideal being knows what is to be done and is *eo ipso* motivated to do it. The Stoics think that a human being could arrive at a state where she is consistently thinking and acting in such a way and

where she is essentially on par with a god. Frede's kind of freedom is, in good Stoic fashion, not that of anyone but the wise. But what if, in asking questions about freedom and determinism, we cared primarily about the actions and options of everyone else? The psychological state of human beings might typically be such that a given person, though she has a certain psychology, beliefs, and commitments, is still susceptible to transient influences and thus in a sense capable of acting in this rather than that way. Perhaps her state of mind doesn't have the kind of stability that would be needed for there to be only one option. In addressing the person who intends to perform a horrible deed, perhaps one would aim to 'activate' some otherwise motivationally inert feature of hers that might enable her to act otherwise.

To further situate Frede's proposals, consider who else – apart from Alexander and the ancient ancestors of the alternate possibilities approach – are his opponents. It is perhaps no overstatement to say that Frede with these lectures reinvents scholarship on an era. Importantly, Frede disputes the idea that the “so-called Judeo-Christian way of thinking” contains much that is specifically Judeo-Christian (151). Christianity is recast as a phenomenon of late antiquity, and the way in which Frede goes back and forth between discussing pagan and Christian thinkers makes clear that he sees them as participants in

one evolving conversation.<sup>4</sup> Frede's method distinctively moves away from entrenched modes of scholarship. Perhaps one must have worked one's way through some thick volumes, geared at identifying traces of Christian insight in pagan philosophers (did they vaguely anticipate what became clear to the believer? did Christian truths shine through the fog of pagan philosophy? was there some Christian influence on Plotinus? etc.) in order to appreciate the verve in Frede's writing as well as the underlying polemic. The methods of old, still vivid in my own memory from sitting in German lecture halls and surely even more on Frede's mind, are not just driven by ideological bias. They can easily appear to be geared toward a piecemeal analysis – a passage that suggests anticipation? a term that implies heritage? – rather than the aim of getting clear about the substance of philosophical and theological proposals.

It is perhaps in this last respect that Frede's lectures are most impressive. The writings Frede addresses are not just hard to access by being the very texts they are. Worse, traditional modes of engaging with them have erected a wall that few are willing to climb over: heavy books filled with particulars but promising little philosophical pay-off. Frede seems to have done the impossible, namely read the late antique authors with a fresh eye and serious appreciation of the depth of different theological outlooks and, at the same

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<sup>4</sup> Frede's proposal – that the traditional contrast between pagan polytheism and Judeo-Christian monotheism is dubious – is developed further in articles that Frede published after he delivered his lectures at Berkeley. Cf. "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy," in Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41-68; and "The Case for Pagan Monotheism," in Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53-81.

time, a kind of analytical playfulness that is rarely seen when such weighty matters as original sin are at issue. I predict that, with the help of *A Free Will*, many will find the questions and texts relevant to the origins of a free will more palatable than they thought possible.

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