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Aristotle on *Prohairesis*

Abstract

Prohairesis plays a central role in Aristotle's moral psychology. It is *prohairesis* that determines an action to be rational, that provides the proximate efficient or moving cause of rational action, and that better reveals one's character than the action itself. This paper will discuss (1) Aristotle's shifted emphases when speaking of *prohairesis* in different ethical treatises; (2) Aristotle's pursuit of the nature of *prohairesis* and his special argumentative strategy in dealing with *prohairesis*; (3) the structure, i.e., the desiderative and deliberative components of *prohairesis*; and will conclude with some remarks about the significance of *prohairesis*.

Keywords: *prohairesis* (decision); *boulēsis* (wish); *bouleusis* (deliberation)

Prohairesis plays a central role in Aristotle's moral psychology. It is *prohairesis* that determines an action to be rational, that provides the proximate efficient or moving cause of rational action, and that better reveals one's character than the action itself. Aristotle also defines ethical virtue as *hexis prohairetikē*, a state that issues in decision. But the proper meaning of *prohairesis*, its nature and its structure are all far from clear. In this paper, I will make some observations in these aspects, and will pay special attention to the desiderative component of *prohairesis*, i.e., *boulēsis*.

I. *Prohairesis* as "πρὸ ἐτέρων αἰρετόν"

The most common starting point to understand Aristotle's *prohairesis* is his own etymological remark in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE):

[T1] Then perhaps *to prohaireton* is what has been deliberated before (τὸ προβεβουλευμένον). For *prohairesis* is with reason and thought. Even the name

seems to indicate that *it is chosen before other things* (πρὸ ἐτέρων αἰρετόν). (*NE* III.2.1112a15-17)¹

But there is a general division among scholars about how to interpret this "*pro*" or "before." Ross, in his famous translation of the *NE*, says, "the etymological meaning is 'preferential choice'."² Influential as it is, this etymological remark seems far from certain, and scholars are still debating about whether we should take this *pro* in preferential or temporal sense. Those who favor the preferential sense tend to translate *prohairesis* into "choice" (e.g., Ross 1925, Nussbaum 1978, Woods 1982, Price 1995, 2011, 2016, Taylor 2006, Pearson 2012, Simpson 2013, Kenny 2013), "deliberate choice" (e.g., Stewart 1894, Reeve 2014), "preferential choice" (e.g., Charles 2007, 2009, 2011), "rational choice" (Crisp 2004); whereas those who favor the temporal sense tend to translate *prohairesis* into "decision" (Joachim 1951, Irwin 1999, Lorenz 2009, Inwood and Woolf 2013, Müller 2016).³ There is still a third group of scholars who simply indicate both possibilities and the difficulty of translating this word, without taking side between the preferential or temporal sense.⁴

This division seems to be rooted in Aristotle's own texts. For the text we just quoted from the *NE* shows quite clearly that this *pro* should be taken in the temporal sense, for the perfect participle *probebouleumenon* ("what has been deliberated before") in the previous clause is obviously temporal. And as we survey all the other appearances of *prohairesis* in the *NE*, we do not see any example going against this temporal sense. Furthermore, several other passages also favor this temporal sense. For example, when speaking of the difference between an unjust action and an unjust character, Aristotle comments, "for someone might lie with a woman and know who she is, but the starting-point might be affections rather than *prohairesis*" (*NE* V.6.1134b19-21). And in his discussion of the incontinent person (*akratēs*), Aristotle says,

[T2] He [i.e., the incontinent person] is not base, since his *prohairesis* is decent (ἡ γὰρ προαίρεσις ἐπιεικής); hence he is half base...For one type of incontinent person [i.e., the weak] does not abide by what he has deliberated (οὐκ ἐμμενετικός οἷς ἄν βουλευόσῃται), while the volatile person is not even prone to deliberate at all (*NE* VII.10.1152a15-19; see VII.9.1151a29-b4 for more extensive discussion).

¹ Translations of the *NE* are from Irwin 1999, with amendments.

² Ross 1925.

³ The earliest commentator of Aristotle's ethics, Aspasius, is the strongest supporter of this temporal understanding (see Aspasius 2006, 70.31-71.2).

⁴ Such as Rowe and Broadie 2002, Ross and Brown 2009, p. 220. Taylor interestingly remarks: "Aristotle plays on the ambiguity of the preposition to support his account of preferential choice as choice resulting from prior deliberation" (Taylor 2006, 155).

It seems clear that in these passages *prohairesis* is taken to mean the "decision" made *before* the actual action takes place.⁵

But if we turn to the parallel passages from *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), we see that it is less decisive than the *NE* passage, but points more toward the preferential sense:

[T3] *Prohairesis* is *hairesis* [choice or taking], but not *hairesis* without qualification, but *hairesis* of *something before something* (ἀλλ' ἑτέρου πρὸ ἑτέρου), and this is not possible without inquiry and council (τοῦτο δὲ οὐχ οἶόν τε ἄνευ σκέψεως καὶ βουληῆς). That is why *prohairesis* is from deliberative belief (ἐκ δόξης βουλευτικῆς). (*EE* II.2.1226b6-9)⁶

In this passage, given the alternative between *heterou* and *heterou*, *prohairesis* is more likely in the preferential sense, i.e., making choice between different alternatives.⁷ The parallel passage from the *Magna Moralia* (*MM*) favors the preferential sense still more clearly:

[T4] But *prohairesis* seems to be what the name suggests, for example we *prohairoumetha one thing instead of another* (προαιρούμεθα τόδε ἀντὶ τοῦδε), for example *the better instead of the worse*" (τὸ βέλτιον ἀντὶ τοῦ χείρονος). (*MM* I.17.1189a12-16).

The proposition *anti* (instead of *pro*), and the examples between this and that, better and worse, makes it beyond any doubt that *prohairesis* is in preferential sense here. This is thus taken by some scholar as decisive evidence to determine the meaning of *prohairesis*, and to settle the debate about *pro*.⁸ If we examine the other passages containing *prohairesis* in the *EE*, we will see that none of them goes against the preferential sense. Furthermore, there are several occasions the contexts clearly favor or even force us to take the preferential sense. For example, when he lists three different kinds of life, Aristotle says, "we see also that there are three lives, *prohairountai* by all who have the means to do so, i.e., political, philosophical, and that of gratification" (*EE* I.4.1215a35-b1).⁹ When he speaks of *homo-*

⁵ Although I will not step into the controversy about the attribution of the "common books," it seems that these two examples from the common books, given the similar usage of *prohairesis* with the *NE*, may lend some weight to the view that even if the common books were originally written for the *Eudemian Ethics*, they were nevertheless reworked by Aristotle to fit into the context of the *NE*.

⁶ Translations of the *EE* are from Inwood and Woolf 2013, with amendments.

⁷ Lorenz 2009 is one of few interpreters who insist that this is also in the temporal sense.

⁸ For example, Woods 1982, 155, and Price 2016.

⁹ This is clearly a choice between three candidates, so it is appropriate to translate it into "choose." But in the parallel passage in the *NE*, Aristotle does not mention "*prohairesthai*" in the context of three kinds of lives, but only mentions this word in his comments on the people who choose the life of gratification:

noia [like-mindedness, or concord], Aristotle says that among the likeminded people, "the same *prohairesis* is made about ruling and being ruled, not each for himself, but all for the same one" (*EE* VII.7.1241a30-33).¹⁰ And when he talks about the markers (*horoi*) of friendship, Aristotle says,

[T5] Here are several markers (ὄροι) and each of them seems, though in fact does not, to belong to friendship as a unity; for example, the *prohairesis* about the other person's existence (ἡ τοῦ εἶναι προαίρεσις). (*NE* VII.11.1244a27-28).

We can only favor, or "choose" to certain extent, our friend's life and existence, but certainly cannot decide on it, for it is not up to us (*eph' hēmin*).¹¹ Since *MM* follows *EE* much more closely in both its terminology and doctrine than *NE*, it is not surprising that *MM* also defines *prohairesis* in this preferential sense.¹²

After this survey, we may conclude that even if Aristotle's general doctrine of *prohairesis* remains the same in the two ethical treatises, as will be shown in the following sections, there seems to be a shift of emphases concerning the meaning of *prohairesis*, from the preferential sense in the *EE* to the temporal sense in the *NE*. If we compare the discussions of deliberation in the *EE* and *NE*, we may find some theoretical consideration behind this shift:

[T6] One deliberates not about end, since that is given for everyone, but about what leads to the end, *whether this or that is conducive* (πότερον τὸδε ἢ τὸδε συντείνει), and when one has a view about that, how it will come about. (*EE* II.10.1226b10-12)

[T7] We lay down the end, and then examine the ways and means to achieve it. If it appears that any of several means will reach it, we examine , which of them will reach it most easily and most nobly; and *if only one means reaches it, we examine how that means will reach it, and how the means itself is reached* (δὲ ἐνὸς δ' ἐπιτελουμένου πῶς διὰ τούτου ἔσται κάκεινο διὰ τίνος), until we come to the first cause, the last thing to be discovered. (*NE* III.3.1112b15-20)

"the life they *prohairoumenoi* is a life for grazing animals" (I.5.1095b20-21). Although the context is somewhat similar to that of the *EE*, it is nevertheless possible to translate it as "decide on," since this is about the result of their "decision," rather than the "choice" among three candidates.

¹⁰ In this case the *prohairesis* is surely concerned with different candidates, and thus preferential. So it is perfect to translate it into "choice" or "preferential choice" here. Interestingly, in the parallel passage about *homonoia* in the *NE*, Aristotle does not use *prohairesesthai*, but only says the common and the decent have the same mind (*homonein*) to let the best people rule (*NE* IX.6.1167a34-b1).

¹¹ Admittedly, given the existence of a friend is not (completely) up to us, the *prohairesis* used here is not in the strict sense of the word. This passage has no clear parallel in the *NE*.

¹² Given the more disputable status of the authenticity of the *MM*, I will leave it aside in this paper.

In the *EE* passage Aristotle only considers the deliberation between alternative means ("this or that"); whereas in the *NE* Aristotle clearly allows deliberation to be *not* about alternatives, but about only one means and the relevant facts or elements about this one single means, just like there being only one way to solve a mathematical problem. So it seems that Aristotle's shift of emphases from the preferential sense to the temporal sense does have some theoretical consideration. But even if Aristotle makes this shift of emphases, the preferential sense is still there, and is incorporated into the temporal sense, for even in [T7] the preferential sense is mentioned first ("if...any of several means"), and the non-alternative and non-preferential case is treated as a special case ("if only one means..."). Therefore, Aristotle might have realized the limitation of the preferential sense of *prohairesis*, and then shifted to the safer and broader temporal sense of this term.¹³ As for the translation of *prohairesis*, I think in most cases "decision" is better than "choice," since the latter is too general, and will also make *hairesis* difficult to translate.

II. The Nature of *Prohairesis* and Aristotle's Argumentative Strategy

As Aristotle indicates at the beginning of his discussion of *prohairesis*, the nature of *prohairesis* seems to be a complicated and difficult topic, with a number of *aporiai* to be solved:

[T8] One might be unsure in what genus it naturally belongs, what kind of thing one should place it under, and whether or not what is voluntary (τὸ ἐκούσιον) and *to prohaireton* are the same thing. In particular there are some who claim, and it might seem so on inquiry, that *prohairesis* is one or other of two things, either belief or desire (ἢτοι δόξα ἢ ὄρεξις), since both of these appear to follow along with it (παρακολουθοῦντα). (*EE* II.10.1225b19-24; see also *NE* III.2.1111b10-12 for a less extensive version of the *aporiai*)

Accordingly, in both treatises Aristotle proceeds to articulate the nature of *prohairesis* through a series of distinctions, distinguishing it (1) from what is voluntary (*to hekousion*), (2) from different kinds of desire (*orexis*), i.e., appetite (*epithumia*), spirit (*thumos*), and wish (*boulēsis*), and (3) from simple thought (*dianoia*) or belief (*doxa*).

The difference between *prohairesis* and the voluntary is clear. For *prohairesis* is said to be a sub-set of the voluntary, and the difference lies in the rational component or element in *prohairesis*:

¹³ Without argument, I assume, together with most of the scholars, that *NE* is a later and more mature work than *EE*. But if my argument about the reasonableness of this shift is correct, it may shed some light on the relative dates between *NE* and *EE*.

[T9] *Prohairesis*, then, seems to be voluntary, but not the same; the voluntary extends more widely. For children and the other animals share in voluntary action, but not in *prohairesis*; and the actions we do on the spur of the moment are said to be voluntary, but not in accord with *prohairesis*. (*NE* III.2.1111b6-10; see also *EE* II.10.1226b34-36)

Therefore, *prohairesis* is reserved for adult human beings whose rational capacity is (fully) developed.¹⁴ But Aristotle does not require that these adults, with rational capacity, are good men in order to have *prohairesis*, for the strictly vicious person acts in accord with his *prohairesis* and without regret, and this is in fact an important difference between the vicious and the akratic (*NE* VII.8.1150b29-36). Therefore, the rational element or reason in *prohairesis* is not in its normative sense, but in the descriptive sense. These two senses correspond well with *phronēsis* (prudence) and *deinotēs* (cleverness), the former only looking for the morally best way to achieve the morally good ends, whereas the latter discovering whatever means to fulfill whatever ends (see *NE* VI.121144a23-b1).

This rational element also provides the first reason to distinguish *prohairesis* from *epithumia* and *thumos*, the two kinds of desire that both human being and other animals possess (*NE* III.2.1111b12-13; *EE* II.10.1225b26-27). A second difference is based on the famous "principle of contradiction," which is used by both Plato and Aristotle to distinguish different parts of the soul (see *Republic* IV.436a-437b and *NE* I.13.1102b13-25), for both *epithumia* and *thumos* may be contrary to *prohairesis* (*NE* III.2.1111b13-19). A third difference lies in the fact that many *prohairesis* arise without the contribution of *epithumia* or *thumos*, and thus without pain (*EE* II.10.1225b27-32).¹⁵

What distinguishes *boulēsis* from *prohairesis* is the fact that we may wish for the impossible, such as immortality or ruler of all mankind; we may also wish for something that is completely beyond our agency, such as the victory of certain actor or athlete. But we only *prohairesisthai* what is possible and what is up to us (*EE* II.10.1225b32-37; *NE* III.2.1111b19-26). Another difference, which will play more important role below, is that "wish is more [or "rather"] for the end, whereas *prohairesis* for the things that promote the end (ἡ μὲν βούλησις τοῦ τέλους ἐστὶ μᾶλλον, ἡ δὲ προαίρεσις τῶν πρὸς τὸ τέλος)" (*NE*

¹⁴ Aristotle clearly thinks that small children do not have reason, but it is less easy to determine whether the youth, whose rational capacity is still developing through habituation, have *prohairesis* or not. Perhaps Aristotle would say, with his typical vocabulary, that they do, but not without qualification.

¹⁵ As Müller 2016 correctly indicates, Aristotle's comment "many decisions are made with no contribution from spirit or appetite (πολλὰ καὶ ἄνευ θυμοῦ καὶ ἐπιθυμίας προαιροῦνται)" makes it clear that either spirit or appetite contributes at least to some decisions.

III.2.1111b26-27; see also *EE* II.10.1226a7-17, where Aristotle says "wish and belief are *above all* about the end" [μάλιστα τοῦ τέλους]).

Whether the object is impossible or up to us (*ep' hēmin*) also distinguishes *prohairesis* and simple thought or belief, for a number of beliefs have nothing to do with possibility or our own agency, such as our beliefs about scientific facts (*EE* II.10.1226a2-4; *NE* III.2.1111b31-33). The second difference is that we use true or false to describe belief, but good or bad to describe *prohairesis* (*EE* II.10.1226a4; *NE* III.2.1111b31-33, 1112a5-8). The third difference is that *prohairesis* is from what kind of people we are, but belief does not depend on our character (*NE* III.2.1112a1-11). The fourth and last difference is that mere belief or thought has nothing to do with pursuing and avoiding, but *prohairesis* directs us to pursue and avoid (*EE* 10.1226a4-6; *NE* III.2.1112a3-5).

After all these distinctions, Aristotle reaches the first formulation (F1) of the nature of *prohairesis*, as shown in [T1] ("*to prohaireton* is what has been deliberated before. For *prohairesis* is with reason and thought. Even the name seems to indicate that *it is chosen before other things*") and [T3] (*prohairesis* "is not possible without inquiry and council. That is why *prohairesis* is from deliberative belief"). The emphasis of this first series of formulation lies in the *rational elements*, i.e., deliberation, reason, thought, inquiry, council, and deliberative belief.

Judging from this first formulation, *prohairesis* seems above all a rational process, the result of deliberation. But it turns out that this formulation is only half way, or less than half way, to the true nature of *prohairesis*.

Following the series of distinctions between *prohairesis* and different kinds of desire and belief, and following the formulation , which emphasizes the rational element in *prohairesis*, Aristotle goes on to analyze the rational element in it, i.e., deliberation (*bouleusis*). It is at the end of this analysis that Aristotle reintroduces the desiderative element, and provides the second formulation (F2) of the nature of *prohairesis*:

[T10] What we *prohairetou* to do is, among those up to us, what we deliberate about and desire to do. Hence also *prohairesis* would be *deliberative desire* of what is up to us (ἡ προαίρεσις ἂν εἴη βουλευτική ὄρεξις τῶν ἐφ' ἡμῖν). When we judge as a result of deliberation, we desire to do it in accord with our deliberation/wish (βούλευσιν/βούλησιν). (*NE* III.3.1113a9-12)

[T11] It is clear that *prohairesis* is *deliberative desire* for things that are up to oneself (ὄρεξις τῶν ἐφ' αὐτῷ βουλευτική). For we all deliberate about/wish for (βουλευόμεθα/βουλόμεθα) the things we *prohairoumetha*, but it is not the case that we *prohairoumetha* all things we deliberate about/wish for (βουλευόμεθα/βουλόμεθα). By *deliberative desire* I mean one whose starting point and cause is

deliberation; the desire arises through one's having deliberated (λέγω δὲ βουλευτικήν, ἧς ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία βούλευσίς ἐστι, καὶ ὁρέγεται διὰ τὸ βουλευσασθαι). (EE II.10.1226b16-20)

There is more to be commented on these two passages in the next section. What is clear for the present purpose is that Aristotle calls *prohairesis* "deliberative desire," and thus clearly attributes desire (*orexis*) as the genus of *prohairesis*. This formulation seems to be the final conclusion of his analysis of *prohairesis* in NE III and EE II. It admits both the desiderative and the rational element in *prohairesis*, and clearly classifies it into the category of desire.

But if we keep this formulation in mind, we will be surprised when we see Aristotle's third formulation (F3). When he comes back to the topic of the origin of rational action in the context of intellectual virtue, Aristotle offers some seemingly uncertain remarks about the nature of *prohairesis*:

[T12] The principle of an action (πράξεως...ἀρχή), i.e., the source of motion, not the goal, is *prohairesis*; the principle of *prohairesis* is desire and goal-directed reason (ὄρεξις καὶ λόγος ὁ ἕνεκά τινος). That is why *prohairesis* requires intellect and thought (οὔτ' ἄνευ νοῦ καὶ διανοίας), and also a state of character (οὔτ' ἄνευ ἠθικῆς)...Thought by itself moves nothing (διάνοια δ' αὐτὴ οὐθὲν κινεῖ); what moves us is goal-directed and practical thought (ἀλλ' ἡ ἕνεκά του καὶ πρακτικῆ)...That is why *prohairesis* is either desiring intellect or thinking desire (ἢ ὀρεκτικὸς νοῦς ἢ προαίρεσις ἢ ὄρεξις διανοητικῆ), and this is the sort of principle that a human being is. (NE VI.2.1139a31-b5)

According to this formulation, it matters nothing or very little whether we say *prohairesis*' genus is desire or intellect, because it is a harmonious combination of both elements. So it makes the distinction neither necessary nor important. This almost undistinguishable harmony reminds us of the metaphor Aristotle uses to describe the difference between rational and non-rational parts of the soul as "concave" and "convex." *Prohairesis* is the best representative of this two-in-one relationship between desire and reason.

[T13] It makes no difference if the soul is or is not divisible into parts; it still has different capacities, including those we have mentioned—just as the convex is not separable in a curve from the concave. (EE II.1.1219b32-34; see also NE I.13.1102a28-32)

And it is also reaffirmed by Aristotle's remark in the *De anima*,

[T14] That , which moves therefore is a single faculty, i.e., the faculty of desire, for if there were two sources of movement, intellect and desire, they would produce

movement in virtue of some common form (κατὰ κοινὸν ἅν τι ἐκίνουν εἶδος). (DA III.10.433a21-22)¹⁶

If we take a fresh look at the complicated nature of *prohairesis* from this final verdict, and from Aristotle's overall doctrine, it seems that the first set ([T1] and [T3]), and the second set ([T10] and [T11]) of formulations of the nature of *prohairesis* may be called temporal and partial. To emphasize either the rational or desiderative aspects of *prohairesis* is certainly not wrong (given the remark at DA III.10.433a21-22, to call it a kind of "desire" is probably more correct), but still not comprehensive enough. They may serve as landmarks toward the final conclusion about the nature of *prohairesis*, but still not the final destination. *Prohairesis* in its nature is so *sui generis* that we can even hardly assign a proper genus to it.

III. The Structure of *Prohairesis*

Now let us take a closer look at the two components of *prohairesis* in turn. The rational component, i.e., deliberation, is relatively clear; whereas there are considerable controversies about the desiderative component of *prohairesis*. Let us start from the clearer one.

1. Rational Component: Deliberation (*bouleusis*)

The role of deliberation is fairly clear. As Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes, "we deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes ends (περὶ τῶν πρὸς τὰ τέλη)" (NE III.3.1112b11-12; see also 1112b33-34); "we lay down the end, and then examine how and through what to achieve it (τὸ πῶς καὶ διὰ τίνων ἔσται σκοποῦσι)" (NE III.3.1112b15-16); "one deliberates not about the end, since *that is given for everyone* (τοῦτο κεῖται πᾶσι), but about what leads to the end (περὶ δὲ τῶν εἰς τοῦτο τεινόντων)" (EE II.10.1226b10-11); "everyone's deliberation, technical or nontechnical, investigates what promotes the end (πρὸς τὸ τέλος)" (EE II.10.1227a11-12).

So the general picture is as follows: first, an unspecific and indeterminate end or goal is set by wish (*boulēsis*), which is "given for everyone." Of course for different people the end may be different, for example, a doctor's given end is to cure, a rhetor's given end is to persuade, a politician's given end is good order (these are the examples from NE III.3.1112b12-14); or more generally, health or happiness may simply be the ends for human being as such (see NE III.2.1111b27-30; EE II.10.1226a7-15). Then deliberation

¹⁶ Translations of DA are from Smith's translation in Barnes 1984, with amendments.

comes into play, looks for the best means to achieve the end, and at the same time makes the end more specific, more determinate, and more practicable. To illustrate it with Aristotle's famous doctrine of the mean: it is the wish of the virtuous person to achieve the mean in particular circumstances, and it is the task of deliberation to find "the right time," "the right things," "the right people," "the right end,"¹⁷ and "the right way" (*NE* II.6.1106b21-22). Deliberation, therefore, is a kind of inquiry (*zētēsis*) and analysis, and results in *prohairesis*.

As a component of *prohairesis*, deliberation is about what is within our own agency, that is to say, about things that we can make it otherwise. Accordingly, it is not about what is eternal, what is necessary, what varies all the time, what results from fortune, what is far away (*NE* III.3.1112a21-31). It is the calculative capacity (*logistikon*) of our rational part of the soul, and the "goal-directed" reason mentioned in [T12]. Aristotle calls it "analysis," the capacity to go backward from the end or goal to the action or movement one can immediately perform to achieve this goal:

[T15] For a deliberator would seem to inquire and analyze in the way described, as though analyzing a diagram...The last thing in the analysis would seem to be the first that comes into being (τὸ ἔσχατον ἐν τῇ ἀναλύσει πρῶτον εἶναι ἐν τῇ γενέσει). (*NE* III.3.1112b20-23)

After examining the rational component in *prohairesis*, let us now turn to the much more problematic desiderative component of it.

2. The Desiderative Component: Wish (*boulēsis*)

Boulēsis was not yet a philosophical term in Plato, and it is a non-technical word for both what we want in general, and what we want in a more rational sense. This ambiguity remains in Aristotle even if he generally takes it as a philosophical term and uses it, in most cases, to refer to the so-called "rational desire," but I will argue in what follows that to call it "rational" may not be as appropriate as the majority of commentators think. Furthermore, I will argue that there is an ambiguity in *boulēsis*, i.e., between the *boulēsis* that sets the end for deliberation (I will call it *boulēsis_(e)*), and the *boulēsis* that results from deliberation (I will call it *boulēsis_(r)*), and the latter sense seems to be the same as *prohairesis* itself.

¹⁷ Here it is the more restricted sense of "end" as components of the more general end given to the agent.

2.1 *Boulēsis_[e]*

Just as he repeatedly emphasizes that deliberation is not about the end, Aristotle also repeatedly says that wish is for/about the end, such as "wish is more [or "rather"] about the end (ἡ μὲν βούλησις τοῦ τέλους ἐστὶ μᾶλλον)" (*NE* III.3.1111b26; III.4.1113a15); "we wish for the end, and deliberate and decide about the things that promote it" (*NE* III.5.1113b3-4); "what one wishes for is above all the end (βούλεται δὲ γε μάλιστα τὸ τέλος)" (*EE* II.10.1226a13). As mentioned above, the proper ends for deliberation are "given to every-one," such as to cure, to persuade, to produce good order, to be healthy or to be happy. What is wished for is what one takes to be good. Different people may see different goals as good, and thus take different things as their end. The virtuous person wishes for the good without qualification or in truth (ἀπλῶς μὲν καὶ κατ' ἀλήθειαν), whereas the other people only wish for the apparent good (τὸ φαινόμενον ἀγαθόν), i.e., what they take to be good (*NE* III.4.1113a21-24; see also *EE* II.10.1227a28-30 where the two kinds of *boulēsis* are qualified as "by nature" [*phusei*] and "contrary to nature" [*para phusin*]). Thus an intemperate or unjust person would wish what is unjust or intemperate (*NE* III.5.1114a11-12).

Based on the above remarks, it seems only natural to understand wish as setting the end, which comes first, and then deliberation comes into play, and turns what is general, unspecific and indeterminate into something particular, specific and determinate. This particular, specific and determinate conclusion is *prohairesis*, and this is an action to be done at the moment, for "what is deliberated is the same as *to prohaireton*, except that *to prohaireton* is determinate (ἀφορισμένον), for what *to prohaireton* is what we have judged from council (ἐκ τῆς βουλῆς κριθὲν)" (*NE* III.3.1113a2-5). I call this *prohairesis* that sets the end *boulēsis_[e]*. For example, a virtuous person may set the end as "I want to be just," then examines the circumstances, deliberates about what to do to realize justice, and eventually reaches the *prohairesis* to distribute the money in front of him equally to the five people in need.

Now we need to pause, and tackle a central controversy about *boulēsis_[e]*, i.e., whether it is a kind of desire that is generated or produced by reason itself, or located in reason, and a related question, i.e., whether Aristotle holds a similar view as Plato on this point, for Plato clearly says that reason has its own desire (see *Republic* IX. 580d-581b). Most scholars take it to be the case that Aristotle's *boulēsis_[e]* is located in reason, so Aristotle's view is similar to Plato's.¹⁸

¹⁸ For example, Aspasius 2006, 68.28, Mele 1984, Cooper 1988/1999, Lorenz 2009, Grönroos 2015, and Müller 2016. For a few examples for the opposite view, see Price 1995, Moss 2011, 2014, and Pearson 2012.

I tend to disagree with this general view about *boulēsis_{le}*, and even think that *boulēsis_{le}* is not generated by the rational part of the soul is an important departure of Aristotle's moral psychology from Plato's, and related to his objection of Socratic or Platonic intellectualism. If the goal is set by reason itself, and the deliberation is also done by reason, then there is very little room left for desiderative part of the soul. For Aristotle, the motivational function of desire is explicitly distinguished from the non-motivational function of reason as we have seen from [T12] ("thought by itself moves nothing; what moves us is goal-directed and practical thought"), and as we can also see this from the following statement, "reason does not seem to move without desire (for *boulēsis* is a kind of desire, and whenever something is moved in accordance with reasoning, it is also moved in accordance with *boulēsis*)" (DA III.10.433a23-25).

I cannot solve all the problems about *boulēsis* here. What I would like to do is to gather some pieces of evidence, , which, *when put together*, may give us strong reasons to reconsider the common view.

First of all, according to Aristotle's basic theory of desire in his ethical works, appetite (*epithumia*), spirit (*thumos*), and wish (*boulēsis*) are different species of desire (*orexis*), and they all belong to the desiderative part of the soul (*orektikon*), instead of the rational part. And this desiderative part of the soul is said to share in reason, or be able to obey reason, but not having reason in itself. This is a basic distinction made in Aristotle's moral psychology:

[T16] The nonrational part, then, also seems to have two parts. For while the plant-like part [i.e., nutritive] does not shares in reason at all, the appetitive part, and *in general desiderative part* (ὄλως ὀρεκτικόν), shares in reason in a way, insofar as it both listens to reason and obeys it. (NE I.13.1102b28-32; see also EE II.4.1221b27-32).

Here Aristotle mentions both the appetitive and the desiderative part in general, and classifies the "desiderative part in general" into the nonrational part of the soul, without singling out any kind of desire (*boulēsis*) as located in the rational part of the soul. The way the *desiderative part in general* shares in reason is to listen to and obey reason, not belongs to reason.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lorenz 2009 underplays the importance of this passage by pointing out that in some cases Aristotle uses *orexis* to refer to non-rational desire, i.e., appetite and spirit. But for one thing Aristotle does not do this in his ethical treatises, and for another, Aristotle never adds *holōs* when he uses *orexis* to refer to non-rational desire.

Second, the two series of virtues are distinguished in accordance with the two "parts" of the soul, and ethical virtue (*aretē ēthikē*) is precisely the excellence of the desiderative part of the soul (*NE* I.13.1103a5-10; *EE* II.1.1220a8-11).²⁰ Aristotle makes it clear that it is ethical virtue that makes the goal right (*EE* II.11.1227b22-28; *NE* VI.12.1144a7-9, VI.13.1145a5-6). Furthermore, it is the task of *boulēsis*_[e] to set the goal for deliberation, and character, be it virtuous or vicious, determines what kind of *boulēsis*_[e] one has: "For the excellent person, what is wished for will be what is in truth, while for the base person, what is wished for is random" (*NE* III.4.1113a21-24; *EE* II.11.1127b34-1228a4). Aristotle also explicitly says that the end is not the result of calculation or inference, but like the principle of mathematics, , which is grasped directly by virtue: "we affirm that it [virtue] makes the goal correct, since the goal is not arrived at by deduction or reasoning" (*EE* II.11.1227b23-25), and more elaborately,

[T17] For virtue preserves the starting point, whereas vice corrupts it; and in action the end we act for is the starting point, as the assumptions are the starting point in mathematics. Reason does not teach the starting point either in mathematics or in action (οὔτε δὴ ἐκεῖ ὁ λόγος διδασκαλικὸς τῶν ἀρχῶν οὔτε ἐνταῦθα); it is virtue, either natural or habituated, that teaches correct belief about the starting point (ἀλλ' ἀρετὴ ἢ φυσικὴ ἢ ἐθιστὴ τοῦ ὀρθοδοξεῖν περὶ τὴν ἀρχήν). (*NE* VII.9.1151a15-19)

Another two famous passages from *NE* VI also confirm the goal-setting role of ethical virtue: "virtue makes the goal correct, and prudence the things promoting the goal" (*NE* VI.12.1144a7-9); "*prohairesis* will not be correct without prudence or without virtue, for the latter makes us do the end, whereas the former makes us do the things promoting the end" (*NE* VI.13.1145a4-6).

Third, a passage at *DA* III.9.432b5-6, , which is often taken as the decisive textual evidence for the view that wish belongs to the rational part (for Aristotle seems to say explicitly "wish is found in the calculative part and appetite and spirit in the irrational"), upon scrutiny in its context, may not do the service as most commentators think. I put this passage in its larger context first:

[T18] The problem at once presents itself, in what sense we are to speak of parts of the soul, or how many we should distinguish. For in a sense there is an infinity of

²⁰ Lorenz 2009 argues that *EE* regards the ethical virtue to belong to the desiderative part of the soul, while *NE* does not do so, because *NE* only says that the distinction of the two series of virtues is in accordance with (*kata*) the two parts of the soul, not that the two series of virtues "belong to" (genitive) the two parts of the soul. But it is important to note that at *EE* II.4.1221b28-29, Aristotle uses the same words as he uses in the *NE* and says that "the virtues are classified in accordance with (*kata*) these." It seems, then, that Aristotle's "belong to" has the same meaning as "in accord with."

parts: it is not enough to distinguish, with some thinkers, the calculative, the spirited, and the appetitive, or with others the rational and the irrational; for if we take the dividing lines followed by these thinkers we shall find parts far more distinctly separated from one another than these, namely those we have just mentioned: the nutritive, , which belongs both to plants and to all animals, and the sensitive, , which cannot easily be classed as either irrational or rational; further the imaginative, , which is, in its being, different from all, while it is very hard to say with , which of the others it is the same or not the same, supposing we determine to posit separate parts in the soul; and lastly the desiderative, , which would seem to be distinct both in definition and in power from all hitherto enumerated. *It is absurd to break up the last-mentioned faculty: for wish is found in the calculative part and appetite and spirit in the irrational; and if the soul is tripartite desire will be found in all three parts* (καὶ ἄτοπον δὴ τὸ τοῦτο διασπᾶν· ἐν τε τῷ λογιστικῷ γὰρ ἡ βούλησις γίνεται, καὶ ἐν τῷ ἀλόγῳ ἡ ἐπιθυμία καὶ ὁ θυμός· εἰ δὲ τρία ἡ ψυχὴ, ἐν ἑκάστῳ ἔσται ὄρεξις). (DA III.9.432a22-b7)

This passage is to raise difficulties (*aporiai*) toward the view that the soul has separate parts and about what these parts are. Aristotle especially singles out two models of dividing the soul, tripartition (*to logistikon*, *to thumikon*, and *to epithumēton*), and bipartition (*to logon* and *to alogon*), and then he very briefly mentions some "soul-parts" according to his own classification, i.e., the nutritive (*to threptikon*), the sensitive (*aisthēton*), the imaginative (*phantastikon*), and the desiderative (*oreton*), as problematic cases if we take the bipartite or tripartite models. Aristotle considers two lines of objections:

- (1) There will be some "parts" that are as well qualified as the other "parts" mentioned by his opponents, but that are not included in his opponent's view, so the number of the "parts" of the soul is unlike what his opponents say;
- (2) There will be some "parts" that are difficult to fit in his opponents' bipartite or tripartite models, so to divide the soul into separate parts is false.

According to Aristotle, (1) is true for all the four "parts" he mentions, i.e., the nutritive, the sensitive, the imaginative, and the desiderative, for they all have distinctive functions, corresponding to different objects and having different mechanisms. (2) is especially true in the cases of the sensitive and the imaginative, for they can hardly fit into the bipartite (explicitly said) or the tripartite (presumably so) models. Aristotle takes sensation as informed or used by reason, and speaks of two different kinds of imagination, i.e., *phantasia aisthētikē* and *phantasia logistikē* (or *phantasia bouleutikē*).

As for the last "part," the desiderative, Aristotle is not as clear as the previous three. What is clear is that Aristotle takes it as "absurd" (*atopon*) to tear apart (*diaspan*) this faculty or "part." According to my interpretation, Aristotle discusses two kinds of absurdities, in

accordance with the bipartite and the tripartite models respectively. According to the former, wish will be classified into the rational part, whereas appetite and spirit into the nonrational part; and according to the latter, wish, spirit, and appetite will belong to rational, spirited, and appetitive parts of the soul respectively. But both cases are "absurd," because they both mean to divide the soul into separate parts. It seems that in the case of "desiderative part," Aristotle is not speaking of the *difficulties* of distributing different kinds of desire into different "part," like in the cases of the sensitive and the imaginative parts, but speaking of the *impossibility* to divide this faculty into different part, and objecting two attempts to introduce divisions to it, so in the end the desiderative faculty should be kept intact, somewhat like the nutritive faculty of the soul. So it seems that only (1), not (2) is applied to desiderative part of the soul. Therefore, Aristotle does not take *boulēsis* as belonging to the rational part of the soul, but rather take the entire desiderative part of the soul in some sense as a whole (of course he agrees there are different kinds of desires), somewhat like the nutritive part, without trying to fit the desiderative part into the bipartite or tripartite model.²¹ And this is precisely in the same line as in [T16].

Fourth, Aristotle explicitly says that children whose reason is not yet developed have wish, and this also shows that wish does not belong to the rational part of the soul:

[T19] Just as soul and body are two, so we see that the soul has two parts as well, one that is nonrational and one that has reason. Their states are also two in number, desire and intellect. And just as the development of the body is prior to that of the soul, so the nonrational part is prior to the rational. This too is evident. For *spirit, wish, and also appetite are present in children right from birth* (θυμὸς γὰρ καὶ βούλησις, ἔτι δὲ ἐπιθυμία, καὶ γενομένοις εὐθὺς ὑπάρχει τοῖς παιδίοις), whereas reasoning and understanding naturally develop as they grow older. (*Politics* VII.15.1334b22-25)²²

²¹ Whether Aristotle's distinction of desire is consistent throughout his corpus, such as *Topics*, *Rhetoric*, *DA*, *NE*, *EE*, *Politics*, and so forth, is another question. But so far as I am aware, only in the *Topics* and *Rhetoric* I.10, generally agreed to be early works, Aristotle unmistakably says "wish is always found in the reasoning faculty (*pasa gar boulēsis en tōi logistikōi*)" (*Topics* IV.5.126a12-13), and "wish is rational desire (*logistikēn orexin*)" and spirit (here "anger") and appetite are "nonrational desire (*alogoi orexeis*)" (*Rhetoric* I.10.1369a1-4). All the rest discussions do not necessarily support this kind of "Platonic" understanding of wish.

²² Quotation from the *Politics* is from Reeve 1997, with amendments.

This passage both confirms that *boulēsis* belongs to the nonrational part of the soul as we mentioned in the first point, and makes it clear that children who have no reason also have *boulēsis* in its strict sense, because Aristotle lists all three kinds of desire here.²³

Fifth, some may object and argue that since the particular object of wish is "good," be it real or apparent, and since the "good" can only be grasped by reason, wish can only be produced by reason.²⁴ But it seems that the second premise is not granted by Aristotle, because, on the one hand, nonrational animals may also grasp the "good," and on the other hand, the object of appetite may also appear good to the agent. The following two passages show these two aspects clearly. When speaking of the three factors in *all animal movements*, Aristotle says,

[T20] All movement involves three factors, (1) that , which originates the movement (τὸ κινουῦν), (2) that by means of , which it originates it (ᾧ κινεῖ), and (3) that , which is moved (τὸ κινούμενον). "That , which originates the movement" has two meanings: it may mean either something , which itself is unmoved or that , which at once moved and is moved. Here *that , which moves without itself being moved is the realizable good* (τὸ μὲν ἀκίνητον τὸ πρακτὸν ἀγαθόν), that , which at once moves and is moved is the faculty of desire...that , which is in motion is the animal. The instrument , which desire employs to produce movement is bodily. (*DA* III.10.433b13-19; see also *De motu animalium* [DMA] 6.700b25-29)

And in his discussion of the object of wish, Aristotle says,

[T21] The excellent person is far superior because he sees what is true in each case, being himself a sort of standard and measure. In the many, however, pleasure would seem to cause deception, since *it appears good when it is not* (οὐ γὰρ οὐσα ἀγαθὸν φαίνεται). Certainly, *they choose what is pleasant as good*, and avoid pain as bad (αἰροῦνται οὖν τὸ ἡδὺ ὡς ἀγαθόν, τὴν δὲ λύπην ὡς κακὸν φεύγουσιν). (*NE* III.4.1113a32-b2; see also *EE* VII.2.1235b18-1236a10)

This is important, because this is to say that wish is *not generated by reason*, but more like *recognized by reason* as something good. Unlike the good or virtuous person, who wishes for the real good, the base or the common people only wish for the apparent good, just like a sick person might not be able to tell accurately a given flavor because his taste is misled by, say, the high temperature of his tongue (*NE* III.4.1113a22-31).

²³ Grönroos takes this remarks to mean "even the as-yet non-rational infant has the propensity for wish" (Grönroos 2015, 68), but this is not persuasive given the context, for it is clear that Aristotle does not speak of "propensity" here, but something already actualized in infant.

²⁴ Cooper 1996/1999 argues for the different objects of desire most emphatically.

Last of all, as we have seen above, we may wish impossible and irrational things, even like immortality, and this does not seem to be something generated or produced by reason.

2.2 *Boulēsis*_[r] and *Prohairesis*

As we have seen above in [F2], Aristotle calls *prohairesis* "deliberative desire," but curiously, this "desire" is not the desire we just discussed, i.e., *boulēsis*_[e]. Here we have to take a closer look at [T10] and [T11]. Still more curiously, there are parallel textual problems in these two passages. In the majority of the manuscripts, [T10] has βούλευσιν and this is also the choice of most of the editors and translators (e.g., Ross 1925, Rowe and Broadie 2002, Crisp 2004, Taylor 2006, Reeve 2014). Only M^b in Bywater's list has *boulēsin* (this variation was noted by Aspasius 2006, 75.1-11); Gauthier/Jolif 1970 and Irwin 1999 follow this line of reading. The situation of [T11] is similar. Most of the MSS have βουλευόμεθα, and this is also the choice in Susemihl's text, and followed by Woods 1982, Solomon in Barnes 1984, Kenny 2013, Simpson 2013. But in OCT, the editors follow some manuscripts (V, Λ¹), Dirlmeier and Rowe, choose βουλόμεθα, and this is followed by Inwood and Woolf 2013.

Besides the fact that the majority of the MSS support the "deliberation" reading, , which makes perfect senses in these contexts. We also have strong philosophical reasons to favor this reading. In [T10], the context shows clearly that what we desire is the *result* of deliberation, but so far all the discussion of *boulēsis* in the *NE* is about its role of setting the goal, and thus provides the starting point of deliberation, rather than the result of deliberation. Furthermore, this *boulēsis*_[e] is unspecified as we have seen above, and thus cannot become action immediately, but what is indicated in [T10] is a specific desire for immediate action.

This also sheds important light on how to understand the parallel case in [T11]. Furthermore, we can make two more observations in [T11]. First, the context of [T11] is about "deliberative desire," and if we accept βουλόμεθα, it will become a discussion that both starts and ends with deliberation, but the middle and explanatory part ("*gar*" at 1226b18) has nothing to do with deliberation. Second, if we take the "wish" readings in both places, we have to accept that Aristotle speaks of two different senses of wish and introduces some strange vocabulary in this very short passage, for the "wish" in "we all *wish for* the things we *prohairoumetha*" can only be the desire in accordance with *prohairesis*, and this will be strange since *prohairesis* itself is the desire to do certain action; whereas the "wish" in "it is not the case that we *prohairoumetha* all things we *wish for*" can only be the desire that sets the end for deliberation.

In these passages Aristotle calls *prohairesis* "deliberative desire," i.e., desire in accordance with deliberation. Given Aristotle's exhaustive tripartition of desire into appetites, spirit, and *boulēsis*,²⁵ this desire that follows from deliberation cannot be otherwise than *boulēsis*. Therefore, I call it *boulēsis_[r]*, a desire resulting from deliberation.²⁶ But interestingly Aristotle never calls this kind of desire *boulēsis* in his ethical treatises (except we accept the "wish" reading in [T10] and [T11]), and whenever he mentions *boulēsis*, he means *boulēsis_[e]*, i.e., the one that sets the goal. And so far as I am aware, the only undoubted reference to *boulēsis_[r]* is in the *DA* III.10.433a23-24 as we quoted above: "*boulēsis* is desire, and when movement is produced in accordance with calculation, it is also in accordance with *boulēsis*."

Given the standard use of *boulēsis* as the desire for the goal of deliberation or *prohairesis*, Aristotle probably should not have called this desire "*boulēsis*," and thus introduce an unnecessary ambiguity, for this *boulēsis* in the sense of the result of rational calculation, is the same as the "deliberative desire" in [T10] and [T11], and this is precisely *prohairesis*.

2.3 Success and failure of *prohairesis* to motivate action

According to the above pictures, we may reach the following diagram [D1] to describe the basic structure of *prohairesis*:

[D1] Normal cases



In this diagram, there is no gap between *prohairesis* and action, for Aristotle says in [T15], "the last thing in the analysis would seem to be the first that comes into being." And in the famous discussion of "practical syllogism," the actual procedure of deliberation, in *DMA*, Aristotle also says that *the conclusion of practical syllogism is action*, such as the following example:

²⁵ *EE* II.10.1225b24-26 provides the clearest support for the exhaustiveness of this division; see also *DA* II.3.414b2, *DMA* 6.700b22, 7.701a36-b1, *EE* II.7.1223a26-27, *Rhet.* I.10.1369a1-7.

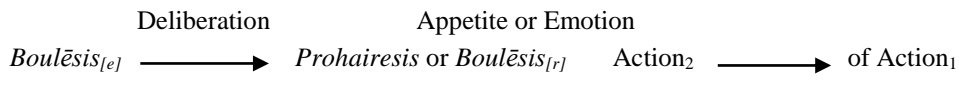
²⁶ Some commentators take this as the standard meaning of *boulēsis*, for example, Irwin (1980) and Cooper (1988/1999). According to this interpretation, *boulēsis* is not only a rational desire, but also a *reasoned desire*. Grönroos (2015), pp. 65-67 provides a good criticism of this view.

- (a) I need a covering.
- (b) A coat is a covering.
- (c) I need a coat.
- (d) What I need I ought to make.
- (e) I make a coat.

The goal or first premise of this syllogism, i.e., "I need a covering," is hardly something produced or generated by reason, but more likely from a direct sense of chilliness, and then *recognized by reason* as an appropriate goal to be achieved. And (b)-(e) represent a deliberative process, and when I reach the conclusion or *prohairesis* in (e), I will start making a coat immediately. This is indeed the *normal* case. When we reach a *prohairesis* about what particular action should be done to promote the goal set by our *boulēsis*, we naturally follow this *prohairesis* and do the action, which is immediately practicable. This is also the sense when Aristotle says the decision and action are the same (*Met.* VI.1.1025b23-24).

But in the above context of *DMA*, Aristotle also raises a restriction, "if there is no hindrance or necessity" (ἄν μή τι κωλύη ἢ ἀναγκάζῃ, 7.701a16), and in the *NE* account of "practical syllogism," similar restriction is also at place: "it is necessary for someone who is able and unhindered to act on this at the same time (ἀνάγκη τὸν δυνάμενον καὶ μὴ κωλυόμενον ἅμα τοῦτο καὶ πράττειν)" (*NE* VII.3.1147a30-31). These hindrances or necessities may be something external that intervenes, such as someone stops me from doing the things I decide to do. Furthermore, there is another sense of hindrance, which explains certain *abnormal* cases, when our *prohairesis* is not realized due to some internal hindrance.²⁷ The most obvious abnormal case is weak *akrasia* in which the agent forms a correct *prohairesis*, but fails to perform the action in accordance with this *prohairesis*, because he is weak, and easily overcome by appetite or emotion (see [T2]). So for this kind of akratic person, he reaches the correct *prohairesis* or practical conclusion, but fails to turn this conclusion into action. And the following diagram [D2] shows the mechanism of this abnormal case:

[D2] Abnormal cases



²⁷ This is the way Charles 2009 understands "hindrance." See Müller 2015, 26-27, for an objection of this reading from more philological point of view. But as Müller shows in n.90, Aristotle uses *kōluein* to mean the prohibition that reason imposes to stop the agent from following certain desires or emotions, if so, there seems to be nothing to prevent the opposite process, i.e., appetite imposes some prohibition to stop the result of reasoning, i.e., *prohairesis*, to be carried out.

In this diagram, *boulēsis_[e]* is what we take to be good, and sets the goal for a *prohairesis*. It is unspecified, such as "I want to be courageous," or "I want to be healthy," or "I would like to enjoy some good music as relaxation."²⁸ With this end set, our reason or deliberation comes into play and does the analysis, and it reaches a *prohairesis* concerning the action, *prohairesis_[r]*, which can be done immediately, and *prohairesis_[e]*, which can best promote the goal. This *prohairesis* may be something like "(in order to be courageous) I should hold my position," "(in order to be healthy) I should take a walk," or "(in order to enjoy music) I should go to the National Theater." In *normal* cases, this *prohairesis* or *boulēsis_[r]* will be actualized in action, so the result of practical syllogism will be action. In these cases, while *boulēsis_[e]* and *boulēsis_[r]* are not the same, they are closely related, for *boulēsis_[r]*, the immediate moving cause or motivation of action, is a direct transmission from *boulēsis_[e]*, the more remote moving cause or motivation, and is a specification and determination of *boulēsis_[e]*. But in *abnormal* cases, *boulēsis_[r]* is overcome by the impact or hindrance of emotion and/or appetite, so the agent fails to actualize his *prohairesis*. In our examples, the agent may be too afraid to hold his position, too greedy to stop eating another big chunk of cake, or too lazy to go to the National Theater.

IV. Significance of *Prohairesis*

I will conclude by briefly commenting on some of the significances of *prohairesis* in Aristotle's moral psychology.

1. Borderline of Rational Action

It is well-known that Aristotle uses the word "action" (*praxis*) in various ways. The broadest sense is whatever is done by an agent, both voluntary and involuntary. The second broadest sense is voluntary action, i.e., "what has its principle in the agent himself, knowing the particulars that constitute the action" (*NE* III.1.1111a20-21). Both rational and nonrational actions (nonrational actions are those from appetite, spirit, or from an episode of emotion) can be voluntary, and bear praise and blame, thus moral responsibility, for the agent. Aristotle is even happy to call animals and children to have these two kinds of ac-

²⁸ Therefore, unlike Müller 2016, I think unharmed pleasure can be the object of *boulēsis_[e]*, since it can be recognized or taken as something good. So his case is actually not an example that challenges the scope of *prohairesis*.

tions (*NE* III.2.1111b6-10). The third sense is *praxis prohairetikē* i.e., the action based on *prohairesis*. This may be called "rational action," narrowly human, and more narrowly reserved for adults who have rational capacity. *Praxis prohairetikē*, as we have discussed above, is action whose starting point is wish and brought about through rational calculation or deliberation. It is a sub-set of voluntary action, and *prohairesis* provides the efficient cause for rational action. The most narrow and most strict sense is rational action, which has the action itself as end, not serving any further end. It is more narrow than the third both in the sense that it has to be correct rational action, thus distinguished from bad ones, and in the sense that it is its own end, thus distinguished from productive actions (see *NE* I.1.1094a3-6, VI.2.1139b1-4).

Prohairesis, thus understood, provides a threshold for distinguishing rational and non-rational actions, and further pins down the moral responsibility of the agent to his reason, and his fully developed character (since we at least "co-responsible [*sunaition*] for our own character"; *NE* III.5.1114b21-24), as we will see in the next point.

2. *Prohairesis* Better Reveals One's Character

Aristotle always emphasizes the difference between one's action and character. It is precisely this salient feature of his ethical perspective that justifies the gap between ancient character-based ethics and modern action-based moral philosophy. A good action, say a just distribution of goods, may be done by chance, compulsion, someone else's instruction, or even out of hypocrisy; and an unjust action may also be done by chance, compulsion, out of ignorance, neglect, or an outburst of anger or *thumos* (see *EE* II.11.1228a11-17; *NE* II.4.1105a21-26, V.8.1135b11-25). It is only action out of *prohairesis*, i.e., out of rational deliberation, that reveals one's true character, and thus is more subject to praise and blame than the action itself. It is from one's *prohairesis*, i.e., from what things he takes into consideration and how he reaches the action he actually performs, that we can fully judge his character. Aristotle's distinction between an unjust person and an unjust action makes this clear enough, "if *prohairesis* causes him to inflict the harm, he does injustice, and this is the sort of act of injustice that makes an agent unjust... a person is just if his *prohairesis* causes him to do justice; one does justice if one merely does it voluntarily" (*NE* V.8.1136a1-5), and more generally, *prohairesis* "is thought to be most closely bound up with virtue and discriminate character better than actions do" (*NE* III.2.1111b5-6; see also IV.7.1127b14-15, *Topics* IV.5.126a30-126b3; *Rhetoric* I.2.1355b18-21). This is certainly in line with Aristotle's famous definition of ethical virtue as a "*hexis prohairetikē*" ("state that issue in decision"; *NE* II.6.1106b36-1107a3).

On the other hand, Aristotle also realizes that it is difficult to judge one's decision, and that in most cases we have to judge one's character through action, so he does not downplay the importance of action and simply values good intention, because he nevertheless holds that activity (*energeia*) is more important than mere state (*hexis*) or possession (*ktēsis*) (see *NE* I.8.1098b31-1099a7). Therefore, he says, "it is because of the difficulty of discerning the quality of *prohairesis* that we are compelled to judge what someone is like on the basis of his deeds. So activity is more choiceworthy but *prohairesis* is more praiseworthy (αἰρετώτερον μὲν οὖν ἢ ἐνέργεια, ἐπαινετώτερον δ' ἢ προαίρεσις)" (*EE* II.11.1228a15-18).

But when he comes to rhetoric and poetic composition, Aristotle instructs the rhetorician or poet to overcome this difficulty. In epideictic rhetoric, to establish the goodness of one's character, the rhetorician "should try to show that his actions are in accordance with *prohairesis*. It is useful for him to have acted often. Therefore, one should make coincidences and accidents as *prohairesis* (διὸ καὶ τὰ συμπτώματα καὶ τὰ ἀπὸ τύχης ὡς ἐν προαιρέσει ληπτέον). For many similar examples seem to be a sign of virtue and *prohairesis*" (*Rhet.* I.9.1367b23-27).²⁹ And the way to establish the goodness of a dramatic personage is to compose some lines of speech or actions to reveal his or her *prohairesis*, and by doing this to reveal his good character (*Poet.* 15.1454a17-19).

3. A New Psychology of Action

In Plato, the relation between reason and desire is usually a picture of division and suppression, even for the virtuous person. We only need to remind ourselves of the allocation of appetite, spirit and reason into different parts of the body in the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, the image of multiform beast for the appetitive part in the *Republic*, the interesting function of liver in the *Timaeus*, and the famous metaphor of charioteer and the two horses in the *Phaedrus*. But moral psychology is developed into a new stage in Aristotle, where desire and reason can be perfectly harmonious, even hardly distinguishable. This is especially clearly revealed in the ambiguous status of *prohairesis* as either "desiring intellect" or "thinking desire," and this ambiguity, in turn, best shows Aristotle's deep insight into the nature of human soul and human action. In transforming a non-philosophical word into an important philosophical term, Aristotle also formed a new moral psychology.

But somewhat curiously and unfortunately, when Hellenistic and Neoplatonic philosophy took over the stage, we see a backward step toward the Socratic/Platonic suppressive model of desire in moral psychology, and this more balanced Aristotelian insight was

²⁹ Translation of the *Rhetoric* is Roberts in Barnes 1984, with amendments.

somehow lost from sight. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take a fresh look at this rather unique Aristotelian heritage, especially from the perspective of *prohairesis*.³⁰

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