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A neglected strategy of the Aristotelian Alexander on Necessity and Responsibility *

A justly influential author, Michael Frede, has treated as an orthodoxy, needing no discussion, what had earlier been put forward as an interpretation of Alexander, and put forward in an objective spirit, in a seminal article by Susanne Bobzien, an article which I have reprinted in *Aristotle Re-interpreted*.¹ She discussed the Stoics' opponent, Alexander of Aphrodisias, who held the Aristotelian chair in Athens five hundred years after Aristotle's death, at or soon after 200 AD. He was the greatest defender of Aristotelianism, and at a time when Aristotelianism needed defending against the refurbished versions of Stoicism and Platonism. Her interpretation of Alexander on this subject has now been treated not only as an orthodoxy, but as a ground for a sustained onslaught on Alexander as caught in a hopeless tangle, which will, I am afraid, mislead some readers, if nothing is said on the other side. I will draw attention to two small passages of Alexander, mentioned but not discussed in Bobzien's enlightening treatment, which I think may suggest that he had an entirely different strategy. I also disagree with the other objections raised against Alexander, and will try to fill out the picture of his approach, as I see it. But first I should give the context of Bobzien's interpretation; I will come to what I think is a mistaken use of her interpretation later.

In her article, Bobzien homes in on Alexander being the first to deny a certain Stoic principle. The principle is that if in the same circumstances (*periestêkota*), as Alexander puts it in his *On Fate* – or *external* circumstances, as it is more misleadingly put by him or someone else in

* I am glad to dedicate what follows to M.M.McCabe, whose seminars, single or joint, have inspired many generations of students and colleagues, and were sometimes billed as being about 'old chestnuts'. For the present book in her honour, chapters have been invited on 'old chestnuts' or 'sacred cows'. I have no sacred cow in view, but something of similar importance: an influential treatment of one interpretation of Alexander as if it were an orthodoxy not requiring discussion and as seriously discrediting Alexander. I thank Verity Harte for helping me to tighten up my argument.

¹ Susanne Bobzien, 'The inadvertent conception and late birth of the free will problem', *Phronesis* 43, 1998, pp. 133-175, reprinted in Richard Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle Re-interpreted, New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators*, Bloomsbury, London 2016, Ch. 3.

Mantissa (Supplement to *On the Soul*)² – one acted (or chose, as the *Mantissa* adds) now in one way, now in another, there would be a change without any cause, which is impossible.³ The *Mantissa*'s confinement to *external* circumstances is misleading because the Stoics think one's *internal* psychological state is also relevant to whether one can act otherwise. Bobzien finds no precedent for Alexander's denial of the Stoic principle that one will act the same way in the same circumstances, even among Middle Platonist discussions of Aristotle's undetermined sea battle in his *On Interpretation* 9. In her definitive book of the same year, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, she throws new light again by pointing out that the name of the 2nd century CE Stoic who pressed this question, Philopator, is given in the late fourth century report of the Christian Nemesius, Bishop of Emesa. It was Philopator's earlier question to which Alexander felt obliged to reply. Nemesius records Philopator's argument a third way by saying that with the same *causes as circumstances* (*aitiôn periestêkotôn*), it is not possible that the same things happen now one way, now otherwise.⁴ I think that Philopator's challenge made Alexander make up his mind how far in advance necessitation would be objectionable. At one point, Alexander tellingly objects to our doing or not doing something having been inevitable before we were *born*.⁵ Many people, but not all, would indeed see inevitability before birth, like Alexander, as particularly threatening to the idea of our moral responsibility, that is, to the idea that we can be justifiably praised or blamed for what we do. Aristotle had been vaguer in the discussion of his sea battle.⁶ Various ethical ideas other than responsibility would be jeopardised, he thought, if our acts had been inevitable ten thousand years ago, or for the whole of time. But under pressure from Philopator's question, Alexander goes further. Even in the extreme case, where the same external and internal circumstances have recurred, it **still need not be** inevitable beforehand how we will act.

The denial of Philopator's principle is one new step by Alexander, but Bobzien rightly argues that he does not take the further step of introducing the idea of *will* as being free. In another innovation of her book, she finds the first move of this type in the Christian tradition marginally earlier in the Christian Justin Martyr (died c. 165).

² Not all passages in the *Mantissa* are necessarily by Alexander, so I will rely on his *On Fate*, but most of the *Mantissa* passages I cite are in agreement with *On Fate*.

³ Alexander *On Fate*, Ch. 15, 185,7-11; *Mantissa* (Supplement to *On the Soul*) § 23, 174,3-7. The authenticity of this part of the *Mantissa* has not been challenged.

⁴ Nemesius *On the Nature of Man* pp. 174, 3-27, Morani.

⁵ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 17, 188, 15.

⁶ Aristotle *On Interpretation*, Ch. 9.

Alexander's neglected strategy, *On Fate* Ch. 15 and *Mantissa* § 23

Now I will turn to the two small passages of Alexander (if the second is also by him) which I believe may show that he had a different and neglected strategy: *On Fate* Chapter 15 and *Mantissa* (*Supplement to On the Soul*) § 23.

For indeed if our decision (*krisis*) about things to be done took place with a view to one goal (*skopos*), perhaps there would be some reason to hold that our decisions about the same things would always turn out similar. But since that is not so (for we choose (*haireisthai*) what we chose sometimes on account of the noble, sometimes on account of the pleasant and sometimes on account of the advantageous, and it is not the same things that produce these outcomes), it is possible for us now to be moved towards the noble <and choose> these things at hand in our surroundings and at another time [to choose] others, according as we make our judgement in reference to the pleasant or the advantageous.⁷

For if one had one goal in relation to which one made one's decision refer, it would have been reasonable that one should always choose the same thing from among the same things, at least if one always had and preserved the same stance in relation to the goal set before one and looked to it in making one's decision between things. But since there are several ends to which one looks in making one's decision and choice of things to be done (for one has before one's eyes the pleasant, the advantageous and the noble, and not all the things surrounding one have the same relation to each of these), one makes one's judgement about the things and one's choice among them sometimes in relation to the pleasant, sometimes in relation to the noble and at other times in relation to the advantageous, and will not always do the same things, nor always choose the same things, even when all the surrounding circumstances are the same. But each time [will do or choose] the things which most appear to lead to the goal.⁸

I believe that Alexander is here drawing a distinction, which I once⁹ ascribed to Aristotle and defended as a good one, between being caused and being necessitated. Being caused, for Aristotle, is having a certain kind of explanatory factor. In the passages ascribed to his follower Alexander, our choice or action has a perfectly good *cause* (explanatory factor) in one of the three standing motives cited. But *which* of our standing motives will operate is not necessitated. Alexander wants thereby to show that even when necessity is absent, a cause can be present, contrary to Philopator's charge from the beginning of each chapter, that the absence of necessity would imply a causeless change.

⁷ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 15, 185, 21-28. < > represents the conjectural filling of a suspected gap in the Greek; [] an explanatory addition to the English.

⁸ Alexander *Mantissa* § 23, 174, 13-24.

⁹ Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, Duckworth, London 1980, Chicago University Press 2006, Ch. 2

There are several advantages of this interpretation of the two passages. First, instead of the passages playing no obvious role, they will provide a relevant defence against the point of immediate concern, Philopator's charge that Alexander's denial of the need for necessity before the moment of choice or decision saddles him with changes occurring without a cause. Further, we shall see that this interpretation will defend Alexander also from the charges of a modern interpreter, that Alexander has got himself into a hopeless tangle. The advantages of the interpretation, then, are that Alexander's passages thus come out neither irrelevant, nor confused. If that makes the interpretation of Alexander plausible, then it may add a certain amount of support also for my earlier identification of the same distinction between cause and necessity in the founding father of Alexander's school, Aristotle.

In the two chapters, Alexander first argues that the person is the cause, and, in more detail, that the person's deliberation (*boulê*), deliberate choice (*prohairesis*) and judgement (*krisis*) are the cause.¹⁰ That much is intended to establish his first point, that there is a *cause*. To me his most interesting argument for the second point, that there need be no *necessity*, is his observation that we have more than one motive, and he names the noble, the pleasant and the advantageous.¹¹ Indeed, we do have different standing motives, and the adherents of Philopator, who introduced the theme of necessity at the beginning of each chapter, would need to show that necessity has to govern which standing motive takes effect. I myself think that that cannot be shown and that Alexander is safe. But it is not whether he is safe that matters for present purposes, but that this is the strategy Alexander intends. He needs such a strategy, if he is to answer Philopator's actual objection, that he has created a change without a cause. The most relevant change is the person's action. Alexander's strategy says that whichever standing motive operates provides a perfectly good cause of that action. Alexander does not have to worry that from his perspective there is something else that may have no explanation, let alone a necessitating explanation, although that is not necessarily because the motives are incommensurable. There may be no explanation of why this time one standing motive operated, last time another. The objection that this would divorce the agent from his wants or beliefs, or from his character, disposition, or reason does not seem to me convincing. The agent may by character always be equally attracted to two or more incentives, or may be volatile in susceptibilities. It is up to the Stoics to show that there must be an explanation, and a determining one, of the agent's variability, and this may be difficult. The important

¹⁰ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 15, 185, 15-16; *Mantissa* § 23, 174,9-10.

¹¹ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 15, 185, 21-28; *Mantissa* § 23, 174,13-24.

point is that the objection Philopator did offer has been answered: the cause of the action which he desiderates is the operative motive.

Frede takes Alexander's ability to choose otherwise in the same circumstances as coming close to the belief of his predecessor as Sather lecturer, Albrecht Dihle, in a will that decides or chooses in a way that is independent of the desires and beliefs of the person. Tony Long as editor has found a passage of Dihle's published Sather lectures in which Dihle says something like that in his own person.¹² But the wording applied by Frede to *Alexander* is very close to that of Susanne Bobzien's article, when she introduces the view that I can decide between alternative courses of action independently of certain internal factors, e.g. my desires, and goes on to apply this to Alexander.¹³

Alexander has another related but different strategy that Bobzien mentions. In his *On Fate* version, the wise person does not do what they choose by being necessitated (*katênakasmenôs*), For it might at some time seem reasonable (*eulogon*) to a wise person to refute a prediction of their activity and show the activity's freedom (*eleutheron*), in Alexander's carefully explicated sense, by *not* doing at some time what would [otherwise] have been brought about by that wise person as [also] reasonable (*eulogôs*). In the *Mantissa* version, even if a person chose the same things in the same circumstances, thinking them to be more reasonable, it would not follow that the choosing was necessitated (*katênakasmenôs*), nor that *external* factors were causes of the decisions [sc. which would make the choice forced, *biaion*]. For the power is available (*exesti*) to that person, if they want to show at some time that that their choice is not necessitated (*katênakasmenên*) and want to defeat the prediction, also to chose what they did not [otherwise] think reasonable. Once again, what is being denied here is necessitation, not causation. Their choice depends in either case on what they think reasonable and in one case partly on competitiveness of character, which is explicitly mentioned. Their normal desires are operating, and the desires correspond to their characters as wise or competitive. A further case is mentioned in *On Fate* to show that physiognomic predictions cannot help getting it wrong. This is the case in which Socrates says that, by the discipline of philosophy, he overcame his *original* nature (*phusis*),

¹² Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, University of California, Berkeley 1982, p. 135.

¹³ This is mentioned only as a consequence of Alexander's view in Bobzien' article at pp. 134-5, 139, 171 (pp. 126, 130, 156 in *Aristotle Re-interpreted*. In the last two passages she adds independence of the agent's disposition, character reason or nature, which is not a cause). But it is repeated as a criticism of Alexander in Michael Frede, *A Free Will*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2011, p. 98.

which would have made him a womaniser.¹⁴ In none of the cases of the ability to refute predictions is the suggestion that wants and beliefs in line with *present* character do not act as *causes*. The point is the entirely different one that the actions are not *necessitated* and in the *Mantissa* are also not *forced* by external factors. In the case of Socrates, what was overridden was only his *original* nature and *potential* character, not his *acquired* character, which Aristotle would call his *second* nature. In the other cases, character need not have been overridden at all, any more than desires and beliefs.

I now come to Frede's interpretation of Alexander of Aphrodisias and attack based on that interpretation. Frede's attack was delivered in his celebrated Sather lectures, beautifully edited from an unfinished manuscript after his untimely death by Tony Long.¹⁵ It concerned Alexander's views on moral responsibility, or liability to praise and blame, and the type of freedom which he took that to require. I shall attempt to make a case on the other side by first trying to explain more fully what Alexander was doing. I shall say that that included some positive and unexpected turns, and that he is not guilty of the errors with which he is charged.

Up to us versus freedom

Alexander was interested in necessity and causation not only for its own sake, but because of its implications for whether necessity would allow our actions or choices to be *up to us*, in other words, liable to justified praise or blame. Many people may think that Alexander's claim is implausible when he says that necessity must be avoided right up the moment of action or choice, if our actions or choices are to be up to us. But opinions may be more evenly divided on his view that our behaviour could not be up to us, and hence that we could not be liable to justified praise or blame for it, if that behaviour had been necessary or inevitable *before we were born*.¹⁶ Inevitability before birth is indeed a more obvious source of worry for those who feel responsibility threatened, than inevitability a fraction before the moment of action, which is what Alexander resists.

There should be no such dispute about whether behaviour inevitable from before birth could be *free*, to which I shall come, because on the Stoic Epictetus' conception of freedom as invulnerability, it clearly could be, while on Alexander's conception of freedom as unnecessitated choice or action, it clearly could not. But whether behaviour inevitable from

¹⁴ Cicero *On Fate* 5.10; cf. *Tusculan Disputations* 4.80

¹⁵ Michael Frede, *A Free Will*, pp.95-101. The book represents his celebrated Sather lectures, beautifully edited by A.A.Long.

¹⁶ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 17, 188, 15

before birth could be *up to us* and hence whether we could be liable to justified praise or blame, is a question on which then as now there seems to be no agreement. No clinching argument has been found, and people continue to appeal to different intuitions. In these circumstances, people may feel exasperated and think that their opponents' arguments beg the question. It is interesting that Alexander himself makes such a charge in Chapter 34 of his *On Fate*. He complains that his Stoic opponents claim that necessity *all along* is compatible with things being up to us, on the ground that it is compatible with our having virtue or vice. But that begs the question, he says, because as one who denies that *up to us* is compatible, he also denies that *virtue and vice* are compatible with *all along* necessity. However, I think we do better to avoid exasperation, since it is felt by both sides.

Although Philopator was challenging Alexander to accept only necessity *fractionally before* the action, the Stoics themselves accepted *all along* necessity, despite some attempts by the third head, Chrysippus, to find special senses of necessity in which it was not required. I have considered these attempts elsewhere, but I did not think they removed the necessity that worried the indeterminist,¹⁷ and I am not aware of Epictetus or other later Stoics relying on them. Let us now look at the definition by the Stoics and by Alexander first of *up to us* and then of *freedom*.

Alexander's partial acceptance of a new Stoic definition of up to us, *On Fate*, Chs 13-14

Bobzien's discussion of Philopator points out that Alexander's *On Fate* Ch. 13 reports, and Ch. 14 repeats, a new Stoic definition of *up to us* (*eph' hēmin*) which seems also to be the work of Philopator, since the phrasing is repeated by Nemesius in the passage which discusses him.¹⁸ What is *up to us* (humans) comes about not merely *through* us, as earlier Stoics had said, but in this refined definition through our being impelled (*hormê*) and giving our *assent* (*sunkatathesis*). What is *up to* the *irrational* animals, however, comes about through their being impelled in a sense, but not through their assent, since assent is given by *reason* and they lack reason. At most they should be said to yield (*eikein*) rather than assenting and to engage in behaviour (*energein*), rather than acting (*prattein*). So we may guess that 'up to an animal', unlike 'up to us', does not for these Stoics imply moral responsibility. As for a stone or fire,

¹⁷ Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, Duckworth, London 1980, Chicago University Press 2006, Bloomsbury 2013, Ch. 4.

¹⁸ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 13, 182, 16-19; Ch. 14, 183, 22-3; 184, 12-13; Nemesius *On the Nature of Man* 105, 9-12, Morani.

certain things come about *through* these, such as falling, or heating, but these activities are not described as *up to* the stone or fire.

It is striking and somewhat surprising that in Ch. 14, Alexander *accepts* much of this new Stoic definition of *up to*, which will lead him to further divergences from Aristotle. But he does add two points of his own.¹⁹ The Stoic view was that assent and yielding are given to a motivating appearance (*hormêtikê phantasia*) about what to do. Alexander picks up both the Stoic appeal to appearance and their belief that assent is given by reason. A human has reason, he says, as a judge (*kritês*) of appearances about things to be done (*phantasiai peri tôn prakteôn*), and uses it to examine (*exetazein*) whether the appearance is really the case. If not (and this is Alexander's major point), a human does not concede (*sunkhôrein*) to it, but resists (*enhistasthai*). In this way a human can abstain from, or pass by, what *appears* to be pleasant or advantageous. Endorsing the Stoic term 'assent' and the Stoic belief that it is rational, he adds his own term 'deliberation', but not in the context in which it was most used by Aristotle (deliberation about policies for achieving what matters in life). The only deliberation he mentions is about the reliability of appearances in a particular situation (a typical Stoic concern), and what to do if reality is different. The very essence of a human as a rational being is to have within himself (or herself) the original source (*arkhê*) of choosing (*helesthai*) or not choosing, so that someone who abolishes that, abolishes the human being. Alexander's strategy is to accept the Stoic requirement of rational assent to (some) appearances, and further to insist on something else with which the Stoics would agree, that we can examine and reject appearances. But he then concludes that we can abstain, pass by and choose *or not*. It is presumably at that point, although he does not say so, that he thinks that Stoic 'all along' necessity has all along closed off any alternative outcome.

Alexander's other objection in Ch. 14 starts with a small oversight pointed out by Bobzien. He wrongly thinks the Stoics allow 'up to *us*' to irrational animals, whereas in fact what the Stoics allow them is described as 'up to *animals*'.²⁰ But Alexander would object to this too because he wants to deny that anything is *up to* animals. This denial is forced on him by his strategy of accepting the new Stoic definition of *up to us* in terms of occurring through the assent of reason, since most Aristotelians agree with Stoics that animals lack reason.²¹ Alexander confronts Stoic views either by rejecting them, or by accepting them as

¹⁹ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 14, 183, 21- 184, 20.

²⁰ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 14, 183, 23-4.

²¹ Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus is an exception according to Porphyry *On Abstinence* Book 3.25.3.

causing no threat to Aristotelianism. But in the present case, I believe his acceptance causes him to diverge from Aristotle.

How does Alexander diverge? He recognises a chapter in which Aristotle explicitly allows that animal behaviour can be voluntary.²² Since Aristotle introduced the subject of voluntariness in the same chapter by saying that the voluntary is subject to praise and blame,²³ this is a strong indication that animals can be praised and blamed, as I have argued elsewhere is true of higher domesticated animals.²⁴ As for Alexander, he appears to allow that irrational animals do not merely ‘yield’, but some can give *assent* of a sort,²⁵ but evidently not the assent of reason.

However, Alexander distinguishes *up to us* from the voluntary more explicitly than Aristotle and he denies that anything can be *up to* irrational animals, because of his acceptance that *up to us* involves assent in accordance with reason and judgement, which irrational animals lack.²⁶

Alexander understood this reason and judgement as involving *deliberation*, and Aristotle himself had denied that animals can make a *deliberate* choice of policy (*prohairesis*), something he treats as based on deliberation. Some modern scholars, at least one on the authority of Alexander, have argued that Aristotle intends *up to us* to require either deliberate choice, or the capacity for deliberate choice.²⁷ My reason for doubting this is that two texts from Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* and from the books common to the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics* make voluntariness imply *up to us*, while three texts from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 and 3.5 create this implication indirectly as following from the voluntary having an internal origin of action, and an internal origin of action implying *up to us*.²⁸ In other words, I take Aristotle to allow that behaviour that is voluntary is thereby up to the agent. In that case,

²² Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, 1111b8-9.

²³ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, 1109b31.

²⁴ For what follows, see Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals*, Duckworth London and Cornell University Press 1993, Bloomsbury, London 2013, pp. 108-112.

²⁵ Alexander *On Fate* Ch 14, 183,31.

²⁶ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 14, 183,26-9.

²⁷ Terry Irwin, ‘Reason and responsibility in Aristotle’, in A.Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, California University Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1980, pp. 117-55; Walter G. Englert, ‘Epicurus on the swerve and voluntary action, Atlanta, Georgia, 1987, Ch. 5; Roderick Long’s, ‘Alexander of Aphrodisias and Aristotle on the conditions for moral responsibility’ was based on his PhD dissertation, *Free choice and indeterminism in Aristotle and later antiquity*, Cornell University 1992.

²⁸ Aristotle *Eudemian Ethics* 2.9, 1225b8; *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.8, 1135a24; 3.1, 1110a15-18; 3.5, 1113b19-23; 1114a18-19.

Alexander's acceptance of the Stoic idea that what is *up to us* involves the assent of reason, coupled with his assumption that they do not distinguish between up to *us* and up to *irrational animals*, lead him to diverge from Aristotle in denying that anything is up to irrational animals.²⁹

Alexander on freedom, *On Fate* Chs. 18-19

I must now turn to the invocation of *freedom*, because in *On Fate* Ch. 18, Alexander himself invokes freedom in making a criticism of the Stoics, which may indeed seem to open him to objections. He has just been talking in Ch. 17 of the Stoics as believing that it has been necessitated since before our birth what we will do or not do. Yet, so he complains in Ch. 18, in all they say, the Stoics behave as if they had never heard of that doctrine, by hanging on to what is *free* (*eleutheron*), to which he adds as if it were his gloss 'and *under our own control* (*autexousion*)', and he goes on to mention the need for alternative possibilities of acting *or not acting*, when he uses the phrase '*or not*'.³⁰ The Stoics behave as if they were free in this sense, he complains, when they try to persuade others to a different course, as if they themselves had the power (*exousia*) to do this *or not*, and as if the others were able to choose (*haireisthai*). They also reproach and rebuke people, and again they act as if it were *up to them* (*ep' autois*) to write *or not* and as if they *chose* to write from *philanthropy*. Alexander has already made amply clear what kind of freedom he requires: the freedom in the same circumstances (as Ch. 15 says) to do or choose something *or not*. This kind of freedom is needed, he thinks, for choices being *up to us* and hence liable to praise or blame.

In chapter 19, Alexander extends his invocation of freedom, and complains that the Stoics should have conceded that what is *up to us* is *free* (*eleutheron*), and under our own control (*autexousion*), and in control (*kurion*) of the choice (*hairesis*) and enacting (*praxis*) of *opposite* alternatives (a requirement still stronger than mere alternatives, and

²⁹ It has been put to me on the other side that when Aristotle allows some animal behaviour to be voluntary at 1111a25-6; 1111b8-9 (which I have just argued to be sufficient for its being up to them), he must mean this in an attenuated sense, because animals do not meet the requirement of knowing (*eidenai*) what they are doing. But *eidenai* is a very broad term for cognition which can include non-rational cognition, and my *Animal Minds and Human Morals* includes (see index sv 'Aristotle, animals and minds') what Aristotle does try to deny to animals, including reason and belief (*doxa*), and what he concedes. To give only one example of concession, the lion perceives that the ox is near and rejoices that he will have a meal, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1118a20-2.

³⁰ Alexander *On Fate*, Ch. 18, 188,17-189,8.

indeed too strong).³¹ Nemesis later records the position slightly more fully. He has just enunciated Philopator's formula according to which in the same causal circumstances, necessarily the same things happen and it is not possible that they happen now this way, now otherwise. Nemesis continues: 'But if being impelled (*hormân*) too follows of necessity, where does the *up to us* remain? For what is up to us must be *free* (*eleutheron*). But it would be free [only] if in the same circumstances it were up to us now to be impelled (*hormân*), now not to be impelled.' Here it is still clearer that the freedom required for choices to be up to us is that most favoured by Alexander which, contrary to the Stoics, allows alternative outcomes *in the same causal circumstances*.

The Stoic Epictetus on freedom and freedom by nature

Alexander evidently had not noticed that the Stoic Epictetus had twice said something *superficially* similar to the very thing Alexander asks for in chapters 18 and 19. For seven times Epictetus brings in the idea that certain things are free *by nature* (*eleutheron phusei*).³² The term alternates twice in one passage, *Discourses* 1.9, with 'free', but the qualification 'by nature' can be understood, and 'free by nature' does *not* mean the same as 'free'. Two of the seven passages say that what is *up to us* is free *by nature*.³³ Epictetus had narrowed down the concept of what is *up to us* compared with his predecessors to a small range of psychological acts or attitudes that no tyrant could take away from you, indeed not even Zeus, as he says at 1.1.23 in his very first discourse, which is on what is *up to us*. Two further passages of Epictetus pick out as free *by nature* our *prohairesis*, which might very inadequately be paraphrased as 'our will' and a still further one speaks of what is under the control of our will (*prohairesis*) as free *by nature*.³⁴ Since our will is our disposition to make choices of a characteristic type, or sometimes is our particular choices, Epictetus may seem to be allowing something *related* to the freedom that Alexander desiderates. Of the two passages, which treat what is *up to us* as free *by nature*, the one from *Handbook* 1.2-3 gives extra information.³⁵ 'What is up to us is *free by nature*, unpreventable, unimpedable, but what is not up to us is weak, slavish, preventable, alien. So remember that if you think that what is slavish by nature is free and that what is alien is your own, you will be impeded, grieved, disturbed, you will blame both gods and humans. But if you

³¹ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 19, 189, 9-11.

³² Epictetus *Discourses* 1.19.7; 2.2.3; 2.15.1; 3.22.42; 4.7.8; 4.13.24; *Handbook* 1.2.

³³ Epictetus *Discourses* 2.2.3; *Handbook* 1.2-3.

³⁴ Epictetus *Discourses* 1.9.7-8; 2.15.1 and 4.7.8.

³⁵ Epictetus *Handbook* 1.2-3.

think only what is yours to be yours, and what is alien to be alien, as it is, no one will ever compel you; no one will prevent you, you will blame no one, you will not do a single thing involuntarily, you will not have an enemy, no one will harm you, for neither will you suffer anything harmful.’

Evidently to call something free *by nature* is not to call it free, but to *qualify* the claim that it is free. Hence to understand it, we need to turn to freedom itself (*eleutheria*). Epictetus devotes a whole discourse to it, *Discourse* 4.1. That freedom is a prized quality rarely achieved by anybody. Through careful adjudication of desires, it frees you from inner (4.1.86-7) and outer tyrannies, so that you are enslaved to nothing, not to house, farm, family, clothes, furniture, nor, he adds (4.4.1-2) books – a warning to academics, nor finally to your own body. That is why you can tell the external tyrant that he cannot put *you* in chains, only your leg, 1.1.23. The rare examples of being free he cites are Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic. This Epictetan freedom, unlike Alexander’s freedom, does not in any way require indeterminism, which is not even mentioned throughout the length of 4.1. It is instead a kind of *invulnerability*, which results from a disposition always to make the right choices, such as is also recalled in the passage quoted from *Handbook* 1.2-3. Invulnerability is not the free person’s *motive* for adjudicating desires the right way, but the resulting invulnerability is the reason for the person’s being described as ‘free’.

That suggests that what is free *by nature* is not what is free, but what *would* give you Epictetus’ rare kind of invulnerability, if you would set your heart only on the right psychological attitudes that are up to you, in the sense that no tyrant could take them away from you.

Epictetus does say something else about the particular choices of *everybody*, but it falls short of saying that they are *free*. He says that they are *not compelled*, except by their *other* choices. He is talking of acts of willing (*prohairesis*). He says that even if you act under the threat of death, nothing compelled that in you which is capable of *prohairesis*. Rather, what happened was that one desire (*hormê, orexis*) for survival, defeated another desire to do the right thing, and specifically, one *prohairesis*, or act of willing, was subjected to necessity by another *prohairesis*, 1.17. 23-26. Epictetus’ response that it is un-compelled except by other choices falls a long way short of the freedom (*eleutheria*) that implies *invulnerability*. It might be expressed by the Stoic term *autexousion*, having things under one’s own control. If that latter term is sometimes translated as ‘*freedom*’,³⁶ it too in Stoicism is freedom that falls far short of invulnerability. Epictetus’ claim that action taken under

³⁶ Michael Frede, *A Free Will*, e.g. p. 75 in the Stoics, cf. p. 96 in Alexander.

threat of death is in a way uncompelled shows how distant his interest is from that of Aristotle who chose a very different example of such action, throwing cargo overboard to save your ship in a storm. As the choice of example makes clear, Aristotle's interest is not in your being in a way uncompelled, but in your not being straightforwardly blameworthy. I have argued elsewhere that he gave it two different treatments. It is either involuntary, or voluntary but typically pardonable.³⁷

I have now discussed Alexander's denial of necessity fractionally before the moment of action, his concessions to and differences from the Stoic account of *up to us*, his treatment of freedom and that of the Stoic Epictetus. I hope that this will be of some interest in itself. But it is also necessary for assessing the three objections which have been made to Alexander's counter-intuitive position, in Frede's celebrated lectures.³⁸

Objection1: should Alexander have recognised that Stoic will is free by nature and its choices are under our own control?

A first objection concerns whether Alexander should not have recognised that Epictetus allows that, since the will and its choices are free *by nature*, it is *in principle* open to everyone that all their choices should be *free*. This was one charge made by Michael Frede, who also gave an explanation of Stoic freedom of will in terms of freedom *by nature* in Chapter 5 of his book, *A Free Will*, although without citing any of the seven passages on freedom *by nature*. Stoic freedom of will, he said, was the ability, allowed for by God's constitution of humans, to make our will not only free by nature, but, as in the case of Diogenes and Socrates, also *free*. But the answer to the charge that Alexander should have recognised this should now be clear. Epictetus is not telling us that everyone's choices *are* free (except in the sense of under our control); and the sense in which they could *in principle* be free invokes the rarely achieved ideal of a kind of invulnerability, which though extremely important, as exemplified occasionally in history – I have cited Mahatma

³⁷ Involuntary *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.8, 1135b4; *Eudemian Ethics* 2.8, 1225 a19; voluntary, but pardonable, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, 1110a18; a 24, as discussed in Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, Duckworth, London 1970, Chicago University Press 2006, Bloomsbury, London 2013, pp. 259-263.

³⁸ The three objections by Michael Frede, *A Free Will, Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2011, are compressed into pp. 97-101. I have discussed other aspects of his book in 'Freedom and Will: Graeco-Roman origins', in Richard Seaford, John Wilkins, Matthew Wright, eds, *Selfhood and Soul*, Essays in Honour of Christopher Gill, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

Gandhi and Admiral Stockdale as coming close³⁹ – is not on anyone's view the kind of freedom required for one's being praiseworthy or blameworthy. Alexander may be considered right or wrong to suppose that the freedom required for that purpose is the freedom to act or not in the same circumstances. But he would be right not to count Epictetus' freedom *by nature* as *actually achieved* freedom, nor as freedom in the sense that he needed for his purposes, and it is only to be expected that he would ignore it, even if he had noticed it.

In fact there is no oversight in Alexander at this point, because he makes it explicit what kind of freedom he desiderates. When he says that what is up to us is free, he glosses this by saying that what is up to us is in control of the choice and doing of opposites in the same circumstances.⁴⁰

'Opposites' may be an exaggeration, because only doctors know how to cure as well as to kill. It would have been enough for Alexander to say 'choosing *or not*, doing *or not*'. Alexander's gloss on freedom seems later to be explicated by Nemesius, when he says that what is up to us would be free only if in the same circumstances it would be up to us now to be impelled, now not to be impelled.⁴¹ The point that we can choose or do different things in the very same circumstances had been made by Alexander twice.⁴²

Frede at one point put his objection not in terms of freedom (invulnerability) *by nature*, but in terms simply of freedom, complaining that Alexander failed to see that a Stoic choice might, despite Stoic determinism, be *free*.⁴³ If this is a distinct objection, it will mean freedom in a Stoic sense weaker than invulnerability or invulnerability by nature. A Stoic choice would be *up to us* because of our *assent*, and could also be *autexousion*, under our own control. It would be uncompelled, except by another choice. The will from which it came would be *by nature* free. But Alexander's interest was whether justified praise and blame would be excluded by Stoic necessity even before we were born or fractionally before the moment of action. He would not have seen this interest as being addressed either by Stoic invulnerability, or by any weaker Stoic senses of freedom. Of course, Alexander may be wrong, but if I am right that there is an unresolved and ongoing disagreement among philosophers, at least about the implications of necessity before birth, Alexander could not be expected to accept the Stoic senses of freedom as

³⁹ Richard Sorabji, *Gandhi and the Stoics*, Oxford and Chicago University Presses 2012, Ch. 3; Stockdale earlier in *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 225-7.

⁴⁰ Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 19, 189,9-12.

⁴¹ Nemesius *On the Nature of Man*, 105-6, Morani.

⁴² Alexander *On Fate* Ch. 15, 185, 7 ff; *Mantissa* 174,3 ff.

⁴³ Michael Frede, *A Free Will*, p. 100.

relevant to that. I will now spend a moment on a different objection, before turning to the big one with which I started.

Objection 2: Ability to do a bad job is not what makes a good job praiseworthy

Frede put a different objection to Alexander by saying that an individual's ability to do a bad job is not what *makes* his good job praiseworthy, nor that from which his good job *derives* its merit.⁴⁴ To this I would reply that Alexander's point was that the possibility of his having done otherwise was only a *necessary prerequisite* of someone doing a praiseworthy job, not that it *made* his job praiseworthy. I think there is something to be said for this more modest claim. If from *birth* someone had been unable to do anything less than a good job, I think our attitude might be one of *awe*, but it would not be one of praise, just as Aristotle says that the gods, and even the most godlike of men, are above praise.⁴⁵

Objection 3: Does Alexander's opposition to the necessity of the same action in the same circumstances divorce agents from their motives, desires and beliefs? *On Fate* Ch. 15 and *Mantissa* § 23

We encountered objection 3 earlier, when we noticed Frede ascribing to Alexander the idea that decisions and choices are independent of the desires and beliefs of the person. He ascribed such a view in modern times also to Dihle, but the ascription to *Alexander*, with the same wording, had been made by Bobzien. In fact, the strategy I ascribed to Alexander in the two passages I quoted was very much the opposite. Alexander was there precisely *linking* choices and decisions to the agent's alternative standing motives as cause. The three motives mentioned very much involved desires and beliefs. Alexander's denial of necessity even at the moment of decision or choice did not depend on divorcing decision or choice from motive with its desires and beliefs. It depended instead on there being no necessity which of several standing motives would operate. I therefore think that the third objection fails.

A final objection

Nonetheless, a different objection may be raised against Alexander's reply to Philopator, who charged that Stoicism would make decisions and choices causeless. Alexander's reply, we saw, was that we have more than one standing motive and these are perfectly good causes, even though there need be no necessity which one will operate in the same circumstances. Alexander ought to concede that there may be no

⁴⁴ Michael Frede, loc. cit.

⁴⁵ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.12, 1101b18-34.

explanation of which cause operates, but that was not the objection raised. Philopator's objection was interested in actions or choices being causeless and that has not been proved.

The new objection needs to concede that Philopator's objection has not been proved. But it may still protest that Alexander's position is unbelievable. Against that quite different objection, I shall have, in closing, to recall the argument I used in the book I mentioned above which presented Aristotle too as divorcing cause from necessity.⁴⁶ For Aristotle what we call a cause is one of four types of explanatory factor, as he spells out in *Physics* 2.3, and Alexander would agree. I have argued in my earlier discussion, though that claim is not needed now, that this account of cause avoids the defects of many other definitions, including those in terms of necessitation.⁴⁷ The point of interest now is that whether one has an explanation and even a complete explanation is relative to the question asked. I did not put this forward as a view of explanation formulated by Aristotle. He indeed thinks that, at least within the sphere of physical science, some things are better fitted by *nature* to explain. But this is compatible with their being so fitted in relation to a *question*, and I at any rate think that an explanation or complete explanation has to answer a question. That question often asks for one fact to be explained *in face of* what appears to be another conflicting fact.⁴⁸ To adapt one of my earlier examples, a good student might have two incentives, (a) the desire to attend a good lecture course, and (b) the struggle if he has to live exceptionally far off campus. Suppose he attends 9 out of 10 lectures. Someone might want to know why he missed one lecture, *in face of the contrasting fact that* he was motivated and the lectures were interesting, or *in face of the contrasting fact that* even unmotivated students were present. There is a perfectly good explanation: the exceptional distance to campus was always a disincentive, and that was his reason for missing one lecture, to his own regret. The lack of necessity has not detached him, as alleged, from his past motivations. Of course, a determinist will hold that there must have been some *extra* causal factor on the one occasion when he did not attend the lecture (his children were less well; he was more tired), just as an indeterminist will say that there need not have been. But these are merely expressions of faith, which tell us little more than 'I am a determinist', or 'I am an indeterminist'. It is not possible to argue the case by saying that without an extra factor there will be no

⁴⁶ *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, Ch. 2

⁴⁷ *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, Ch. 3.

⁴⁸ I took this point (*ibid.* pp. 29-30) from Michael Scriven, 'Explanations, predictions and laws', *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* vol. 3, ed. H. Feigl and G. Maxwell, Minneapolis 1962; and review in *Review of Metaphysics* 17, 1963-4, pp. 403-24, of E. Nagel's *The Structure of Science*.

explanation of the non-attendance. The exceptional distance is a perfectly good explanation in relation to the question asked. Moreover, there will be a perfectly good explanation in relation to innumerable other contrasts that might be raised.

There is admittedly one fact that cannot be explained, on this view, namely the student's missing one lecture in face of a *different* fact: that he attended nine. But why should there be an explanation in relation to every contrast we care to choose? Aristotle, as I believe, drew attention to *another* case in which there is no explanation: coincidences are *unexplained* conjunctions of things, each of which is *itself* perfectly explicable.⁴⁹ Be that as it may, in the present case, the missing lecture is inexplicable only in relation to a question of one particular type. It might be thought that distance does not provide a *complete* explanation, but completeness is also relative to the question asked, and the explanation is complete in relation to the question specified and innumerable others. Certainly, it would be *irrelevant* to seek to add the entire history of the universe, if that expression had any meaning, in the hope of adding completeness.

Suppose the lecturer, fully apprised of the student's situation, still insisted on an explanation of the one non-attendance in face of the attendances on other occasions. It would be hard to believe that the lecturer really did not understand. Rather, he or she might seem to be demanding an *apology* rather than an explanation,⁵⁰ and using the attendances to show that the one absence was not necessary. It would have been more human to offer to help to the student to catch up.

The argument is that what is explained or caused is not thereby required to be necessitated. The distance was a standing motive on every occasion, but on Alexander's type of view, it may have taken effect only on one, and this need not have been because of an extra factor, nor by any necessity.

⁴⁹ So I interpreted Aristotle *Metaphysics* 6.3, in *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, Ch. 1.

⁵⁰ I thank Raphael Woolf for making this observation.