

may decide to cross the street but be run over as we try to do so. We may decide to raise our arm, but the arm does not rise. The doctrine of a free will is certainly not a doctrine to explain how we manage to raise our arm or cross the street. It is, rather, a doctrine of how we are responsible for raising our arm, if we do raise our arm, irrespective of the fact that the world out there is populated by agents of various kinds who might thwart our endeavor.<sup>13</sup> At least for Stoics, Christians, and, to a lesser degree, Platonists, there is also divine providence, which already has settled ab initio whether what we decide to do fits into its plan for the best possible world and hence will be allowed to come to fruition.

This, then, is the general schema for a notion of a free will. Our next major step will be to see how the notion of a specific and actual will first emerged in Stoicism. But before we can turn to this, we have to take a look at Aristotle.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Aristotle on Choice without a Will

There are at least three reasons why we should begin our detailed study with Aristotle. First, the Stoics can only develop a notion of a will, because they have a certain notion of the mind. But they have developed this notion of the mind in opposition to Plato's and Aristotle's notion of the mind, or rather of the soul. Second, we should reassure ourselves that we have understood not only that Aristotle does not have a notion of a free will but also why he does not have a notion of a free will. Third, there will come a time in late antiquity when Aristotle is studied again with great care by philosophers and when at least some of his writings are recommended, if not required, reading for any highly educated person. What we find as a result, if we look at certain philosophical authors—but also at some influential Christian writers like Nemesius of Emesa—is that they reimport into a discussion, which by this point has moved far beyond Aristotle, certain doctrines from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in a way that confused, rather than clarified, matters.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle has a notion of a will. What they

do have, though, is a closely related notion, namely, the notion of somebody's willing or wanting something, in particular, somebody's willing or wanting to do something, the notion of *boulesthai* or of a *boulēsis*. Indeed, this notion plays a fundamental role in their thought about human beings and their behavior, and it will continue to play a crucial role throughout antiquity. But the term *boulesthai* will be a source of confusion, and hence it is important to be clear about what it means in Plato and in Aristotle. It will be a source of confusion in part because the word is the Greek version of a verb which we seem to find in many, if not all, Indo-European languages, for example, *velle* in Latin and its derivatives in the Romance languages, and *wollen* in German, or "to will" in English. These languages also form a corresponding noun, like *voluntas* in Latin, or "will" in English, which from a certain point onwards will also be used to refer to the will, though the Greeks are rather late and hesitant in using *boulēsis* in this way.

Yet the intimate etymological connection should not confuse us into thinking that *boulesthai*, at least as used in Plato and Aristotle and in later Greek philosophy, has the same rather broad use as Latin *velle* or German *wollen* or English "to will" in the sense of "to want." In Plato and Aristotle it refers to a highly specific form of wanting, or desiring, in fact, a form of wanting which we no longer recognize or for which we tend to have no place in our conceptual scheme. For Plato and Aristotle willing, as I will call it, is a form of desire which is specific to reason.<sup>1</sup> It is the form in which reason desires something. If reason recognizes, or believes itself to recognize, something as a good, it wills or desires it. If reason believes itself to see a course of action which would allow us to attain this presumed good, it thinks that it is a good thing, other things being equal, to take this course of action. And, if it thinks that it is a good thing to do something,

it wills or desires to do it. Thus it is assumed that there is such a thing as a desire of reason and hence also that reason by itself suffices to motivate us to do something. This is an assumption which is made by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and their later followers. They all agree that reason, just as it is attracted by truth, is also attracted by, and attached to, the good and tries to attain it.

In Plato and Aristotle but not in the Stoics, this view of willing, as a form of desire distinctive of reason, is closely bound up with the view that the soul is bipartite or, rather, tripartite, meaning that, in addition to reason, it consists of a nonrational part or parts. (I will, for our purposes, disregard their specification of two nonrational parts.) This division of the soul is based on the assumption that there are radically different forms of desire, and correspondingly radically different forms of motivation, which may even be in conflict with each other and which therefore must have their origin in different capacities, abilities, or parts of the soul.<sup>2</sup> Thus one may be hungry, and in this way desire something to eat, and hence desire to get something to eat. This sort of desire is called *appetite* (*epithymia*). It is clearly a nonrational desire. One may be hungry, no matter what one thinks or believes. One may be hungry, even though one believes that it would not be a good thing at all to have something to eat. One might be right in believing this. Hence a nonrational desire may be a reasonable or an unreasonable desire. Similarly, though, it might be quite unreasonable for one to believe that it would be a good thing to have something to eat. Hence a desire of reason too might be a reasonable or an unreasonable desire. Therefore the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable desires is not the same as the distinction between desires of reason, or rational desires, and desires of the nonrational part of the

soul, or nonrational desires. It is also assumed that, just as one may act on a rational desire, one may act on a nonrational desire. What is more, one may do so, even if this nonrational desire is in conflict with a rational desire.

(4) Now, the assumption that, if there is a conflict, one may follow either reason or appetite amounts, of course, to a denial of Socrates' claim that nobody ever acts against his better knowledge or, indeed, against his mere beliefs. So, according to Socrates, if you really believe, whether rightly or wrongly, that it is not a good thing to have something to eat now, you will not be driven by appetite, as if your reason were a slave dragged around by the passions, and have something to eat.<sup>3</sup> Plato's and Aristotle's doctrine of a tripartite soul and different forms of motivation, with their possible conflict and the resolution of such conflict, constitutes an attempt to correct Socrates' position, in order to do justice to the presumed fact that people sometimes, in cases of conflict, do act, against their better knowledge, on their nonrational desire. In any event, Aristotle in his famous discussion of this presumed phenomenon, called *akrasia*, or, rather misleadingly, "weakness of will," is explicitly attacking Socrates' position.<sup>4</sup> Now, in looking at this discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is important to notice that it is not focused, as modern readers apparently can hardly help thinking, on cases of acute mental conflict, that is to say, on cases in which we sit there anguished, tormented, torn apart by two conflicting desires which pull us in opposite directions, while we try to make up our mind which direction to take. We tend to read Aristotle in this way, because we have a certain conception of the mind which we project onto Aristotle. But the cases on which Aristotle is focusing are rather different.

Take the case of impetuous *akrasia*. Somebody insults you,

and you get so upset and angry that you let your anger preempt any thought you would have, if you took time to think about an appropriate response. You just act on your anger. Once you have calmed down, you might realize that you do not think that this is an appropriate way to respond to the situation. In general, you think that this is not a good way to act. But at the time you act, you have no such thought. The conflict here is a conflict between a nonrational desire and a rational desire which you would have, if you gave yourself or had the space to think about it. Or look at the very different case of *akrasia* of appetite. You have the rational desire not to eat any sweets. At some point you decided not to have any sweets. But now a delicious sweet is offered to you, and your appetite may be such that, at least for the moment, it does not even come into your mind that you do not want to eat sweets any more. This again is not a case of acute conflict. But, whichever cases of *akrasia* we consider, Aristotle's view is never that, if we are confronted with such a conflict, whether it is acute or not, and act on a nonrational desire against reason, we do so because there is a mental event, namely, a choice or a decision to act in this way. And certainly it is not the case that one chooses or decides between acting on one's belief and acting on one's nonrational desire. For, as we have seen, the way Aristotle describes these cases, they often, if not for the most part, do not even involve an occurrent thought to the effect that it would not be a good thing to act in this way.

More important, Aristotle himself explicitly characterizes these cases as ones in which one acts against one's choice (*prohairesis*), rather than as cases in which one chooses to act against reason.<sup>5</sup> What in Aristotle's view explains that one is acting against one's own beliefs is not a choice which causes the action. It is, rather, a long story about how in the past one has failed to

submit oneself to the training, practice, exercise, discipline, and reflection which would ensure that one's nonrational desires are reasonable, that one acts for reasons, rather than on impulse, and hence that, if there is a conflict, one follows reason. It is this past failure, rather than a specific mental event, a choice or decision, which in Aristotle accounts for *akratic* action.

It should now be clear why Aristotle does not have a notion of a will. One's willing, one's desire of reason, is a direct function of one's cognitive state, of what reason takes to be a good thing to do. One's nonrational desire is a direct function of the state of the nonrational part of the soul. One acts either on a rational desire, a willing, or on a nonrational desire, an appetite. In the case of conflict, there is not a further instance which would adjudicate or resolve the matter. In particular, reason is not made to appear in two roles, first as presenting its own case and then as adjudicating the conflict by making a decision or choice. How the conflict gets resolved is a matter of what happened in the past, perhaps the distant past.

What Aristotle does have is a distinction between things we do *hekōtes* and things we do *akōtes*.<sup>6</sup> The distinction he is aiming at is the distinction between things we do for which we can be held responsible and things we do for which we cannot be held responsible. Aristotle tries to draw the distinction by marking off things we do only because we are literally forced to do them or because we act out of ignorance, that is to say, because we are not aware, and could not possibly be expected to be aware, of a crucial feature of the situation, such that, if we had been aware of it, we would have acted otherwise. If somebody offers you a chocolate, he might not be aware, and there may have been no way for him to know, a crucial fact involved, namely, that the chocolate is poisoned, such that, if he had known this, he would

not have offered it to you. We are, then, responsible for those things we do which we do neither by force nor out of ignorance. Put positively, for us to be responsible for what we do, our action has to somehow reflect our motivation. We must have acted in this way, because in one way or another we were motivated to act in this way, that is, either by a rational desire or a nonrational desire or both.

*[y phaino to sy]*

Traditionally, and highly misleadingly, Aristotle's distinction is represented as the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary, and Aristotle's terms *hekōn* and *akōn* are translated accordingly. This tradition is ancient. Already Cicero translates *hekōn* in this way.<sup>7</sup> It reflects a projection of a later conception of the mind onto Aristotle. To begin with, we have to keep in mind that Aristotle's distinction is supposed to apply to all beings—for instance, domestic animals, children, and mature human beings—who have been trained or taught or have learned to behave in a certain way and whom we can therefore expect to behave in a certain way. If we hold an animal responsible, scold and punish it to discourage it or praise and reward it to encourage it, we do so not because we think that it made the right choice or that it had any choice. At least Aristotle assumes that the animal, whatever it does, just acts on a nonrational desire, albeit one which may be the product of conditioning and habituation, which may or may not have been fully successful. The same, more or less, according to Aristotle, is true of children. But children begin to have and act on rational desires, and mature human beings should have, and should act on, rational desires rather than on impulse. But when they nevertheless do act on a nonrational desire, again it is not by choice. The nonrational desire in and by itself suffices to motivate us, even when we are grown up. And, as we have seen, even if we act against our ratio-

*Handwritten notes:*  
 7. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 429a10-11.  
 8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112a1-2.

1) nal desire, this does not involve a choice. Thus there is no notion of a will, or a willing, in Aristotle, such that somebody could be said to act voluntarily or willingly, whether he acts on a rational or a nonrational desire. Hence for Aristotle responsibility also does not involve a will, since any form of motivation to act in a given way suffices for responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

But, as I have already indicated, this does not mean that Aristotle does not have a notion of choice. For he says that if one acts on a nonrational desire against one's better knowledge, one acts against one's choice. Indeed, the notion of a choice plays an important role in Aristotle.<sup>9</sup> For he thinks that if an action is to count as a virtuous action, it has to satisfy a number of increasingly strict conditions. It must not only be the right thing to do, one must be doing it *hekōn*, of one's own accord; indeed, one must will to do it. What is more, one must do it from choice (*ék probairetōs*), that is, one must choose (*probairēsthai*) to do it, and the choice itself must satisfy certain conditions. Hence Aristotle explains what it is to choose to do something. In doing so, given what we have said, he also distinguishes choosing from willing. This has contributed to a widespread misunderstanding of what Aristotle takes choosing to be. It is often thought that willing and choosing are two entirely different things, that choice is a composite desire, consisting of a nonrational desire to do something and a belief, arrived at by deliberation, that it would be a good thing to act in this way in this situation.

I hardly need point out that this interpretation in part is driven by a model of the mind according to which our actions are determined by our beliefs and our nonrational desires, and in any case are motivated by our nonrational desires. But this clearly is not Aristotle's view, given his notion of willing. The

reason why he distinguishes willing and choosing is not that willing and choosing are altogether different but that choosing is a very special form of willing. One may will or want something which is unattainable. One may will to do something which one is unable to do. One may will something without having any idea as to what one should do to attain it. Choosing is different. We can choose to do something only if, as Aristotle puts it, it is up to us (*epi hēmin*), if it is in our hands, if whether it gets done or not or happens or not depends on us.<sup>10</sup> Thus one cannot choose to be elected to an office, since whether one is elected depends on others. But one can will or want to be elected to an office.

Yet choosing still is a form of willing. In Aristotle's view there is a certain good which we all will or want to attain in life, namely, a good life. As grown-up human beings, we have a certain conception, though different people have rather different ones, of what this final good consists of. So in a particular situation we shall, as mature human beings, choose what to do in light of our conception of this final good, because we think, having deliberated about the matter, that acting in this way will help us to attain this good. But this is what willing to do something is: desiring to do something, because one thinks that it will help one to attain something which one considers a good and which one therefore wills or wants. Hence choosing is just a special form of willing. So in Aristotle's account choice does play an important role. But choices are not explained in terms of a will but in terms of the attachment of reason to the good, however it might be conceived of, and the exercise of reason's cognitive abilities to determine how in this situation the good might best be attained.<sup>11</sup>

Just as there is no notion of a will in Aristotle, there is also no notion of freedom. This does not at all mean that Aristo-

12) tle has a view of the world which entails that we are not free. Aristotle's view of the world is such that the behavior of things in the celestial spheres is governed by strict regularity dictated by the nature of the things involved. But once we come to the sublunary, grossly material sphere in which we live, this regularity begins to give out. It turns into a regularity "for the most part," explained by the imperfect realization of natures in gross matter. What is more, these regularities, dictated by the natures of things, even if they were exceptionless, would leave many aspects of the world undetermined. This is not to say that there is anything in the world which, according to Aristotle, does not have an explanation. But the way Aristotle conceives of explanation, the conjunction of these explanations still leaves the world undetermined in our sense of casual determination. So in Aristotle's world there is plenty of space left for human action which does not collide with, or is excluded by, the existing regularities. Aristotle appeals to this, for instance, when he explains that choosing presupposes that it is up to us, depends on us, whether something gets done or not. Whether it gets done or not is not already settled by some regularity in the world. What is more, Aristotle's universe is not populated by sinister powers who try to thwart us in trying to live the kind of life which is appropriate for beings of our nature. There is a God whose thought determines the natures and thus the regularities in the world as far as they go, and there are truly angelic intellects who move the planets.<sup>12</sup> They should be a source of inspiration for us. They certainly are not a hindrance to our life.

13) This bright view of the world with plenty of space for free action should not delude us into thinking that we have, according to Aristotle, much of a choice in doing what we are doing. Let us look at Aristotelian choice again. We can choose to do

14) something, if it is up to us to do it or not to do it. This notion of something's being up to us will play a crucial role in all later ancient thought. And it will often be interpreted in such a way that, if something is up to us, we have a choice to do it or not to do it. But, if we go back to Aristotle, this is not quite so. All Aristotle is committed to is that, if something is up to us, we can choose to do it. We can also fail to choose to do it. But to fail to choose to do it, given Aristotle's notion of choice, is not the same as choosing not to do it. We saw this in the case of *akrasia*. One can choose to follow reason. But if one fails to follow reason and acts on a nonrational desire, it is not because one chooses not to follow reason and, rather, chooses to do something else. So the choice one makes in Aristotle is not, at least necessarily, a choice between doing X and not doing X, let alone a choice between doing X and doing Y. It is a matter of choosing to do X or failing to choose to do X, such that X does not get done.

15) What is more, Aristotle's and, for that matter, Socrates', Plato's, and the Stoics' view of the wise and virtuous person is that such a person cannot fail to act virtuously and wisely, that is to say, fail to do the right thing for the right reasons. But this means for Aristotle that a wise and virtuous person cannot but make the choices he makes. This is exactly what it is to be virtuous. Hence the ability to act otherwise or the ability to choose otherwise, if construed in a narrow or strong sense, is not present in the virtuous person, because it is a sign of immaturity and imperfection to be able to act otherwise, narrowly construed. So long as one can choose and act otherwise, one is not virtuous. So Aristotle's virtuous person could act otherwise only in an attenuated sense, namely, in the sense that the person could act otherwise, if he had not turned himself into a virtuous

person by making the appropriate choices at a time when he could have chosen otherwise in a less attenuated sense. Unfortunately, this more robust, less attenuated, sense is not a sense Aristotle is particularly concerned with. And the reason for this is that Aristotle thinks rather optimistically that the ability to make the right choices comes with human nature and a good upbringing. But he also, given the age he lives in and his social background, has no difficulty with the assumption that human nature is highly complex and thus extremely difficult to reproduce adequately in gross matter. Thus he has no difficulty in assuming that most human beings are such imperfect realizations of human nature that they have little or no hope of becoming virtuous and wise. He also has no difficulty with the assumption that most human beings lack a good upbringing. We shall see that this way of thinking will increasingly offend the sensibilities of later antiquity.

Aristotle's view leaves plenty of space for unconstrained human action, but it is hardly hospitable, even in principle, to a notion of a free will. In any case, he lacks this notion. For Aristotle a good life is not a matter of a free will but of hard work and hard thought, always presupposing the proper realization of human nature in the individual, and a good upbringing, which unfortunately many are without.

## CHAPTER THREE

The Emergence of a Notion  
of Will in StoicismUNIPARTITE PSYCHOLOGY:  
REASON, IMPRESSION, IMPULSE, AND ASSENT

As we have seen, for Aristotle to have had a notion of the will, he would have had to have the appropriate notion of a choice. Although he did have a notion of a choice, he did not have the kind of notion which would allow him to say that whenever we do something of our own accord (*hekantes*), we do so because we choose or decide to act in this way. Aristotle did not have such a notion of choice since he assumed that we sometimes just act on a nonrational desire (i.e., a desire which has its origin in a nonrational part of the soul) without choosing to act in this way and in fact sometimes against our choice. He could assume this, since he supposed that there are nonrational parts of the soul which generate such nonrational desires and that these by themselves suffice to motivate us to act. The crucial assumption is that being hungry may be enough to make you have something to eat and that being angry may be enough to make you