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## Agency in Greco-Roman philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

Agency, the theme of my life's work, consists of efficacy, future-minded optimism, and imagination. I here attempt to trace the history of agency in Western thought over the Greco-Roman epoch. The *Iliad* presents mortals without any agency, the gods having it all; whereas in the *Odyssey*, humans have considerable agency, and the gods less. Later, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and the Stoics postulate full-blown human agency. The emphasis on will, responsibility, and choice continues through early Christianity and then is renounced by Augustine in the fourth century, CE, with human agency relegated to being grace, a gift from God. Human progress seems linked to these beliefs, with strong human agency beliefs linked to progress and weak human agency beliefs linked to stagnation.

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I am beginning the pursuit of a psycho-historical claim: psychological states are major, immediate causes of big events in human history. In particular that the psychological state of Agency causes human progress and the absence of this psychological state causes stagnation.

What is this state of Agency?

When do we try hard? When do we break out of our sloth and overcome barriers that seem insurmountable? When do we reach for goals that seem unobtainable? When do we persist against the odds? When do we make new, creative departures? These all require Agency, an individual's belief that he or she can influence the world.

Here is my underlying theory of Agency: 'Trying,' 'action,' "voluntary response initiation, 'will,' 'executive control,' or 'operant responding' – these are all different names for agency in different schools of thought – and they all require: a mental likelihood estimation of achieving one's goal. This is what Bandura (1977) dubbed a 'self-efficacy expectation,' just *efficacy*, henceforward.

The first component of agency is efficacy and it has two other components:

1. Optimism (which contains Future-mindedness): The goal is likely achievable in the future, perhaps in the quite distant future.

2. Imagination: The goal is broad and not present to the senses. It is beyond, perhaps well beyond, the here and now.

Agency is not all or nothing. Different individuals, different cultures, and different epochs may have a lot or only a little efficacy, a lot or only a little optimism, and a lot or only a little imagination. To begin my search over history, I start in Western thought across the Greco-Roman epoch.

Agency, as best I can tell, was invented (or discovered) independently across history at several times and in several cultures. But nowhere in Western thought is it so explicit and examined with such nuance and detail as during the Greco-Roman Epoch. It must be added that what the Hellenes wrote about agency is so subtle, so thoroughly discussed, that it is the fullest historical precedent for any history of agency. It is hard to read the Greeks and Romans on agency and wonder if we moderns have made much progress on this thorny topic. While what follows will, I hope, be a useful introduction to these issues for the professional psychologist, I do not pretend that it could stand scrutiny as an expert review for the professional historian of classical philosophy.

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I lean on the following four excellent secondary sources, since the most serious omission in my education was ancient Greek: Lang (2015) *Greek models of mind and self*, Frede (2012). *A free will*, Williams (1993). *Shame and necessity*, and Williams (2006) *The sense of the past*. I have, of course, read many of the primary sources in English, but because so much of the nuance depends on the original Greek words (I can just manage the Latin), that much of this is truly inaccessible to me. Even so some of what follows will include the original Greek terms. In addition, I am grateful to Caleb Cohoe, professor of ancient philosophy at Metropolitan State University, in Denver, Colorado. Even though I am not illiterate in this area, I got him to guide me through the literature and to write a ten-page precis, with long appendices. I also thank Darrin McMahon, Paul Woodruff, and Richard S. Powers for their comments on the manuscript. I am aware of disputes about what progress actually is and even of the view that there has been no human progress at all. By progress I mean advances and innovation in thought, science, technology, medicine, art, literature, the quality of human life, and political freedom.

## Homer (1200 BCE to 800 BCE)

The Homeric poems sing of a war launched by the Greek city-states against Troy, historically sometime between 1260–1189 BCE. The Greeks won and Troy was destroyed. The two poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, come down through oral iterations of bards until they are written down, likely around 800 BCE. There is a dark age between 1200 and 800 BCE, which marks the end of the Bronze Age. So, the iterations of the poems sung, and modified, by the bards are unknowable. The poems are nevertheless one of our only windows on Greek thought about agency, self, and mind at the end of the Bronze Age.

Of the two poems, *Iliad* was composed earlier than *Odyssey*, which was composed perhaps 100 years or more later. This is important because the two poems are very different psychologically and they suggest a seismic change in Greek thought. Something momentous – politically and psychologically – must have happened in the Mediterranean basin between the two poems. The Dorian invasion, invaders ‘from across the seas’ put an end to the Bronze Age (Cline, 2014). The Greeks now faced new people, people who thought and acted differently from their tribal kinfolk. Trade, and even, life or death, depended on understanding these new people. The Bronze age mentality (Jaynes, 1990 argues there was no mentality at all) would hold one back. If you were a Greek during the Dorian invasions, you needed to be able to look into other minds, guess what the invaders were thinking, and anticipate their actions. You needed to outsmart them. You needed a self, a theory of mind, and even more, you needed agency to survive; you needed efficacy, foresight and imagination. Many of those who had such agency survived and reproduced, many of those without it became evolution’s losers

The gods and the mortals, in about equal number, are the characters of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Who has agency? In general, across history, there is a trade-off between human agency and supernatural agency. In *Iliad* the gods have almost full agency and the mortals have almost none. Human fate is entirely in the hands of the gods. In the later poem, *Odyssey*, the trade-off tilts toward human agency. The gods still have quite a lot of agency, although not as much as in the *Iliad*, but so too do the mortals. Human fate is determined by both the gods, and for the first time in Greek literature, by us mortals. What changes is the balance between supernatural agency and human agency. Attend carefully to this balance because it is a recurring nexus in human history, and it is the trade-off that spurs progress. When we mortals are thought to control our

destiny, we actually do. When supernatural forces or chance or bad luck are thought to control our destiny, we actually languish.

*Iliad* is from the Bronze age psychologically. Its hero, Achilles, as a mortal, is almost without agency. When it matters, the gods have it all. Whereas the hero of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, does not seem at all to be a Bronze age figure. He, unlike Achilles shares a lot of agency with the less than omnipotent gods.

Let’s look.

*Iliad*. What is the picture of agency in the *Iliad*? Of human agency, there is almost none. Of the components of agency? Among mortals, of efficacy almost none, of future-minded optimism, almost none, of imagination, little.

It is the gods who spur the mortals to action.

Agamemnon, the king, steals Achilles’ mistress and Achilles in a rage confronts him, but Achilles stays his hand. Why does he not act?

*“The goddess, bright-eyed Athene, replied: ‘I came from the heavens to quell your anger, if you’ll but listen I was sent by the goddess, white-armed Hera, who in her heart loves and cares for you both alike. Come, end this quarrel, and sheathe your sword. Taunt him with words of prophecy; for I say, and it shall come to pass, that three times as many glorious gifts shall be yours one day for this insult. Restrain yourself, now, and obey.’”*

*Then swift-footed Achilles, in answer, said: ‘Goddess, a man must attend to your word, no matter how great his heart’s anger: that is right. Whoever obeys the gods will gain their hearing.’”*

Notice that Athena has all the components of Agency: efficacy, she stops Achilles; future-minded optimism, she sees into the distant future; and imagination. Achilles has none. He is Athena’s puppet.

*So saying he checked his great hand on the silver hilt, and thrust the long sword back into its sheath, obeying the word of Athene.”*

Agamemnon himself is without efficacy and bears no responsibility for stealing Achilles’ woman.

*“You Achaeans have often criticized me as he has done, but the fault was not mine. Zeus, Fate, and the Fury who walks in darkness are to blame, for blinding my judgement that day in the assembly when on my own authority I confiscated Achilles’ prize. What choice did I have? There is a goddess who decides these things.”*

The turning point in *Iliad* occurs when Achilles, after long sulking about Agamemnon’s misdeeds, finally takes up arms against the Trojans. He does not decide to take up arms, the goddess Hera, through Iris, decides that Achilles will fight:

*"Iris sent by Hera, unbeknown to Zeus and the other gods except Pallas Athene, carried a message to Achilles to arm for war. Reaching him, she uttered winged words: 'Up, son of Peleus, most daunting of men. Save the body of Patroclus, they are fighting over it beside the ships. Men are dying while your Greeks try to protect his corpse, and the Trojans attack, longing to drag him off to windy Troy. Glorious Hector is their leader, who sets his heart on slicing his head from the tender neck and fixing it on a stake above the wall. Up then, and no more idling here!'"*

And so prodded and armed Achilles slays Hector, the Trojan prince. Or does he?

*'Athene came to Achilles and standing close, spoke winged words: 'Glorious Achilles, beloved of Zeus, now you and I will kill Hector, and bring the Greeks great glory. Warlike he may be, but he'll not escape us, even if Apollo, the Far-Striker, grovels before aegis-bearing Father Zeus. Stop now and catch your breath. I will go and incite him to fight you face to face.'*

The heroes of the *Iliad* never sit down, mull, ruminate and decide. They are usually impelled to act by the gods, but sometimes they are swept up into action by *thumos*. Here we have the first seeds of human choice. *Thumos* is not mental, it is barely the stuff of will. It is literally in their chests, their breath. When they die, it too, being mere body, departs and comes to an end.

The brothers Ajax defend their ships:

*"The god filled them with powerful strength and made their limbs agile ... Within myself the spirit (thumos) in my chest is more eager to fight and wage war."*

As we see, the heroes of *Iliad* are presented as having no efficacy, none at all. This is, of course, not to claim that Homer or the audiences of the Homeric poems had no sense of efficacy; it is hard to imagine the social transactions of any culture which was devoid of any notion of efficacy (see Williams, 2006, Chapter 3, *Understanding Homer*.) Rather it shows that the gods had a lot of it and we mortals relatively very little.

How about optimism and future-mindedness, the second component of agency? *Iliad's* heroes are fatalistic and pessimistic. Achilles reflects on the human condition:

*"What good's to be won from tears that chill the spirit? So, the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men live on to bear such torments – the gods live free of sorrows. There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus's halls and holds his gifts, our miseries, one, the other blessings. When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man, now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn."*

Achilles accepts his doom:

*"And Thetis weeping, replied: 'My child, your own death will swiftly be upon you if Hector dies, for your own doom*

*must inexorably follow.' Then swift-footed Achilles answered, passionately: 'Let it follow instantly, since I could not save my friend from death ... Not even great Heracles escaped his doom, dear as he was to Zeus, the son of Cronos, Hera's dread anger fated to overcome him. I too, if a like fate has been spun for me, will lie quiet when I am dead.'"*

Along with lack of efficacy and pessimism is a lack of imagination. It is not that Homer lacked imagination. The gods are full of imagination, often about human futures. They determine it. It is Homer's mortals in *Iliad* who lack imagination. They are men of the here and now. Odysseus in the *Iliad* says

*'What now? Shame if I flee in fear of enemy numbers but worse to be cut off, since Zeus has routed the rest of the Danaans. But why think of that? Only cowards run from battle, a true warrior stands his ground, to kill or die.'*

For Achilles all that matters is how he fares from day to day, how he feels now and how he succeeds and where he fails. When his days are over, they are done. When his *thumos* leaves his dying body, it is gone forever.

Odyssey. This is the tale of wily Odysseus, who following the victory over Troy, spends the next twenty years trying to get home to his kingdom of Ithaca. The very first thing to realize is how future-minded and relentlessly optimistic is his quest. This long-range optimism is absent in the heroes of *Iliad* and when there is a glimmer it turns out to be illusory. But it is the driving incentive for Odysseus.

*"Nevertheless, I long – I pine, all my days – to travel home and see the dawn of my return. And if a god will wreck me yet again on the wine-dark sea, I can bear that too, with a spirit tempered to endure. Much have I suffered, labored long and hard by now in the waves and wars. Add this to the total – bring the trial on!"*

While this mortal has efficacy, optimism, and imagination, the gods also still have efficacy. Zeus commands Calypso, his seductive captor:

*"send him off with all good speed: it is not his fate to die here, far from his own people. Destiny still ordains that he shall see his loved ones, reach his high-roofed house, his native land at last."*

Odysseus repeatedly shows efficacy and future-minded optimistic, planning:

*"But battle-weary Odysseus weighed two courses, deeply torn, probing his fighting spirit: "Oh no – I fear another immortal weaves a snare to trap me, urging me to abandon ship! I won't. Not yet. That shore's too far away – I glimpsed it myself – where she says refuge waits. No, here's what I'll do, it's what seems best to me. As long as the timbers cling and joints stand fast, I'll hold out aboard*

*her and take a whipping – once the breakers smash my craft to pieces, then I'll swim – no better plan for now."*

*– I'm bone-weary, about to breathe my last, and a cold wind blows from a river on toward morning. But what if I climb that slope, go for the dark woods and bed down in the thick brush? What if I'm spared the chill, fatigue, and a sweet sleep comes my way? I fear wild beasts will drag me off as quarry." But this was the better course, it struck him now.*

More efficacy, optimism, and imagination as he deals with the cyclops:

*"So, we lay there groaning, waiting Dawn's first light. And now I ordered my shipmates all to cast lots – who'd brave it out with me to hoist our stake and grind it into his eye when sleep had overcome him? Luck of the draw: I got the very ones I would have picked myself, four good men, and I in the lead made five ...*

*But I was already plotting ... what was the best way out? how could I find escape from death for my crew, myself as well? My wits kept weaving, weaving cunning schemes – life at stake, monstrous death staring us in the face – till this plan struck my mind as best."*

The agency of the gods is waning as mortal agency waxes:

*"But even from there my courage, my presence of mind and tactics saved us all, But now I cleared my mind of Circe's orders – cramping my style, urging me not to arm at all. I donned my heroic armor, seized long spears in both my hands and marched out on the half-deck."*

Odysseus clearly has agency: he mulls decisions and then acts. This is efficacy. His mulling is future-minded and optimistic, and he is imaginative, making new departures.

Williams (1993) has argued elegantly that agency is truly present, even if not explicit, in Homer. He points out that even when the reasons for Achilles's actions, for example, his refraining from killing Agamemnon are omitted, the gods (in this case Athena) provide him with a reason. So, Achilles's chain of action is implicit: mental conflict, a decisive reason (provided externally), followed by action. This is plausible since the gods often exhibit just this chain, even if mortals do not. Williams reinforces this with instances of agency in the *Odyssey*, as above. Williams also points out that the absence of Homer mentioning a separable faculty, the will, is sensible and all to Homer's credit: since the will adds nothing to the chain of mental conflict, an overriding reason, followed by action. There is no additional thing, a will, needed to intervene between an overriding reason and the spurring of action. So, we can be quite sure that Homer and Homer's audiences knew about and had agency; nevertheless, the balance of Agency tilts from

the gods towards mortals from the time of the *Iliad* to the time of the *Odyssey*.

My conclusion is that the bronze age *Iliad* Greek believed that mortals had almost no agency. All agency resided in the gods. But this changes from the first to the second poem and the balance between god and man shifts dramatically by 800 BCE. The *Odyssey*, in contrast to the *Iliad*, tells us that the gods do not irrevocably determine the events of our lives even if they do determine our ultimate fate. We mortals now have considerable efficacy, lots of future-minded planning, a measure of optimism, and quite a lot of imagination.

## 600 BCE- 400 BCE

The *Odyssey* intimates increasing agency for humans and less for the gods. After Homer the quality of human life is also improving dramatically. The 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century bring the theater, literature, mathematics, sculpture, writing, education, city-states, sea-faring skills and the celebration of individual achievement and of the ideal human body. It also brings an evolution from tyranny to the beginning of democracy and equality (but not for women or slaves). These vast improvements in life are not mere correlates of the belief in human agency, but my central thesis is that this belief is one of the crucial causes. The 6<sup>th</sup> century Greeks discover (or invent) agency and this new psychology is, in my view, the most proximal cause of their other innovations.

The vocabulary of psychological states expands to allow agency. In Homer, there are no unequivocally mental words: *Thumos*, which will now evolve into 'spirit', was merely physical activity or energy; *Noos*, which will evolve into 'intellect', was merely visual sight. *Psyche*, whose root comes from breath, is what the body loses at death. *Psyche* will evolve into 'soul' or 'self'. It is partly this absence of such explicitly mental words in Homer that moved Julian Jaynes (1990) into starkly denying consciousness to Bronze age humans. And there are no unambiguous Homeric words for agency or for efficacy or for optimism or for imagination. How could there be, Jaynes reasons, if there is no self, no soul, no mind, no spirit?

*Psyche* expands in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Psychē* comes to mean that which makes something alive (*emp-sychos* meaning 'ensouled'). Thales of Miletus (c. 624 BCE – c. 548 BCE) thought that even magnets had *psyche*, since they could move iron. This *psychē* experiences the appetites of food, drink, and sex. A strong *psychē* is now also what makes someone courageous or better than someone else: it bears personal and moral qualities (Lorenz, 2009). *Psychē* is responsible for planning. Antiphon, in one of his law-court speeches, calls on the

jury to 'take away from the accused the *psychē* that planned the crime.' *Psyche* is a persisting self, with moral and intellectual attributes for which we can praise or blame someone. This enlarged self allows for greater agency.

At the same time, most thinkers continue to emphasize the limits of human agency. Herodotus (c. 484 – c. 425 BCE), Greek historian, recounts the famous exchange between Croesus (c. 595 BCE – 547 BCE), fabulously wealthy ruler of Asia Minor, and Solon (c. 640 BCE – 560 BCE), the famed Athenian sage. Croesus, with *hubris*, asks Solon who is the most blessed human and Croesus expects to be so recognized. Solon instead gives his top honors to a man who courageously dies in battle and to twins who piously carry their mother to the temple. For Solon blessedness and happiness are not something a person can strive for and then achieve; they are but an accident of fate. Solon claims that 'man is entirely what befalls him ... for he that is greatly rich is not more blessed than he that has enough for the day unless fortune so attend upon him that he ends his life well ... **wait till [someone] is dead to call him [blessed].'** (Herodotus (1983), p. 32). For Solon, happiness is a matter of what happens to you and how your life ends. Croesus is, in fact, about to lose his whole kingdom to the Persians and be captured by them. Humans still have very limited efficacy; hence fortune and luck, if not the gods, are the ultimate forces in our lives.

The gods are present, but they are decreasingly active in the great tragedies of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The transition toward human agency can be seen in the climax of Aeschylus' (458 BCE) *Eumenides*. Athena establishes a court of law in which human judges, not the gods, are sworn to decide the fate of those who shed blood.

*O men of Athens, ye who first do judge  
The law of bloodshed, hear me now ordain.  
Here to all time for Aegeus' Attic host  
Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn...  
...Thus have I spoken, thus to mine own clan  
Commended it for ever. Ye who judge,  
Arise, take each his vote, mete out the right,  
Your oath revering. Lo, my word is said.*

At the close of Sophocles' (ca. 440 BCE) *Women of Trachis*, Heracles' son says, 'nothing in this is not Zeus.' But the gods' presence does not seem to undercut human agency. Rather what the gods do is never inconsistent with agency as expressed by the characters of the mortals (Woodruff, 2018).

The tragedians are both impressed by human abilities, but they nevertheless echo Solon's warnings to Croesus. In the *Antigone* of Sophocles (ca. 441 BCE), the chorus praises human agency, the wonder that is man:

*There are many wonderful things, but not one of them is more wonderful than man. This thing crosses the gray sea in the winter storm-wind, making its path along the troughs of the swelling waves. And the loftiest of goddesses, Earth, deathless and unwearied, it wears away, turning up the soil with the offspring of horses, as the ploughs go back and forth from year to year ...*

*Clever beyond hope is the inventive craft he possesses. It brings him now to ill, now to good. When he fulfills the laws of the land and the oath-sworn justice of the gods, he is a man of lofty city.*

There is something wonderful about humans, but we are still subject to fate. In *Oedipus the King* (429 BCE), Sophocles concludes with the chorus reminding us of Solon and of what we should take away from the fall of Oedipus:

*"not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot – see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him. Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain."*

The Athenian tragedians of the 5<sup>th</sup> century are impressed by the efficacy and the imagination of humans. We are a wonder. But they warn of the limits of human efficacy, and theirs is not a particularly optimistic vision. They still see a world in which ultimate happiness is not up to us, a world in which the protagonist is often destined for humiliation and death.

### **The great golden age philosophers**

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE gift us with the first 'professional' philosophers and agency, hotly debated, is one of their major concerns. This is the age of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and not the least, of Epicurus and his fellow Stoics. All of them emphasize human agency, but they differ substantially about the details and about the implications.

Not coincidentally, this is also a Golden Age of human progress. My central quest is to test the idea that when cultures (and individuals) believe in their own agency innovation and progress happen. When they do not, they stagnate. I define agency as having efficacy, optimism and imagination components. This thesis is a psychological hypothesis, not a philosophical one, and the innovations of the golden age are consistent with it.

Agency does entail philosophical problems and I now review the history of agency in explicit Greek and Roman philosophizing. This epoch took agency very seriously and this epoch was indeed a time of enormous human progress. All the philosophers below believed in agency,

but they also unearthed three knotty issues underneath the concept.

1. Do we have a Will?
2. Is this Will free?
3. Is all human action pre-determined?

I have been fascinated by these profound questions all my working life. The great golden age philosophers disagreed, about these three, but they all believed in the existence and importance of agency. I review their thinking on agency with the following disclaimer: each of these three deep issues remains controversial and unsolved to this day. Perhaps after 2500 years of argument, these issues should be considered undecidable. My basic thesis – that the belief in Agency spurs innovation – is, however, independent of any resolution of these three issues.

### **Socrates (470 BCE – 399 BCE)**

Insisted that we are agents responsible for our own character and for our own well-being. A character in a play of Euripides dismisses practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), the facility of deciding the right thing to do in the context of the real world, saying: 'It is best to let these things go as they will, without management.' (Laertius, 1925). Socrates was so offended that he 'got up and left the theater, saying that it was absurd to . . . let excellence perish in this way.'

Socrates, famously, is tried and found guilty of corrupting Athenian youth. At issue here is one of efficacy. Up until the time of Socrates, an Athenian youth was most prized for his efficacy on the battlefield, in money-making, and in the Olympic games. This kind of efficacy brought glory (*kleos*) in the eyes of his fellows. Socrates advocates a different kind of efficacy, that of the examined life. What youth should strive for is not *kleos*, external achievement, but internal, psychological excellence, *arete*. Viewed from our time, Socrates wins our sympathy. But Socrates was indeed attempting, unrelenting as a gadfly, to upend the values of Athenian youth and so he was justly convicted by his contemporaries (Goldstein, 2014). So convicted, he chose death rather than exile.

### **Plato (424 – 348 BCE)**

In addition to advocating efficacy in the form of mental excellence, Socrates's philosophy was eminently future-minded and optimistic. We know of Socrates's views primarily through the dialogues of his student, Plato. 'Why do we sometimes fail to do the good?' Socrates

asks Protagoras in Plato's dialogue, *Protagoras*. It is the 'power of appearance: present pleasures loom so much larger than long-term future goods, such as health. If we weighed the future knowledgably (the 'art of measurement'), with rational prospection, we would always choose what is best for us.

Socrates's views of agency merge into Plato's. For both of them, it was the Sophists they railed against. The Sophists made their living by teaching young Athenians 'rhetoric,' or more precisely, how to be verbally persuasive. Gorgias, with Protagoras the most famous of the Sophists, argued that people cannot resist persuasive speeches any more than men could resist Helen's beauty. This seducible faculty, Gorgias calls *psyche* or mind. It is Gorgias's implication that persuasion was merely seduction that most scandalized Plato. For Plato, persuasion partook of the very highest of human faculties: Reason.

We can best understand Reason and how sacred it is for Plato by analogy to his conception of the ideal state of the *Republic*. The ideal state has three parts, the Guardians who govern wisely, the military who assist them by providing energy and strength, and the workers who provide the food. The human soul, like this state, has three parts: Reason (*logistikon*), Spirit or energy (*thumoeides*), and Appetite (*epithumetikon*). One thing and one thing only, Reason, is best qualified to control and to govern the subordinate parts of the body politic as well as the individual soul (*psyche*).

Plato's emphasis on the difference between the body and the soul is novel in Greek thought. It captures the difference between the sensual and the physical versus the rational and the spiritual. Plato assumes that most people only care about the physical and the common man is just a hedonist.<sup>1</sup>

It is Reason, the rational part of the soul, that allows us to resist the temptations of sex, food, and drink. It is Reason that is future-minded and so properly measures the tempting pleasures of here and now appetites against the long-term benefits of health. It is Reason, most of all, that allows us to resist the seductions of the unfounded persuasive techniques that the Sophists profess.

The body and this tripartite soul are unhappily conjoined in natural life and our great task in life is to make the soul good, even perfect. The soul, unlike the body, is not physical, unlike the *thumos* of Homer which, like breath, is extinguished on death. The soul, unlike the body, is immortal. The soul, unlike the body, is perfectible.<sup>2</sup>

In Plato (and in Aristotle as well), here is how action unfolds: a person wants (*boulesthai*) to do something specific. If reason recognizes that some action is good, the person wants to do it. Everything else being equal

and the world not thwarting the action, the person therefore acts. This is all that efficacy amounts to in Plato.<sup>3</sup> For better or worse, there is no intervening faculty of Will between thought and action in Plato. Action follows directly from Reason wanting something specific and being unimpeded by the world.

Plato, I conclude, endorses a full-blown sense of agency: people have efficacy, people can be very future-minded, and the soul is improvable, even in principle perfectible, and people can imagine a great range of possible futures.

### **Aristotle (384 BCE – 322 BCE)**

Is, for my purposes, similar in his belief in agency to Plato and Socrates, but he adds a great deal more detail: Action proceeds not simply from Reason and wanting to do something, but from the character of the agent. For Aristotle, we choose our actions: they are, as he crucially puts it, *up to us* (*eph'hēmin*). (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1–2) We have the efficacy to direct ourselves for better or worse, but our actions, stemming from our character, can be virtuous, vicious, or mixed. Character is a habit and it is acquired by repetition; but once our character is formed, it may no longer be in our power to change it. This is why Aristotle places great emphasis on being brought up right and living under good laws. For Aristotle, the virtues of character give us the right habits of feeling and the goals of acting nobly, but we also require practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) to act well. Practical wisdom is excellence at judging what's good or bad for us and about the best means to attain these goals in real life. Practical wisdom needs to accurately recognize the particular circumstances we are in and so experience (*empeiria*) and imagination (*phantasia*) matter. Imagination is the psychic power which stores our perceptions and allows us to combine them in new ways.

Importantly, we deliberate, and we choose the means to the ends that our character wishes for:

*"The end, then, being what we wish for, the means what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning means must be according to choice and voluntary. Now the exercise of the virtues is concerned with means. Therefore virtue also is in our own power, and so too vice . . . Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious."<sup>4</sup>*

Aristotle is a thorough-going optimist. Human beings have the possibility of *eudaimonia*, roughly translated as happiness, in this life. Necessary conditions for *eudaimonia* include developing excellence in reason, having virtuous character, acting upon one's virtuous character,

and living in accordance with reason. Moreover, there are things we can do, practices, to increase our *eudaimonia*. But this is not enough: Needed also are external supports: friends, wealth, good birth, good children, and beauty.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Solon's misgivings about happiness easily shattered by misfortune, having these conditions will protect us, even against great misfortune.

So, Aristotle, like Plato, believes we have full-blown agency. Also, like Plato he does not posit an enacting faculty, the Will, to spur desire into action. For Aristotle, humans have full-blown efficacy, since we choose the means to our desired ends, since we can be optimistically future-minded, and since we have imagination.

I emphasize Aristotle's unequivocal stance that being virtuous or vicious is *up to us*. There is no longer any trade-off between the agency of the gods and human agency and little in the tyranny of misfortune; our fate is almost entirely determined by human agency. I will at the end of this article indict Augustine (354 CE – 430 CE) for abandoning Aristotle's doctrine. Augustine's was one of the great missteps of Christianity and it condemned countless Christians to 1000 years of darkness.

The *Stoics* and the *Epicureans* became the most influential schools of philosophy after Aristotle's time, and they too believed that we all have enough agency to achieve our own happiness. They also introduced the notion of Will into agency and they invented training programs to increase happiness.

### **Epicurus (341 BCE – 270 BCE)**

Took up Plato's challenge from *the Protagoras* and worked out an art of measuring pleasure and pains. While he held that pleasure was the ultimate goal of life, Epicurus was no crude hedonist: he urges us to control our minds to live well:

*"the flesh is only troubled by the present, but the soul is troubled by the past and the present and the future. In the same way, then, the soul also has greater pleasures."* (Laertius, 1925).

Epicurean philosophy aims to help us by removing all anxiety and other mental disturbances. It does this by dispelling the fear of death. Once this fear is removed, the Epicurean can enjoy the tranquil pleasures of friendship and live undisturbed by worry: *'for there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life.'* (*Letter to Menoeceus* 125)

Luxurious foods add no pleasure but create bad habits and the desire for money and status can never be satisfied (*Letter to Menoeceus* 131–132). The person who calculates rightly will always be able to meet his

needs and so can be happy, untroubled by past, present, or future, knowing he<sup>6</sup> can face whatever is coming.

The Stoics agreed with the Epicureans that a good life requires mental tranquility, but they insisted that we can achieve this only if we recognize virtue or wisdom as the true good, the only thing that always benefits us. Zeno of Citium (335 BCE – 263 BCE) founded this school, which rapidly became the focal point of debate over whether virtue is enough on its own for a good life. The Stoics insisted that external misfortunes such as sickness, dishonor, and poverty need not rob one of happiness. We should focus on what we can control, our mind's use of reason.

Reason's role is to guide us in resisting bad impulses. Once we have an impression that we should do something, reason must then *assent* to the impulse for the impulse to become action. Stoic *assent* is parallel to *consent* in law; it marks the presence of a mental state of willingness to allow an action. Thus, the Stoics introduce a faculty of Willingness, assent, that transforms an impulse into an action that one is now responsible for. Willingness, in the hands of the Greco-Roman Stoic, Epictetus, three centuries later, will become the faculty of Will (*prohairesis*).

The Stoics and Epicureans developed psychological techniques to help their followers to face challenges and to exercise agency. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – 50 CE) offers lists of common practices including thorough investigation (*skepsis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and meditations (*meletai*). The Stoics practiced reflection to avoid going along with mere appearances. These sometimes involved questioning the beliefs that give rise to our feelings – why, for example, do we think we are harmed when someone insults us?

Epictetus, a former slave who became a teacher of Stoicism in Rome, offers an array of such imaginative exercises to his listeners. Before doing anything that might upset or anger us, he suggests that we prepare by picturing the challenges we might face. In the case of going to the baths, 'set before your mind the things that happen at the baths, that people splash you, that people knock up against you, that people steal from you. And you'll thus undertake the action in a surer manner if you say to yourself at the outset, "I want to take a bath and ensure at the same time that my choice remains in harmony with nature."' (Epictetus, 2014). These Stoic techniques deeply resonate with the techniques of modern Cognitive Therapy.

In summary, the Stoics and Epicureans believed in full agency: People have efficacy that is marked by the mental act of assenting. This efficacy is optimistic and future-minded, allowing happiness to be achievable. This

efficacy is imaginative, it requires being reflective about what would obtain and what would not obtain (imaginary counterfactuals) from an action. Importantly, the Stoic sage can withstand the most outrageous flows of torture.

## Early Christian philosophers

As the Roman empire became the dominant power in the Mediterranean world, Rome became the epicenter of philosophy. Stoic and Epicurean views, all stressing agency, were now popular and taken seriously, at least in educated circles. Unlike philosophy in our time, philosophy may have shaped the worldviews of the general populace, and such democratization of belief is important to sustain the hypothesis that human progress follows from the belief in agency. Philosophers occupied key roles within the empire, from politicians (Cicero 106 BCE – 43 BCE) and advisors (Seneca 4 BCE – 65 CE) to emperors (Marcus Aurelius 121 CE – 180 CE). Philosophers, such as Lucretius (95 BCE – 55 BCE), could become renowned public intellectuals: After Diocletian banished all philosophers from Rome around 90 CE, Epictetus (50 CE – 135 CE) set up a successful new school in Greece. While no longer at the center of power, he would still go on to have the future emperor Hadrian as a student. Many aspiring public figures would seek philosophical training even if they did not intend to be committed Stoics.

Philosophical conceptions had a broad audience, especially popular in the case of the Epicureans and Stoics, who promised that happiness and a good life available to all. The most remarkable example of their popularity comes from an inscription discovered in 1884 in the town of Oinoanda, situated in what is now southwestern Turkey. Diogenes of Oinoanda was an otherwise unknown merchant. He commissioned an entire wall taking up 260 square meters with 25,000 words of Epicurean philosophy. These carved words tell us that Diogenes was confident that the Epicurean view will benefit all, and possibly result in a future state of the world in which there are no slaves, but everyone is just and will participate both in the 'study of philosophy.' This inscription suggests that philosophical thought and the emphasis on human agency penetrated from the academies and educated elite even into the world of business. Diogenes literally inscribed in stone, at his own expense, words to live by (Smith, 1993).

Just after the time of Epictetus, Christian philosophers begin to articulate their ideas. All of them adopted the Stoic idea of free will, and the belief in free will 'became so widespread, indeed for a long time almost universal, thanks to the influence of Christianity.'<sup>7</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, there are increasing attacks on Stoicism

and Epicureanism, particularly those aspects that belittle human agency. Alexander of Aphrodisias (late 2<sup>nd</sup> to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) argued that the Stoic's deterministic account of the universe rules out freedom and agency. Freedom of the will is at the heart of Alexander's philosophy and it is attainable by many people, not just the very few wise and virtuous people commended by the Stoics.

Exercises, such as reading and meditating on a foundational text or reflecting on one's actions, were adopted by early Christians in the service of growing in holiness. It was holy to discipline one's bodily appetites and subdue the flesh. The Christian monastic movement was distinctive in its emphasis on such asceticism, avoiding temptation and pursuing increasing closeness to God. For my purposes, this growing monastic movement was a child of the belief in human agency, and it emphasized our ability to do good as human agents. It optimistically held out the possibility of humans could achieve holiness.

Origen (185 CE – 253 CE) is a central and a representative figure of Christian theologians at this time. A man of exceptional piety, he espoused freedom of the will. After we die, we are judged by God for our actions. We could not be judged unless we had been free to choose and hence responsible for our choices in life. Even Origen's fiercest critics could find nothing wrong with this premise. So, at this time, Christianity is a religion underpinned by human agency: humans have efficacy, it is future-minded and optimistic, since we can by our actions become holy, and it is imaginative in that we are judged by God after death and if found virtuous, we are saved. While the balance of God's agency versus human agency tilted a bit toward God in early Christian theology, there was greater weight placed on human freedom, responsibility, and will.

At this time, from the point of view of human progress, the Roman Empire was still a center of prosperity, innovation, artistic and literary achievements, and a high quality of life. This remained so through at least the middle of the third century.

It is against this background of material prosperity along with the universal Christian acceptance of free will and responsibility that I finally turn to Saint Augustine of Hippo (354 CE – 430 CE), far and away the most influential theologian of the Millennium. His influence on Western thought, even to this day, cannot be overstated. Augustine unequivocally renounced human agency in favor of the grace of God.

Augustine was born in north Africa in 354 CE of a devout Christian mother and a pagan father. He studied rhetoric in Carthage from age 17 and he lived a typically hedonistic life. He was a brilliant student, particularly in Latin (the language spoken in his home). He taught at Carthage until 383 and then moved to

teach in Rome. He married twice and had one son, who died at age 16.

In August of 386, he underwent a dramatic conversion to Catholicism.<sup>8</sup> He heard a child shout '*tolle, lege*' (take up and read). He interpreted this as God making a child shout this and Augustine thereupon picked up a book and opened it at random. It was to Paul's Epistles to the Romans 13:13:

*"No reveling or drunkenness, no debauchery or vice, no quarrels or jealousy. Let Christ Jesus himself be the armor you wear; give no more thought to satisfying the bodily appetites."*

Augustine interpreted this event as 'God setting things up' so he would see that his only freedom could come through Christ. This was a purely an act of God's grace (*gratia* means gift), not of Augustine's own willing or Augustine's doing or Augustine's merit.

Here is the 'logic' by which Augustine renounced human agency: The world is full of evil and almost no one can control their sinfulness. Before we were born, we like Adam, had free will, but we chose evil. We committed original sin—willfully. Once having chosen evil, we can never regain freedom of the will. Our life is predetermined by this original sin. If we happen to do good or if we happen to avoid temptation, it is only by God's grace.

This was Augustine's response to the 'Pelagian heresy' and many of his writings are polemics against his theological opponents, such as Pelagius. We don't know exactly what Pelagius said, since Augustine had his books burned, but the gist of Pelagius's writings was that human beings have the ability to gain the good life and to do meritorious deeds that should earn a good life. For Augustine (and for Luther and Calvin one thousand years later) if you have a good life, it was only because God set it up for you.

The balance between God and man now falls all the way back to where it was one thousand years earlier in the *Iliad*. God is all-powerful. Humans do not have any independent efficacy. Humans, doomed by original sin should be full of pessimism, and imagining God's mysterious plan is beyond us.

This becomes church doctrine and essentially remains so for the next one thousand years. Importantly this gloomy anti-human theology arose and took hold just as the Roman Empire was in drastic decline. The barbarians were at the gates. Art, literature and science were in decline, the quality of life deteriorated dramatically, and human freedom soon fell to a new low.

Human progress now stagnates for one thousand years.

## Notes

1. When I was first writing about Positive Psychology and its emphasis on PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement), one of my California friends wrote and asked me 'Marty, what are you smoking? Out here all we care about is sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll.'
2. I lean heavily on Lang (2015), Chapter 3, *Bodies, Souls and the Perils of Persuasion*.
3. I lean heavily on Frede (2012), Chapter 2: *Aristotle on Choice without a Will*.
4. Nichomachean Ethics, Book 3, Chapter 5.
5. Nichomachean Ethics, Book 1, especially Chapter 8.
6. The masculine pronoun here is not accidental.
7. Frede (2012). Chapter 6.
8. Frede (2012), Chapter 6 is a useful and very detailed analysis of Augustine's renunciation of human agency.

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