

A
FREE
Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought
WILL

MICHAEL FREDE

EDITED BY A. A. LONG FOREWORD BY DAVID GOSSET

The Joan Palevsky

Imprint in Classical Literature



In honor of beloved Virgil—

“O degli altri poeti onore e lume . . .”

—Dante, *Inferno*

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A Free Will



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*Origins of the Notion
in Ancient Thought*

by Michael Frede

Edited by A. A. Long

with a Foreword by David Sedley



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FOREWORD

Michael Frede's untimely death in 2007 marked off a forty-year era in the study of ancient philosophy upon which he has left his unique mark. This imprint owed much to his intellectual persona. At Göttingen (1966–71), Berkeley (1971–76), Princeton (1976–91), Oxford (1991–2005), and, in his final years, Athens (2005–2007), he was a magnet to younger scholars, many of whom have gone on to become leaders in the field. For them and others he set an inspiring example by his dialectical practice of live discussion, which, provided that it was accompanied by sufficient coffee and cigarettes, was liable to continue hour upon hour without limit. He was unfailingly supportive of his countless former students, in many of whom the spirit and style of his scholarship live on.

For the wider world, however, his writings were the primary conduit of his influence. They started with *Prädikation und Existenzaussage* (1967), his seminal monograph on Plato's *Sophist*, and continued through his superlative book on Stoic logic (1974), his celebrated commentary (coauthored by Gunther Patzig) on Aristotle, *Metaphysics Zeta* (1988), innumerable articles and chapters,

three edited collections, a translation (with Richard Walzer) of *Three Treatises on the Nature of Science* by Galen, and a volume of Frede's reprinted papers (1987), to which further volumes are now to be posthumously added. The present book further enlarges, perhaps even crowns, that remarkable corpus of work.

From the twelve centuries during which Greco-Roman philosophy flourished, there are few thinkers or topics whose understanding has not been enriched by Frede's publications. A full list would be tediously long. Plato and the dialogue form; Aristotelian category theory and metaphysics; Stoic logic, grammar, ethics, and epistemology; Pyrrhonist skepticism; and Galen's theology are no more than examples of the subjects whose understanding has been permanently transformed by Frede's now classic studies. I do not mean by this that he has definitively solved the major historical or exegetical problems; his views have as often as not generated new controversy. Rather, his example and contribution have dramatically clarified the issues and raised the level of debate, introducing entirely new perspectives and interpretative options.

Frede was invited to be the eighty-fourth Sather Professor of Classical Literature at his former university, the University of California, Berkeley, in 1997–98. The professorship requires its holder to give six lectures that will later be published by the University of California Press in its Sather Classical Lectures series, which includes such celebrated works as E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), and Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (1993). As Tony Long explains in his preface, although the lectures were extremely well received, Frede did not feel ready to publish them before extending his research further. But as readers will quickly discover, the quality of the text that he has bequeathed fully matches the brilliance and incisiveness for which all his work is admired.

The origin of the concept of will, and more specifically free will, has been endlessly debated, and the inconclusiveness of the debate has mirrored the philosophical indeterminacy of the concept itself. Frede's strategy is to avoid any initial presuppositions about the term's precise meaning and instead let his understanding of it emerge from the texts. This leads him to set Aristotle aside (albeit in a characteristically illuminating chapter) and to shift the focus firmly to Stoicism, arguing that it was in Epictetus that the earlier Stoic theory of assent, enriched with a now developed notion of an inner life, led to the first philosophical concept plausibly identifiable as free will. Much of Frede's past work on Stoic psychology is fruitfully redeployed in securing this result. Later chapters are devoted to showing how the underlying Stoic notion, despite not being able to commend itself in unmodified form to Platonism and Aristotelianism, was the one that ultimately found its way into Christian doctrine.

In addition to its potential to become a landmark in the historiography of philosophy, this book displays the familiar magic of Michael Frede's writing at his usual best. One of the earliest lessons he learned, he once told me, was not to dress up as complicated anything that is fundamentally simple. And that capacity for putting across a powerfully illuminating perspective without the least pretension, but with a winning combination of lucidity, patience, and penetratingly sharp vision, will be found to be on display once more in the pages that follow.

David Sedley

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

This book is an edited version of the six lectures Michael Frede delivered as the eighty-fourth Sather Professor of Classical Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, during the fall semester of 1997–98. Frede entitled his lectures “The Origins of the Notion of the Will.” They were well attended by the campus community and received with great interest and appreciation. The Department of Classics was eager to publish the lectures as soon as Frede was ready to commit them to print, but he insisted that, before doing so, he needed to discuss further ancient authors and related topics. This perfectionism was completely in character, but by summer 2007 we were still hoping to receive a typescript from him that we could send to the University of California Press. Then, on August 11 of that year, during a triennial colloquium on Hellenistic philosophy at Delphi, Frede died unexpectedly while swimming in the Gulf of Corinth.

What additions and changes he might have made, but for his untimely death, we shall sadly never know. In conversation with me in the years since he delivered his Sather Lectures, he

spoke eagerly about his interests in Maximus the Confessor and John Chrysostomos; as this book's bibliography shows, in 2002 he published a substantial article entitled "John of Damascus on Human Action, the Will, and Human Freedom." We can be fairly confident that Byzantine philosophy and theology was the field in which he would have expanded his research on the will. But, though he himself was not ready to publish his lecture typescripts, they already form, as this book shows, a completely coherent and well-fashioned whole.

Having been fortunate to know Michael Frede for a period of thirty years, I readily agreed to edit the lectures when Katerina Iorediakonou, his partner, asked me to do so. I realized of course that the task would be daunting. Frede's command of ancient philosophy was legendary in its range and subtlety, and his Sather Lectures drew him into Patristic scholarship, where I was far from being at home. However, I knew I could count on help wherever my own familiarity with the material ran out. In compiling the notes, which were not part of the original typescript, I have consulted the following friends: Alan Code, John Dillon, Dorothea Frede, James Hankinson, James O'Donnell, and Robert Sharples. George Boys-Stones deserves special mention as he is largely responsible for the notes for chapter 7, on Origen. I am also grateful to my colleague Mark Griffith, who wrote the Sather committee's report recommending the book's publication to the University of California Press and gave me several suggestions and corrections that I have gladly incorporated.

As Frede indicated in his first lecture (chapter 1), he conceived his project, to quite a large extent, as a response to the Sather Lectures delivered by his compatriot, Albrecht Dihle, in 1974 and published in 1982 under the title *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*. Frede fully acknowledges Dihle's extraordinary learn-

ing, but he contests his predecessor's thesis that the effective originator of the notion of a free will was Augustine. According to Frede, it is later Stoicism, as represented by Epictetus, that was chiefly responsible for developing the notion of a free will, with Augustine himself one of the chief beneficiaries of this Stoic notion.

Frede entitled his lectures, as I have mentioned, "The Origins of the Notion of the Will." In fact, as he makes plain in the introduction to this book, what chiefly concerns him are the origins of the notion of a *free* will. In editing his work I decided that it would be much more appropriately publicized by stating "free will" in the book's title rather than simply "will." I have also converted the first three chapters of his typescript, which were lengthy and closely packed, into the first six chapters of this book. Chapters 1, 3, and 5 retain Frede's original lecture titles, as do chapters 7 to 9. But chapters 2, 4, and 6, with titles I have invented, incorporate material Frede included in the second half of each of his typescript chapters 1, 2, and 3.

In editing the material I have been chiefly concerned to smooth the flow of sentences and paragraphs in ways that still respect the inimitable tone of Frede's voice. In a few instances I was not sure of his meaning, and I have indicated these in the notes. Most often the changes I have introduced are to punctuation, syntax, and word order, pruning some of the profuse uses of *now* or *and* at the beginning of sentences and eliminating repetition that works better in a lecture than in a text for reading. I have also introduced a few subheadings or white space between paragraphs, in order to temper the density of some passages. I was greatly helped with the mechanics of editing by Nandini Pandey, a graduate student at Berkeley, who put the preliminarily edited typescript on line and spotted many neces-

sary changes that I had overlooked. I am also grateful to David Crane, another Berkeley graduate student, who read parts of the typescript with me at an early stage and made helpful editorial suggestions.

In most of his publications Frede was sparing in the use of notes and in references to scholarly literature. This book departs somewhat from that practice, but I have been encouraged by friends, among whom I am especially grateful to Charles Brittain, to annotate Frede's text to the extent that I have done. His work is of such high quality and of such general interest that it deserves a large readership. I have compiled the book's notes and bibliography, modest in scope and quantity though they are, in the hope that they will be of help to readers who are relatively new to this material and keen to pursue it further, as Frede himself would have wished .

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The notion of a free will is a notion we have inherited from antiquity. It was first in antiquity that one came to think of human beings as having a free will. But, as with so many other notions we have inherited from antiquity, for instance, the notion of an essence or the notion of a teleological cause, we have to ask ourselves whether the notion of a free will has not outlived its usefulness, has not become a burden rather than of any real help in understanding ourselves and what we do. Contemporary philosophers for the most part dispense with the notion of a free will, and the few attempts which are still made to give an account of what it is to have free will seem rather discouraging. In this situation it may be of some help to retrace our steps and see what purpose the notion of a free will originally was supposed to serve, how it was supposed to help our understanding, and whether it was flawed right from its beginnings, as we might now see in hindsight.

In these lectures it is in this spirit that I want to pursue the question “When in antiquity did one first think of human beings

as having a free will, why did one come to think so, and what notion of a free will was involved when one came to think of human beings in this way?" To raise this question, though, is to make a substantial assumption about the very nature of the notion of a free will. I assume, and I will try to show, that this notion in its origins is a technical, philosophical notion which already presupposes quite definite and far from trivial assumptions about ourselves and the world. It is for this reason that I presume its having an identifiable historical origin.

In contrast, this is not the view scholars took until fairly recently. They went on the assumption that the notion of a free will is an ordinary notion, part of the repertory of notions in terms of which the ordinary person thinks about things and in terms of which the ancient Greeks must have already been thinking all along. And on this assumption, of course, there is no place for the question of when the ancients first came to think of human beings as having a free will.

The assumption that the Greeks all along must have been thinking of human beings as having a free will seems truly astounding nowadays. For, if we look at Greek literature from Homer onwards, down to long after Aristotle, we do not find any trace of a reference to, let alone a mention of, a free will. This is all the more remarkable, as Plato and in particular Aristotle had plenty of occasion to refer to a free will. But there is no sign of such a reference in their works. Scholars did indeed notice this with a certain amount of puzzlement. But it did not occur to them to draw what would seem to be the obvious inference, namely, that Plato and Aristotle did not yet have a notion of a free will and that it was for this reason that they did not talk of a free will. As eminent a scholar as W.D. Ross again could note that Plato and Aristotle do not refer to a will, let alone a free will.

But even Ross concludes that we must assume that Aristotle, as Ross puts it, “shared the plain man’s belief in free will.”¹ And he explains Aristotle’s failure to refer to a free will explicitly as due to the fact that Aristotle did not think hard and carefully enough about the matter to arrive at a philosophical account of what it is to have a free will.

But why should we assume in the first place that Aristotle believed in a free will? To understand the assumption Ross and earlier scholars make, we have to take into account the following. Let us assume that it is a fact that, at least sometimes when we do something, we are responsible for what we are doing, as nothing or nobody forces us to act in this way; rather, we ourselves desire or even choose or decide to act in this way. Let us also assume, as is reasonable enough, that this is what the Greeks believed all along. It certainly is something Aristotle took to be a fact. The notion of a free will was originally introduced within the context of a particular theory, namely, a late Stoic theory, in a way specific to this theory, to account for this presumed fact. But once this notion had been introduced into Stoicism, rival theories, either Peripatetic or Platonist, developed their own version of a notion of a free will, which fitted in with their overall theory. In fact, it was a notion which was eagerly taken up by Christians, too. And, largely due to the influence of mainstream Christianity, it came to be a notion which, in one version or another, gained almost universal acceptance. People quite generally, whether followers of Stoicism, Platonism, or mainstream Christianity, felt committed to a belief in a free will. Even if they themselves were not able to give a theoretical account of what a free will is, they relied on such an account’s being available. This had the effect that the mere assumption that sometimes we are responsible for what we are doing, since we do it not because