

## THE MEANING OF *PROHAIRESIS* IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

CHARLES CHAMBERLAIN

University of Arizona

Aristotle's concept of *prohairesis*, generally translated as "choice" or "moral purpose," is central to his teaching on ethics. We find it in his definition of moral virtue as a "*hexis prohairetikê*," that is, a state which is "prohairetic."<sup>1</sup> *Prohairesis* is further characterized as being the "decisive factor in virtue and character (*êthos*)."<sup>2</sup> According to a passage in the *Rhetoric*, "acting in accordance with *prohairesis* is the distinguishing mark of the morally virtuous man."<sup>3</sup> In the discussion of friendship, *prohairesis* plays an important role: the best type of friendship, the *êthikê philia*, or friendship based on *êthos*, is said to be based on *prohairesis*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, "*prohairesis* is characteristic of a friend and of virtue."<sup>5</sup> Aristotle's treatment of *akrasia*, or weakness of the will, often introduces *prohairesis* at crucial junctures.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the *akratês* or weak-willed person is distinguished as acting "contrary to his *prohairesis*," giving way to strong desire, in contrast to the *engkratês*, the strong-willed person, who abides by his *prohairesis* in resisting desire.<sup>7</sup> We even find Aristotle coming back to the subject of *prohairesis* at the beginning of his discussion of the intellectual virtues, thus indicating that it plays a part in both intellectual and moral development.<sup>8</sup> Thus in nearly every major area of Aristotle's ethical thought the concept of *prohairesis* plays a central role. Furthermore, each ethical treatise contains one chapter

<sup>1</sup> NE 2.6.1106B36–A2. So also EE 2.10.1227B5–11.

<sup>2</sup> NE 8.13.1163A22–23: τῆς ἀρετῆς γὰρ καὶ τοῦ ἥθους ἐν τῇ προαιρέσει τὸ κύριον.

<sup>3</sup> 1.9.1367B22–23: ἴδιον δὲ τοῦ σπουδαίου τὸ κατὰ προαίρεσιν.

<sup>4</sup> EE 7.10.1243B9–10: ὅτι δ' ἐστὶν ἡ ἠθικὴ (sc. φιλία) κατὰ προαίρεσιν, δῆλον. Cf. also EE 7.10.1243B2–3; NE 8.5.1157B30–31.

<sup>5</sup> NE 9.1.1164B2: αὕτη (sc. ἡ προαίρεσις) γὰρ τοῦ φίλου καὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς. Cf. *Politics* 3.9.1280B38–39: ἡ γὰρ τοῦ συζῆν προαίρεσις φιλία.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, NE 7.4.1148A4–17; 7.7.1150A9–27; 7.8.1150B29–51A28; 7.9.1151A29–B1; 7.10.1152A8–19.

<sup>7</sup> NE 7.1.1145B8–17.

<sup>8</sup> NE 6.2 *passim*.

devoted specifically to the subject of *prohairesis*.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the term is scattered throughout Aristotle's other works, especially the *Politics* and *Rhetoric*.<sup>10</sup> Purely in terms of its frequency, then, *prohairesis* would seem to be a vital part of Aristotelian ethics.

In spite of the obvious importance of this concept, great uncertainty exists among scholars about how to translate it. Sir David Ross, for instance, in his translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, confesses: "*Prohairesis* is a very difficult word to translate. Sometimes 'intention,' 'will,' or 'purpose' would bring out the meaning better; but I have for the most part used 'choice.'"<sup>11</sup> Similarly G. E. M. Anscombe: "The notion of 'choice' as conceived by Aristotle, his *prohairesis*, is a very peculiar one."<sup>12</sup> In a recent book, A. J. P. Kenny explains his translation of *prohairesis* as follows: "'Purposive choice' seems to me the least misleading translation of *prohairesis*. Its clumsiness reflects the fact that no natural English concept corresponds to Aristotle's."<sup>13</sup> Most striking of all is this assertion by W. F. R. Hardie: "But it is not clear to what it [*prohairesis*] refers. And we cannot make it clear since to do so would involve asking questions which Aristotle did not ask and trying out distinctions which he did not make."<sup>14</sup> Clearly whatever Aristotle intended by *prohairesis* is a puzzle: it is a "difficult word to translate," a "peculiar notion" to which "no natural English concept corresponds," one which cannot perhaps even be known, if Hardie is right. However this latter view seems extreme; in studying antiquity we must often be satisfied with answers which do not meet Hardie's requirements for "definiteness." I propose in what follows to go over the evidence of the ethics, and attempt to give a more conclusive description of *prohairesis* than is to be found in the scholarly literature. At the same time I hope to explain why translators have had such problems with the word, since, as Aristotle says, to show the source of the error contributes to the persuasiveness of one's case.<sup>15</sup>

Before proceeding, let me say that the goal of this study is not simply to find a single word or phrase which will serve as a suitable translation of *prohairesis*. Kenny's "purposive choice" will no doubt

<sup>9</sup> NE 3.2; EE 2.10; MM 1.19.

<sup>10</sup> Only twice in the *Poetics* (6.50B9; 15.54A18), but both times intimately linked to *êthos*.

<sup>11</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford 1926) 53, note 1. Cf. also his *Aristotle* (London 1956) 200 with references.

<sup>12</sup> "Thought and Action in Aristotle: What is Practical Truth?" in *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough (New York 1965) 143–58.

<sup>13</sup> *Aristotle's Theory of the Will* (New Haven 1979) 69, note 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford 1968) 161–62. See also 164: "A definite answer would only be possible if Aristotle had himself made and accepted the distinction which, in asking what he meant, we have ourselves assumed." See also W. W. Fortenbaugh, "Aristotle and the Questionable Mean-Dispositions," *TAPA* 99 (1968) 221, note 29: "This is not to imply that Aristotle's conception of *prohairesis* is altogether clear."

<sup>15</sup> NE 7.15.1154A22–25.

satisfy many. It is understanding we are after, not a verbal place-holder for translations of Aristotle. The scholarly *aporiai* over the proper translation of *prohairesis* point to a serious problem, namely a fundamental lack of clarity about the concept signified by the word.<sup>16</sup> Given its central position in Aristotle's thought, this state of affairs is unfortunate. I suggest that if we are satisfied to translate this crucial term now by "choice," now by "will," now "intention," now "purpose," we do Aristotle a disservice. At the very least we ought to inquire how these diverse concepts are related in his mind under one heading—*prohairesis*.

Let us first begin with the general outlines of Aristotelian ethical theory. He divides the soul into two parts—that which "has reason" and that which does not.<sup>17</sup> The rational part of the soul is able to view the *archai* of things, attain to calculation and practical and theoretical wisdom, use induction and deduction. Its *aretai* are the so-called intellectual virtues treated in book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The irrational soul is the seat of the emotions (*pathê*)—anger, fear, hate—or in more general terms, of desire (*orexis*).<sup>18</sup> This will include not only the emotions, but also bodily drives like hunger, thirst, and sexual desire.<sup>19</sup> Books 2 through 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are devoted to the ethical virtues and related matters.

In general, this bipartite scheme of rational and irrational forms the basis of Aristotle's ethical writings.<sup>20</sup> There are however many traces of the Platonic scheme of tripartition, according to which the soul is divided into a logical, a spirited, and an appetitive part.<sup>21</sup> Although it

<sup>16</sup> As Anscombe well says (150; see above, note 12): "If it [*prohairesis*] had been a winner, like some other Aristotelean concepts, would not 'proheretic' be a word as familiar to us as 'practical' is?"

<sup>17</sup> Where Aristotle speaks of τὸ λόγον ἔχον and τὸ ἄλογον, I shall for convenience use the traditional terms "rational" and "irrational soul" without intending anything more than to reproduce his distinction in English.

<sup>18</sup> *Ὀρεξις* is more inclusive than *ἐπιθυμία*; see *NE* 1.13.1102B30; *EE* 2.7.1223A26–27; 2.10.1225B24–26. *Ἐπιθυμία* often refers to bodily drives like hunger, thirst, and sexual appetite; see W. W. Fortenbaugh, "Aristotle's *Rhetoric* on Emotions," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 52 (1970) 66–70.

<sup>19</sup> See W. W. Fortenbaugh, "On the Antecedents of Aristotle's Bipartite Psychology," *GRBS* 11 (1970) 248–50.

<sup>20</sup> This conception recurs throughout Aristotle's works. See for example, *Protrepticus*, frag. 6, p. 35, lines 6–8 (Ross); *MM* 1.1.1182A17–26; *NE* 1.7.1097B33–1098A5; 1.13.1102A27ff.; 6.1.1139A3–6; *EE* 2.1.1220A8–11; *Politics* 1.5.1254B8–9; 7.14.1333A16–18; 7.15.1334B18–19; *de Anima* 3.9.432A30–31. Dispute has arisen over the meaning and consistency of Aristotle's division; see Fortenbaugh, "Antecedents" (above, note 19) 241–50, for a summary of the problem. Though Aristotle may work with other types of theoretical division of the soul (as in the passage cited above from *de Anima*), his system of ethics is firmly grounded upon the bipartite division.

<sup>21</sup> See *Republic* 4.435Bff.; *Phaedrus* 246Aff.; *Timaeus* 69C–71A. According to Terence Irwin, "Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle," in Amélie O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on*

may seem that Aristotle has simply fused the Platonic spirited and appetitive into his irrational soul, W. W. Fortenbaugh has argued persuasively that this is not the case, that Aristotle's bipartite soul is a special division of its own.<sup>22</sup> The issue of bipartition versus tripartition needs to be raised because it may explain certain inconsistencies in Aristotle's account of *prohairesis*. In particular, he sometimes assigns "wish" (*boulêsis*) to the irrational, sometimes to the rational soul.<sup>23</sup> When he then describes *prohairesis* in terms of *boulêsis*, it is unclear whether he is thinking of "rational" or "irrational" wish.<sup>24</sup> In the case of *boulêsis*, however, it is likely that Aristotle is simply inconsistent in his use of the word.<sup>25</sup> Though such inconsistencies may be caused by Aristotle's habit of thinking in Platonic terms when presenting his own ideas, they seem to have little bearing on the theory of *prohairesis* proposed here. In general, this model of *prohairesis* will be presented in terms of a bipartite soul.

It is a fundamental proposition of Aristotelian ethics that each part of the soul needs the assistance of the other in order to achieve its own maximum potential, that is, its *aretê*. Unless there is a mean or goal at which to aim, *orexis*, desire, cannot be properly disciplined in every case.<sup>26</sup> It is the function of the rational soul to supply this mean; as Aristotle says, "the mean is as the correct account prescribes," and the correct account comes from the use of the rational soul.<sup>27</sup> What the correct account prescribes is the "when," the "where," the "how long" and so forth, which Aristotle often mentions in his discussion of the individual virtues in books 2 through 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>28</sup>

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*Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley 1980) 143, the tripartite scheme is accepted throughout Aristotle's ethical writings.

<sup>22</sup> "On the Antecedents of Aristotle's Bipartite Psychology," (above, note 19). See also D. A. Rees, "Theories of the Soul in the Early Academy," in I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen (edd.), *Aristotle and Plato in Mid-Fourth Century* (Goteborg 1960) 191–200, who argues for bipartition as the foundation of Aristotelian ethics.

<sup>23</sup> In *Topics* 4.5.126A13 and *de Anima* 3.9.432B5, *βούλησις* is located in the *λογιστικόν*. More often, *βούλησις* is named as a species of *ὄρεξις*, which by implication would put it in the irrational soul; see *Politics* 7.15.1334B22–25; *de Anima* 2.3.414B2; *EE* 2.7.1223A26–27.

<sup>24</sup> *EE* 2.10.1226B2–5.

<sup>25</sup> W. L. Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford 1902; rpt. New York 1973) vol. 3, p. 456, claims that Aristotle is inconsistent in his use of *βούλησις*.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle speaks of a target (*skopos*) on which, in his metaphor, the rational soul fixes its gaze, then strains or relaxes tension as required (like a bow) in order to discipline desire. Cf. *NE* 6.1.1138B22–23: ἔστι τις σκοπὸς πρὸς ὃν ἀποβλέπων ὁ τὸν λόγον ἔχων ἐπιτείνει καὶ ἀνίησι.

<sup>27</sup> *NE* 3.5.1114B30: ὡς ἂν ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος προστάξῃ.

<sup>28</sup> *NE* 2.3.1104B22–23, 25–26; 2.6.1106B21–22; 1107A16; 2.9.1109A28, B14–16; 3.11.1118B23–27; 1119A13–15, B17. We also find the abbreviation ὡς ὁ λόγος for ὡς ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος at *NE* 3.8.1117A8. Cf. also 3.11.1119A20.

For instance, it is easy to get angry, but not easy to define in every case in what way and at whom and on what grounds and how long to get angry.<sup>29</sup> Not only does the irrational soul need the help of the rational soul, but in turn, as the irrational soul becomes more disciplined, it enables the other side to arrive at a more correct account of the mean.<sup>30</sup> The path to total human excellence will thus be for Aristotle a crabwise movement of the whole soul, which uses now the rational, now the irrational to progress. We need not examine all the implications of this conception. It is enough to conclude that for Aristotle, total virtue requires the proper working of both rational and irrational souls—the correct account provides the description of the proper mean for desire to achieve.

What we need now is a name for the process by which the orders of reason are brought upon desire so as to change it. My contention is that this is what Aristotle means by *prohairesis*, and that failure to recognize the fact that *prohairesis* is a process has given rise to the various translations mentioned earlier. In order to find support for this hypothesis we must first look to the second chapter of *NE* 6, since it is here that Aristotle has left vital clues about *prohairesis*.<sup>31</sup> After examining this text, we will inspect *NE* 3.2 and *EE* 2.10, which are devoted specifically to *prohairesis*, to check our findings.

In book 6 of the *NE*, Aristotle moves from the ethical virtues, those of the irrational soul, to those of the rational soul, the intellectual virtues. Although there is much that is puzzling in chapter 2, let us focus on one sentence which contains an important statement about *prohairesis*:

Since ethical virtue is a state involving *prohairesis*, and since *prohairesis* is desire involving deliberation, therefore it is necessary that the reasoning be true and the desire correct, if in fact the *prohairesis* is to be *spoudaia*; that is, the *logos* affirms and desire pursues the same things.<sup>32</sup>

The first two clauses have already been established earlier in the *NE*: ethical virtue was defined in 2.6 as a *hexis prohairesetikê*, while in 3.3 *prohairesis* was found to be *orexis bouletikê*.<sup>33</sup> What is new to discover is that in a *spoudaia prohairesis*, both parts of the soul—the rational part containing *logos* and the irrational part containing *orexis*—are in accord.

<sup>29</sup> *NE* 2.9.1109A28 with B14–16.

<sup>30</sup> This reciprocity, hinted at throughout books 1 through 5 of the *NE*, is elaborated in book 6, chapters 12 and 13, especially 1144B32ff. Cf. also 6.12.1144A7–9: ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀρετὴ (that is, ethical ἀρετὴ) τὸν σκοπὸν (that is, the ὁρθὸς λόγος) ποιεῖ ὁρθόν.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Anscombe (above, note 12) 147: "Aristotle devotes most discussion to this definition of 'choice.'"

<sup>32</sup> 1139A22–26: ὥστ' ἐπειδὴ ἡ ἠθικὴ ἀρετὴ ἔξιν προαιρετικὴ, ἡ δὲ προαίρεσις ὀρεξὶς βουλευτικὴ, δεῖ διὰ ταῦτα μὲν τὸν τε λόγον ἀληθῆ εἶναι καὶ τὴν ὀρεξιν ὁρθήν, εἴπερ ἡ προαίρεσις σπουδαία, καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ τὸν μὲν φάναι τὴν δὲ διώκειν.

<sup>33</sup> 1106B36; 1113A10–11.

Aristotle says this in two ways: first, that the *logos* is true and the desire correct; second, that the *logos* affirms and the desire pursues the same things.<sup>34</sup> Here is explicit evidence that *prohairesis*, at least one that is *spoudaia*—good or complete—is Aristotle’s term for the concord of reason and desire, as proposed above.

Continuing through chapter 2, we find the same point made again in different words. At 1139A31–33: “*prohairesis* is the cause of action—the efficient but not the final cause—while the cause of *prohairesis* is desire and reasoning about an end.”<sup>35</sup> Here again the source (*archê*) of *prohairesis* comes from both the irrational soul, the seat of desire, and the rational soul, the seat of *logos*, which will include reasoning about an end. The text continues: “Hence *prohairesis* exists neither apart from *nous* and *dianoia* nor apart from an ethical state.”<sup>36</sup> Once more the linking of the two parts of the soul: *nous* and *dianoia* from the rational, *êthikê hexis* from the irrational.<sup>37</sup> Finally a few lines further: “Therefore *prohairesis* is either *nous* combined with desire or desire combined with *dianoia*.”<sup>38</sup> Here the jingle *orektikos nous ê orexis dianoêtikê* emphasizes the dual nature of *prohairesis*. When both parts of Aristotle’s bipartite soul—*dianoia* and *orexis*—function in harmony, the result is *prohairesis*.

Let me give an example of what I have described. The first step in a *prohairesis* is the exercise of one’s *dianoia*, an intellectual act of affirming a proposition as true.<sup>39</sup> In other words, to use an example, after smoking for twenty years and enjoying it, I finally accept the medical evidence, the urgings of my friends, the physical symptoms I have, and decide to stop smoking.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps I find a new cure, or have a religious experience, or a brush with death, or start jogging, or my wife beats me in tennis. For whatever reason, I undertake to end my habit of smoking; in Aristotle’s terms, I am undertaking to change my desires, or form a new one. For several months, it is difficult—perhaps I taper off, perhaps I go “cold turkey.” I may have a cigarette at a party, and regret it the next day. In spite of the pain and the backsliding, by the end of one year

<sup>34</sup> 1139A24: τόν τε λόγον ἀληθῆ εἶναι καὶ τὴν ὄρεξιν ὀρθήν; A25–26: καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ τὸν μὲν φάναι τὴν δὲ διώκειν.

<sup>35</sup> Πράξεως μὲν οὖν ἀρχὴ προαίρεσις—ὅθεν ἡ κίνησις ἀλλ’ οὐχ οὗ ἔνεκα—προαιρέσεως δὲ ὄρεξις καὶ λόγος ὁ ἕνεκά τινος.

<sup>36</sup> 1139A33–34: διὸ οὗτ’ ἀνευ νοῦ καὶ διανοίας οὗτ’ ἀνευ ἡθικῆς ἐστὶν ἔξωθεν ἡ προαίρεσις.

<sup>37</sup> The relation between *νοῦς* and *διάνοια* needs to be elaborated more clearly than has presently been done. I hope to show later that they are two distinct entities, although in the adjective forms *διανοητικός* and *νοητικός* Aristotle may use them interchangeably.

<sup>38</sup> 1139B4–5: διὸ ἡ ὀρεκτικὸς νοῦς ἡ προαίρεσις ἡ ὄρεξις διανοητική.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. NE 6.2.1139A21–22: ἐστὶ δ’ ὅπερ ἐν διανοίᾳ κατάφασις καὶ ἀπόφασις, τοῦτ’ ἐν ὀρέξει διώξις καὶ φυγή.

<sup>40</sup> It may be that I have had my doubts for some time, and have continued to smoke in an incontinent way. What matters is that I do reach a point, consciously or not, when I say: Yes, smoking is unhealthy and I don’t want to do it.

or five years, I have totally given up smoking. We may say that I have changed desire, or formed a new one. I no longer desire to smoke and I even find the smell of cigarette smoke nauseating.

Now I claim that what I have just described is what Aristotle intends by *prohairesis*. Basically it is the process of consciously deciding to form and of forming a new desire, and the implications of this formulation will clear up the difficulties mentioned earlier in translating the word in Aristotle's works. First of all, a *prohairesis* begins with the *dianoia*, that faculty of the rational soul by which we affirm or deny fundamental propositions about reality. Hence Aristotle's repeated assertions that *prohairesis* is accompanied by *dianoia*.<sup>41</sup> After affirming the proposition, we deliberate about how to achieve the goal or put it into action, and select from our deliberation a means. In the case of smoking, people may suck on pencils, eat fruit, join various therapy programs, or rely on their friends and family. This is the stage Aristotle calls selecting from deliberation.<sup>42</sup> Merely selecting from deliberation, however, constitutes only the beginning of a *prohairesis*. So far only *dianoia* and *boulê* have been involved, both of which Aristotle locates in the rational soul. *Prohairesis* is *dianoia* combined with *orexis*; both sides of the soul must be involved. Now that deliberation about means is over, the *orexis* must be changed accordingly; we must "desire on account of deliberation."<sup>43</sup> As Aristotle says elsewhere, we must make our desire accord with reason.<sup>44</sup> Though he does not discuss the point, this step takes time. It may happen along the way that we backslide, that is, act "contrary to our *prohairesis*" or that we do not "abide by our *prohairesis*."<sup>45</sup> In doing so, we are *akrateis*, and it may be that we never advance beyond this stage.<sup>46</sup> Or it may be a temporary phenomenon which we overcome, and in time form a new desire which is in accordance with our decision. In the final stage, the *prohairesis* can be described as complete (*spoudaia*)—"reason affirms and desire pursues the same thing."<sup>47</sup>

Aristotle seems to use the term *prohairesis* to refer to all parts of this process, from the selecting from deliberation to the point at which desire

<sup>41</sup> NE 6.2.1139A31ff.; 3.2.1112A15–16; *Metaphysics* 11.8.1065A32; *Physics* 2.5.197A7; *MM* 1.17.1189A16ff.

<sup>42</sup> NE 3.3.1113A2–5: βουλευτὸν δὲ καὶ προαιρετὸν τὸ αὐτό, πλὴν ἀφωρισμένον ἥδη τὸ προαιρετὸν τὸ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς βουλῆς κριθέν προαιρετὸν ἐστίν. However, it does not follow that all deliberation is in the service of a *prohairesis*.

<sup>43</sup> EE 2.10.1226B20–21: ὀρέγεται διὰ τὸ βουλεύσασθαι. The same point is made at NE 3.2.1113A10–12: προαίρεσις is βουλευτική ὄρεξις (that is, desire shaped by deliberation): "for after selecting from the results of deliberation we desire according to deliberation" (ἐκ τοῦ βουλεύσασθαι γὰρ κρίναντες ὀρεγόμεθα κατὰ τὴν βούλευσιν).

<sup>44</sup> NE 1.3.1095A10: τοῖς δὲ κατὰ λόγον τὰς ὀρέξεις ποιουμένοις.

<sup>45</sup> NE 7.4.1148A9; 7.8.1151A7; 7.9.1151A31, 34.

<sup>46</sup> I believe it was Mark Twain who said, "It's easy to quit smoking; I do it every month."

<sup>47</sup> NE 6.2.1139A25–26 (quoted above, note 32).

and reason concur. For instance, the *akratês*, having made his selection of the goal but having not yet changed his desire, can still be said to have made a *prohairesis*. In his case, however, he acts contrary to it (*para tèn prohairesin*) or does not abide by it (*ouk emmenei têtî prohairesei*).<sup>48</sup> The *engkratês*, on the other hand, acts *prohairoumenos* or *kata tèn prohairesin*, even though for him reason and desire are not yet in harmony. At the other end of the scale, in the *spoudaia prohairesis*, when reason and desire function in harmony, we can still say that the person acts from *prohairesis* (*ek prohaireseôs*). Thus Aristotle can say that the morally excellent man, the *spoudaios*, is characterized by acting according to *prohairesis*.<sup>49</sup> Even though the *prohairesis* has become, as it were, second nature to the *spoudaios*, he may still be said to act *prohairoumenos*.

If the preceding account is accurate, it may explain why scholars have had such difficulties in translating *prohairesis*. There is good reason for Ross' statement that sometimes "intention," "will," or "purpose" brings out the meaning better than "choice."<sup>50</sup> I believe that by trying to make *prohairesis* fit into the mold of "choice," or some version of it, translators have overlooked the full implications of what Aristotle says repeatedly about *prohairesis*. As Miss Anscombe says: "'Choice' cannot do all the work Aristotle wants it to do."<sup>51</sup> What seems to happen is that scholars allow the notion of "choice" or "will" or "purpose" to interfere with what Aristotle says about *prohairesis*. It should be obvious that to try to investigate the latter in terms of the former is a *petitio principii*. It is better to admit that Aristotle's meaning is unclear, examine the copious data in the ethics, then choose a proper translation.

There is perhaps another explanation why *prohairesis* is so difficult to translate. Basically it is that of the words generally used—"choice," "intention," "will," and "purpose"—each refers to a different stage of the whole process described above. In the beginning of a *prohairesis*, when *dianoia* is involved, we may call it a "choice" or "intention." We may say, "I have *chosen* to quite smoking," or "I *intend* to quit smoking." Once we have settled on the means and have undertaken to change desire, we enter the stage where *akrasia*, backsliding, can strike. Now we may speak of our "purpose," or "resolve" to quite smoking, or say that to quit smoking requires "will-power." Such words imply the effort which is necessary to bring a *prohairesis*, that is, the process of changing desire, to completion.<sup>52</sup> The translation depends on which part of the process is

<sup>48</sup> See the references in note 45.

<sup>49</sup> *Rhetoric* 1.9.1367b22–23.

<sup>50</sup> See above, note 11.

<sup>51</sup> "Thought and Action" (above, note 12). She continues: "The notion of 'choice' as conceived by Aristotle, his *prohairesis*, is a very peculiar one. I used to think it spurious" (150).

<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, Aristotle has not said much about the effort involved, except perhaps by implication in his discussion of *ἐγκράτεια*, *NE* 7.1–3.



under discussion. So, for instance, when Aristotle deals with *akrasia*, it is usually the case that "will," "purpose," or "resolve," terms which imply effort, are appropriate. On the other hand, "choice" or "intention" may fit the earlier stage of *prohairesis*.

It would be desirable for purposes of translation to find one term which might cover all the stages involved in *prohairesis*. Kenny has devised "purposive choice," an artificial creation, but in keeping with his position that no natural English concept corresponds to Aristotle's.<sup>53</sup> T. H. Irwin, in several of his writings, consistently uses the word "decision" to translate *prohairesis*.<sup>54</sup> Certainly this term captures the early stages of the process, where one decides on a course of action. However, "decision" seems to be a mental act which happens quickly, whereas *prohairesis* refers to a process, one which necessarily extends over time and requires effort.

I would like to propose another term, one which I have not seen used in the scholarly literature. This is "commitment," which in some ways shares the strengths of Irwin's "decision," while opening up possibilities of its own. Commitment covers much of the same ground as Aristotle's *prohairesis* as described above. For instance, in the example of smoking, I might say I am "committing" myself to giving up cigarettes, or, while I am in the process, I am "committed" to giving up cigarettes. In many cases, we "commit" ourselves to actions which we do not "feel like" (that is, desire) doing, and for a time then, reason and desire will be in conflict until a new desire has been formed. When we make a commitment, we must honor it, whether we want to or not; here desire has not yet been changed. At the same time, we may not abide by a commitment, as in the case of the *akratês*. We may, for instance, commit ourselves to spending two hours a day with our children, then default on the commitment when we feel too busy. When a commitment finally becomes engrained, and a new desire has been formed, we can still use the term. Thus I can say that I am a committed vegetarian, meaning that I have no desire to eat meat. Because commitment covers nearly the same ground as does Aristotle's use of *prohairesis*, it will function as a more consistent translation.

By translating *prohairesis* as "commitment," we smooth over many harsh passages in the ethics, in particular in the chapter of *NE* 3 devoted to *prohairesis*.<sup>55</sup> It will be a useful and convenient check on the argument thus far to apply the findings to that chapter. Aristotle says, for instance, that children and animals have no share in *prohairesis*.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> See above, note 13.

<sup>54</sup> "First Principles in Aristotle's Ethics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978) 252-72; "Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle," in Amélie O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley 1980) 117-55.

<sup>55</sup> *NE* 3.2; see also *EE* 2.10-11 for many of the same points with fuller treatment.

<sup>56</sup> *NE* 3.2.1111b8-9: τοῦ μὲν γὰρ ἐκουσίον καὶ παῖδες καὶ τᾶλλα ζῶα κοινωνεῖ, προαιρέσεως δ' οὐ; 12-13: οὐ γὰρ κοινὸν ἢ προαίρεσις καὶ τῶν ἀλόγων, ἐπιθυμία δὲ καὶ θυμός.

Taking *prohairesis* as “choice” distorts the meaning; this is indeed a peculiar notion of choice if it would be denied to children. But we can agree that children and animals do not in fact share in commitment, and for the same reason that Aristotle would give. In children the rational part of the soul is undeveloped; therefore the function of *dianoia* is lacking, and a *prohairesis* cannot technically begin.<sup>57</sup> Animals, irrational creatures by definition (*zôa aloga*), lack a rational soul entirely.<sup>58</sup> Children have *hairesis* (choice) but not *prohairesis* (commitment). According to Aristotle, we may say, a child is capable of saying whether he or she wants peas or beans (choice), but not of deciding to become a vegetarian (commitment).

Aristotle’s next statement, that “acts according to *prohairesis* cannot be performed suddenly,” makes more sense with commitment than with choice.<sup>59</sup> We can and often do make sudden choices, for instance, when we are in danger or under pressure, but we commit ourselves only after deliberation, that is, deliberately.<sup>60</sup> To continue, Aristotle says:<sup>61</sup>

The weak-willed man (*akratês*) acts in accordance with desire, not with commitment (*prohairoumenos*), while the continent man (*engkratês*) on the other hand acts in accordance with commitment not with desire.

The *akratês* has made the resolve, which is the first step in commitment, but is succumbing to desire; he is not acting as his commitment requires. The *engkratês*, who has also undertaken a commitment, feels the pull of desire, but perseveres (*karterei*). By doing so, he allows new desire to form.

Moving on a few lines, we read that the difference between *prohairesis* and *boulêsis* (wanting) is as follows:<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Politics* 7.15.1334b17–28.

<sup>58</sup> See Fortenbaugh, “Aristotle, Animals, Emotion, and Moral Virtue,” *Arethusa* 4 (1971) 137–65.

<sup>59</sup> *NE* 3.2.1111b9–10: καὶ τὰ ἐξαίφνης ἐκούσια μὲν λέγομεν, κατὰ προαίρεσιν δ’ οὐ.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, in the example given at *NE* 3.1.1110a8–14 to illustrate the difference between ἐκούσιον and ἀκούσιον, a sensible person will choose (αἰρεῖσθαι) to throw cargo overboard to increase the chances of safety. This is a choice, αἵρεσις, but it is not a commitment, προαίρεσις. Commitment presupposes choice, but not vice-versa.

<sup>61</sup> 1111b13–15: καὶ ὁ ἀκρατής ἐπιθυμῶν μὲν πράττει, προαιρούμενος δ’ οὐ. ὁ ἐγκρατής δ’ ἀνάπαλιν προαιρούμενος μὲν, ἐπιθυμῶν δ’ οὐ. Here the translation of the participle as “in accordance with” is indicated by an important piece of information. Both the ἀκρατής and the ἐγκρατής are assailed by desire (ἐπιθυμία), but the latter resists though he feels the pull. Hence πράττει ἐπιθυμῶν of the ἀκρατής means “he acts in accordance with desire.” Only in the complete commitment, say in complete σωφροσύνη or ἀνδρεία, is contrary desire absent.

<sup>62</sup> 1111b20–23: προαίρεσις μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι τῶν ἀδυνάτων, καὶ εἴ τις φαίη προαιρεῖσθαι, δοκοῖν ἂν ἡλίθιος εἶναι. βούλησις δ’ ἔστι <καὶ> τῶν ἀδυνάτων, οἷον ἀθανασίας. See also *EE* 2.10.1225b34–37. I have avoided translating βούλησις as “will,” since it is doubtful that Aristotle had a theory of will. See Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of Will* (above, note 13), introduction. Here no doubt Aristotle is thinking of the irrational type of βούλησις, one that could be directed toward impossible goals.

Commitment does not apply to impossibilities, and if someone should say that he was committed to an impossibility, he would be thought a fool. But wanting can apply to impossibilities, as in wanting immortality.

In English usage this distinction may not be obvious; nowadays someone may say he is committed to discovering a way to live forever without being thought a fool. Given the modern faith in science and technology, such a goal may not seem impossible. In general, however, Aristotle's stipulation seems to correspond to commitment as well as to *prohairesis*, namely that when we commit ourselves to something, it must be in the realm of the possible. Aristotle's next statement is related:<sup>63</sup>

And wanting can also apply to things which could not be done through one's own agency; for instance, wanting a certain actor or athlete to win. But no one commits oneself to this sort of thing, but only to that which he thinks can come about through his own agency.

This distinction seems to be present in the idea of commitment, that we commit ourselves only to things whose outcome we can somehow affect. When I say I am committed to electing a certain political candidate, I imply that I can play some part in the process. It would be unusual to hear that someone had committed herself to a goal over which she had no influence at all. So it appears that commitment also shares this dimension of the Aristotelian *prohairesis*.

To recapitulate the argument of this paper: the problems which scholars encounter in translating *prohairesis* in Aristotle's ethics arise because they have overlooked several crucial pieces of information in the ethics. An examination of *NE* 6.2 shows *prohairesis* to be the *process* of forming a new desire or desires. The customary translations of the word, such as "choice," "will," "purpose," "resolve" (and combinations such as Kenny's "purposive choice") are inadequate because they refer to different parts of the whole process. By translating *prohairesis* as "commitment" many of the difficulties are eliminated, since the English term covers much of the same ground as Aristotle's technical term, namely the whole process of forming new desires.

<sup>63</sup> B23–26: καὶ ἡ μὲν βούλησις ἐστὶ καὶ περὶ τὰ μηδαμῶς δι' αὐτοῦ πραχθέντα ἄν, οἷον ὑποκριτὴν τινα νικᾶν ἢ ἀθλητὴν· προαιρεῖται δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα οὐδεὶς, ἀλλ' ὅσα οἶεται γενέσθαι ἂν δι' αὐτοῦ.