

# The equivocality of Aristotle’s expression ‘choice’

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## Abstract

I argue that Aristotle’s use of the expression ‘*prohairesis*,’ often translated as ‘choice,’ is equivocal. In particular, I argue that the expression has both a generic and specific sense. The generic sense is choice conceived as a distinctively human cause of action through thought and reasoning. Generically, choice is of a course of action for the sake of some desired for end. The specific sense is choice made with reference to a person’s values. In other words, choice is of a course of action as what, from the chooser’s perspective, is worthy of pursuit. I argue that the occurrence of both senses has been overlooked in interpretation, and that the specific sense has been privileged, in part because Aristotle sometimes equivocates between the two senses. This is most clear in Aristotle’s discussion of incontinence (*akrasia*) as a failing made possible by human beings’ animal nature. Keeping the senses distinct allows for a broader conception of incontinence in which practical thought and reason can go against their own aims.

## 1 English expressions

What do you learn when I tell you that I “chose” or “decided upon” some course of action? What do I emphasize when I use words like ‘choice’ or ‘decision’?

Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind when considering the usage of these expressions is that they evoke a process of selection between alternatives. “Choice” is generally of one of several “choices;” “decision” is usually of or on one of several options.

But these words evoke more than 'mere' selection. They evoke the sorts of things that typically "go into" the selection—things like thought and reasoning, on the one hand, and preference or evaluation, on the other. To see that this is so, it is helpful to note that we tend to use different word, "pick," when we expect that there is no reason or preference which privileges one option over the others. It's "pick a card, any card" or "pick a cookie from the tray," not "choose a card" or "decide on a cookie."

No doubt we would understand someone who uttered either of the latter sentences. But the fact that that we tend to use "pick" and not "choose" in these contexts seems telling. When I say that I "chose" to do something, in contrast, I often intend to bring attention not just to the fact that I have selected an option but also to the fact that I have thought about my choice, or considered reasons for and against it, or made sure that the option harmonizes with my values, or is consistent with my preferences.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we use these these words even when there is only one option. If I find that the only way to get to Athens, Georgia is to take a shuttle from Atlanta and I am determined to go to Athens, I can 'decide' to take the shuttle. If you ask me whether I have decided how I'll get there, I can say "Yes," even if I have not selected between multiple options. And, again, if you then query why I chose to take the shuttle, and I answer "Because it's the only way to get to Athens," this response does not refuse the question. It answers it. Such uses of 'choice' or 'decision,' that is, ones which do not imply a selection between multiple options, may perhaps be rarer than the uses that do. But the fact that they are much more familiar than uses of choice in situations where we tend to use 'pick' (e.g., "choose a card, any card") suggests that the idea of the involvement of thought or preference is more central to the notion of 'choice' than

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the English expressions 'picking' and 'choosing,' see Morgenbesser and Ullmann-Margalit (1977).

the idea of a selection between multiple options. When I tell you that I have chosen to do something what I tell you *foremost*, then, is that my doing or intending to do that is the manifestation of some thought or evaluation on my part.

This is an essay on Aristotle’s concept of ‘*prohairesis*,’ often translated as ‘choice’ or ‘decision.’ So far I have only stated observations, hopefully plausible, about the common usage of English expressions. This may seem a dangerous start to an inquiry into how a philosopher of the ancient world used a Greek expression. For we may already doubt whether the usage of the many Greek expressions whose analogues are alive in modern English—for example, ‘ethical’ or ‘practical’—accurately reflect their usage in ancient Greek, let alone in a particular philosopher’s technical vernacular. So much the worse for concepts like ‘*prohairesis*,’ which (as Anscombe noted<sup>2</sup>) did not migrate into everyday English. (No English-speaker calls any dispositions, actions, procedures or thought processes “prohairesic,” outside of high-level Aristotle interpretation.) So one may worry that a focus on the English expressions ‘choice’ and ‘decision’ in a discussion of ‘*prohairesis*’ imports illicit biases which may blind us to the discrepancies between our and Aristotle’s uses of these expressions. Indeed, such a worry has motivated some interpreters to use the clearly technical ‘rational choice’ or ‘purposive choice’ as a translation.<sup>3</sup>

The worry is fair, but it is possible to overdo it. We should not let the worry dictate in advance what Aristotle can or cannot mean by ‘*prohairesis*.’ We should instead aim to let the text speak for itself. I think that a close inspection of the text reveals that the above observations about the English expressions ‘choice’ and ‘decision’ hold for

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<sup>2</sup> Anscombe (1965), 150.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Crisp (2000) and Kenny (1979), 69n1. For a survey of worries about the peculiarity of translating the term, see Chamberlain (1984), 148–149.

Aristotle's expression. Aristotle notes that '*prohairesis*' evokes the idea of selecting between alternatives: "the name seems to suggest that it is what is selected [*haireton*] before [*pro*] other things" (*NE* 1112a16–17; cf. *MM* 1189a13–14, *EE* 1226b7).<sup>4</sup> In this respect, it is like the English expression. But also like the English expression, we can *prohairesesthai* even when there is only one option. In the midst of a discussion of acting on one's choice Aristotle says, "if one asks, 'Why did you do this?' the answer is, 'Because it was the only thing possible', or 'Because it was better so'" (*MM* 1189b15–18; cf. *NE* 1112b17). This suggests that something else—whatever "goes into" *prohairesis* and puts the chooser in a position to explain her choices to others—is more central to Aristotle's use of the expression than selection from a plurality of options. I will show that what goes into *prohairesis*, to put it synoptically, is the involvement of thought or evaluation. In this respect as well, '*prohairesis*' is like 'choice' or 'decision.'

If I am right, this is a happy result: It not only means that English speakers get a head start on understanding Aristotle's treatment of '*prohairesis*' merely from their familiarity with their own language. It also means that Aristotle's detailed analysis of *prohairesis* bears on our understanding of the corresponding English expressions. And this means that English speakers are in a good position to *learn* from Aristotle's discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> All citations to Aristotle's corpus give the Bekker page and line number. All translations derive from Barnes (1984). I use the following abbreviations for Aristotle's works: *NE* for *Nicomachean Ethics*, *EE* for *Eudemian Ethics*, *MM* for *Magna Moralia*, *DA* for *On the Soul*, *DM* for *Movement of Animals* and *Met.* for *Metaphysics*. These abbreviations will be skipped when numerous contiguous quotes derive from the same text. There are some discrepancies between the source translations and my representation of them in quotes due to my consistently translating certain terms as follows: '*orexis*' as 'desire,' '*epithumia*' as 'appetite,' '*eu prattein*' as 'doing well,' '*eudaimonia*' as 'the good life.' I also make some alterations to render the text gender neutral. In the above quote, I render '*haireton*' as 'selected' instead of Stock's translation 'chosen,' in order to emphasize that it is not '*prohaireton*.' All further alterations are listed in footnotes.

## 2 Equivocality

This similarity between Aristotle’s expression and the common English expressions must of course be shown. Showing this is one of the central aims of this essay. But the essay has a more specific aim as well, which is to shed light on why the first aim is difficult. The first aim is difficult, I suggest, in part because Aristotle’s expression ‘*prohairesis*’ is equivocal. The expression, as I read Aristotle’s use of it, has both a generic and a specific sense.

Aristotle does not explicitly acknowledge that ‘*prohairesis*’ is equivocal in this way. But he does acknowledge that some expressions are. For example, Aristotle says that the state called ‘political wisdom’ contains two parts: a “controlling part” called ‘legislative wisdom,’ and a part that “relates to particulars” which is given “the generic<sup>5</sup> name ‘political wisdom’” (*NE* 1141b26–28). Hence the expression ‘political wisdom’ names both the whole and one its parts—plausibly: both the genus and one of its species.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, I think the English expressions ‘choice’ and ‘decision’ are similarly equivocal. This is a point I will return to below. For now it is enough to indicate that this equivocality can be a source of confusion, but that this need not count against the thesis about the similarity of these English expressions with Aristotle’s ‘*prohairesis*.’<sup>7</sup>

We can get a preliminary view of the equivocality of Aristotle’s expression by ob-

<sup>5</sup> Ross and Urmson have “general.”

<sup>6</sup> Another example can be found in the *NE*. In I.13 and II.1, among other places Aristotle distinguishes between virtues of thought and virtues of character. But, for example, in II.6 Aristotle calls virtue of character by the generic name ‘virtue’. Similarly, in *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle sometimes calls definitions “the principles of demonstration” (e.g. 75b31, 90b25, 96b22). But in I.2 and I.10 he identifies several different kinds of principle of which definitions are one.

<sup>7</sup> From this point forward I will translate ‘*prohairesis*’ as ‘choice,’ except in cases of comparing the English and Greek expressions, in which case the Greek expression will be left untranslated.

servicing what he says in his discussion of choice in *NE* III.2.

The first sense of 'choice' can be gleaned from Aristotle distinguishing what is chosen (*prohairesis*) from what is merely voluntary (*ekousion*). Aristotle tells us that "both children and the other animals share in voluntary acts<sup>8</sup>, but not in choice" (*NE* 1111b7–10; cf. 1149b34, *MM* 1189a1–4; *EE* 1225b26, 1226b21, 1240b33–34). This is because choice "involves reason and thought" (*NE* 1112a18). Human children have not yet developed these capacities. Non-rational animals never will. Only mature human beings are capable of thought and reason, and so only they can make choices and perform chosen acts. The chosen, then, is the species of voluntary acts which is distinctive of and unique to fully developed human agency.

The sense of the concept 'choice' which can be used to distinguish the chosen from the merely voluntary, then, is that of "practical thought"—that is, thought or reason that is "capable of originating local movement" (*kinēsis*). According to Aristotle, this is necessarily "thought...which calculates the things contributing<sup>9</sup> to an end" (*DA* 433a13–15). This implies that thought, even practical thought, is not capable of causing movement by itself (433a23). It must be given an end from outside, which then "stimulates" the thought (433a16). This end is provided by the faculty of desire (*orexis*), which Aristotle deems the "single" source of movement in all animals (433a21; cf. *DM* 700b14–701a6; *EE* 1226b25–29).

Now perhaps it is possible for thought to cause movement in other ways. For example, if I think about my own mortality, this thought may cause me to shiver. I am not sure if Aristotle ever considers this sort of mental causation. But regardless, it is clear that he would agree with us that my shivering in this case is not chosen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ross and Urmson have "actions."

<sup>9</sup> Smith has "means."

He would not even count it as action (*praxis*) in his quasi-technical sense: “The origin of action—its efficient, not its final cause—is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end” (*NE* 1139a31–33). Thought causes action (as opposed to jolts or cold sweats), and so counts as choice, only when its content bears a certain logical relationship to an end given by desire: “[A]ll choice is of something *for the sake of* some [desired] object” (*EE* 1227a36) or of “the things *contributing to* the end” (*NE* 1113b4). These highlighted connective expressions are familiar as the ones which figure in deliberation (*boulē*, *bouleusis*), the mental process in which we determine what contributes to our ends. Hence, Aristotle classifies choice as “deliberative<sup>10</sup> desire” (*NE* 1139a24; cf. *MM* 1189a31; *EE* 1226b9), thereby registering that choice’s content bears this sort of relationship to a desired end.

The discussion so far suggests that choice is thought with a view to a desired end which, when unimpeded by external circumstances, results in action. But this turns out to be but one of two senses of the expression as Aristotle uses it. The next is suggested by what Aristotle goes on to say in *NE* III.2 immediately after distinguishing the chosen from the merely voluntary. Here, Aristotle acknowledges that various people take choice to reduce to several other phenomena. The candidates include the three species of desire (*orexis*)—appetite (*epithumia*), anger (*thumos*) and wish (*boulēsis*)—and opinion (*doxa*) (*NE* 1111b11; cf. *DA* 414b1–2, *DM* 700b21). Aristotle then rules out all four candidates one by one in order to show that choice neither reduces to nor is a species of any of them (*NE* 1111b11–1112a13). His argument that choice is not appetite (1111b12–18) is what concerns us here. This is so because this argument suggests a narrower sense of ‘choice’ than is suggested by the above considerations.

<sup>10</sup> Ross and Urmson have “deliberate.”

Aristotle explains, “the incontinent person [*akratēs*] acts with appetite, but not with choice; while the continent person [*enkratēs*] on the contrary acts with choice, but not appetite” (*NE* 1111b12–14; cf. 1151a29–b4, 1152a15–17). This then shows that “choice is contrary to appetite.” And since appetite is not “contrary to appetite,” it follows that choice is not appetite (1111b12–15). I am unconvinced that appetite cannot be contrary to appetite. It seems that an animal’s appetite for sex may be opposed to its appetite for food, if mating would mean foregoing a meal or vice-versa. So the latter part of the argument seems dubious. But this is irrelevant to our present purposes. It is the former part of the argument which is of interest—in particular, Aristotle’s portrayal of the incontinent person as “acting without choice.”

The incontinent person is, roughly, someone who we would now say “acts against her better judgment.” Say someone values a balanced diet free of indulgent sweets. So she determines to skip desserts, knowing that she ought to abstain. But when the dessert tray comes by, she is tempted by the chocolate cake—perhaps a favorite of hers since childhood! And so, spurred on by appetite, she orders a slice and eats it, though this goes against her better judgment.

In the context of discussing incontinence (*akrasia*), Aristotle’s locution ‘acting without choice,’ I think, means more or less what we mean by ‘acting against one’s better judgment.’ Both locutions express acting in a way that goes against what one thinks one ought to do according to one’s relatively stable values.

Before developing this interpretation of Aristotle’s locution, it is useful to observe that in this context ‘choice’ must mean something more than just thought or reasoning with a view to an end given in desire. It seems innocent to say that some thought or reasoning mediates the gap between the incontinent cake-eater’s receiving the end of

eating some cake from appetite and her ordering a slice. After all, she orders the cake *in order to* eat it. Indeed, Aristotle explicitly acknowledges that incontinent people are often “given to plotting” about how to satisfy their appetites (*NE* 1149b13–19) and “calculate” and “deliberate” about how to bring about their ends (1142b18–19). If any thought with a view to an end which results in action is to count as ‘choice,’ then these calculating incontinents would not ‘act without choice.’ So it seems the ‘acting without choice’ does not mean acting without thought or reasoning, and that ‘choice’ in this context means something more specific than thought or reasoning with a view to an end.

A rough picture of the more specific meaning of Aristotle’s locution ‘acting without choice’ can be gleaned from his discussion of the difference between the incontinent person and the self-indulgent person [*akolastos*]: “the one [the self-indulgent person] is led on in accordance with his own choice, thinking he ought always to pursue the present pleasure; while the other [the incontinent person] does not think so, but yet pursues it” (*NE* 1146b23–24; cf. 1151a6–7). The self-indulgent person sees pursuit of the present pleasure as the most worthy pursuit in all situations. Presumably most of his activity is organized by this pursuit, since he sees this as best. His choice to eat the cake, then, is both in line with and in some sense expressive of his overall values. This is why he “has no regrets” and “stands by his choice” (1150b29). The incontinent person, on the other hand, “is subject to regrets” (1150b30). Plausibly, this is because she fails to act on the choices about what, according to her, she ought to do. Aristotle describes the incontinent person as being in a good position to see what is in fact worthwhile. She has “universal opinions” that are consistent with “right reason” (1147a24–b5), which is to say that she is in a good position to know what she

in fact ought to do.<sup>11</sup> Her vision of what is valuable in life and must be done, then, is accurate and reliably orients her toward the good. At least some incontinent people, Aristotle says, even reach a choice in line with their good values through deliberation; their “choice is good” (1150b18). But “after deliberating [they] fail, owing to their passion [*pathē*], to stand by the conclusion of their deliberation” (1150b20–22). So when the incontinent person ‘acts without choice,’ she fails to do justice to what she takes to be (and in fact is) good. Her consciousness of this (cf. 1150b36–1151a3) is what inspires regret.

We can get some purchase on the sense of ‘choice’ in play when Aristotle says the incontinent person “acts without choice,” I think, by construing it as ‘choice expressive of one’s values.’ Of course, more will have to be said to refine this notion. The other, broader sense of choice will need some refinement as well. These refinements will be the task of the next section of this essay.

But before moving on to this, I want to entertain and then reject the thought that Aristotle only intends the second of the two senses, which I am provisionally labeling ‘choice expressive of one’s values.’ In the interest of entertaining this thought, we may observe that it is not hard to see that the things that Aristotle says which suggest the first sense also apply to the second. For a ‘choice expressive of one’s values’ could easily be construed as thought or reasoning with a view to a desired end—namely, to the specific end of doing something valuable or of doing what one ought. It may then seem that all the things Aristotle says which suggest the first, broader sense are

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotle’s example of a “universal opinion” in his discussion of incontinence is “dry food is good for everyone” (1147a5). Assuming the opinion is true, it is not hard to see how someone who holds it is in a good position to know that she ought to eat, e.g., nuts and grains and avoid, e.g., moist chocolate cakes. That would be a matter inference from the universal opinion and elementary experiential knowledge about, in this case, the characteristics of various foods.

just part of the story about the second, narrower sense. Aristotle, on this reading, is working his way to the narrower sense, and the illusion that he uses the expression in a broader way is a result of not yet taking into account, ignoring or abstracting away from some of choice's essential features.

This reading can seem almost compulsory when focusing on Aristotle's account of incontinence in *NE* VII.<sup>12</sup> But it can be shown to be false by looking at what Aristotle says elsewhere. It seems telling, for example, that Aristotle's clearest examples of deliberation—the sort of thought process which results in choice—are from craft (*technē*). These are not the ethical person's deliberations about what is most worthwhile to do but rather the doctor, orator, statesman, businessman, navigator or general's respective deliberations about how to produce health in the patient, convince the audience, produce law and order, make money, navigate the straight or set up a strategic encampment (*Met.* 1032b6–8, *NE* 1112b2–15, *EE* 1227a16–23). While it is true that crafts aim at some good (*NE* 1095a14, *EE* 1227a24), that good is “qualified” and “relative to a particular end,” for example, the patient's health. So craft deliberation is precisely not about what one ought to do *simpliciter* (cf. *NE* 1142b28–34). But presumably craft deliberation still results in choice.

Now it may be objected that the examples from craft are meant to shed light on a specifically ethical sort of deliberation by analogy, and that strictly speaking only what is reached through the ethical sort of deliberation counts as “chosen.” Aristotle's remark that not that “we do not choose all that we deliberate about” (*EE* 1226b19) may seem friendly to this thought. But this seems to me a strained reading. The examples of craft deliberation appear in the very chapters that Aristotle gives his most

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, many have notes this. See, e.g., Anscombe (1965), Broadie (1991) and McDowell (1998b).

focused discussions of choice. Moreover, Aristotle is content to speak about choice in the context of craft. See, for example, the following: “a master of any craft<sup>13</sup> avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this” (*NE* 1106b3). This suggests that the more natural way to read the remark that we do not choose all that we deliberate about is that in deliberation we sometimes consider options that we do not choose, since we can only choose one from any set of mutually exclusive options.

The mention of choice in the context of craft is sufficient to show that Aristotle uses ‘choice’ in a way that is not appropriately glossed as ‘choice expressive of one’s values.’ But the mention of choice in the context of incontinence shows that there is a sense of the expression which is appropriately glossed so. So we cannot avoid concluding that Aristotle’s expression ‘choice’ is equivocal.

### **3 Generic and specific senses**

How are the two senses related? I have already hinted at an answer above. The observation that the things Aristotle says which suggest the first, broader sense of choice also apply to the second, narrower sense suggests that the relationship is one of genus to species. This is to say that the narrower sense expresses what the broader sense expresses with the addition of some further specification(s). Making good on this interpretation involves both clarifying the essential characteristics of choice in the broader sense and stating what exact further specification defines the narrower sense. I will start at this by clarifying the broader sense.

Again the broader sense of ‘choice’ is that of thought or reasoning with a view to an end given by desire. *NE* III.3 is evidently meant to shed light on the character of

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<sup>13</sup> Ross and Urmson have “art.”

this sort of thought or reasoning through a discussion of the structure of deliberation, given that “the same thing is deliberated upon and chosen” (*NE* 1113b3). Here is the core of Aristotle’s account of the mental process deliberators engage in: “Having the end set<sup>14</sup> they consider how and by what means [*to pōs kai to dia tinōn*] it is to be attained.” When multiple means present themselves “they consider by which [*dia tinos*] it [i.e., the end] is most easily and best produced.” If there is still ambiguity about how the means are to be achieved, they may then investigate “by what [further] means this will be achieved, till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last” (*NE* 1112b12–19; cf. *EE* 1226b10–14). What the deliberator finally settles on, namely, an action which she need not think about more in order to do, is the first in the sequence of things she does in pursuit of her end. Her choice is of the action or actions which contribute to her pursuit of her end (*NE* 1113b4–5; cf. *EE* 1226b18).

The preceding paragraph seems to paint a picture of deliberation in which one determines what we may call the ‘*causal conditions*’ of achieving one’s end. By ‘causal conditions,’ I mean either what causes the achievement of the end directly or what puts one in a condition to achieve that end. Turning the key is a causal condition of unlocking the door, and sounding the gong of waking the neighbor, since in both cases the first directly causes the second. Likewise, getting a degree is a causal condition of securing a higher-paying job, and equipping oneself with a hammer of fastening nails, since in both cases the first puts one in good condition to achieve the second.

But causal conditions are not the only thing we can be said to deliberate about. If I wish to be kind to my mother, and make this my end, I may deliberate about how to do this. This is not simply a question of causal conditions; I am not just deliberating

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<sup>14</sup> Ross and Urmson have “Having set the end.”

about, for example, what would cause her to be cheerful, or how to put myself in a good position to make her cheerful. For I may question whether the kind thing to do right now is to make my mother cheerful as opposed to, for example, helping her with a difficult and sobering decision. When I deliberate between these options, I do not deliberate about any causal conditions. Instead, I deliberate about what sort of action counts, in this case, as the kind thing to do. Now it may be that once I determine that the way to be kind is to help with the difficult decision, I deliberate about the causal conditions of this, e.g., about whether I should establish a connected mood first through small talk or come in with guns a' blazin'. But, in that case, the first step of my deliberation is about the nature of the end I am pursuing, not yet about its causes.

We may ask then whether Aristotle's notion of deliberation embraces both deliberation about the causal conditions and about the nature of one's end. The fact that Aristotle's discussions of deliberation in *NE* III.3 and *EE* II.10 are both flanked with examples of craft deliberation (e.g., *NE* 1112b2–15, *EE* 1227a16–23) seems to suggest that the causal sort is at very least what Aristotle primarily has in mind. This is because craft deliberation concerns “making” (*poiēsis*), which is causing something to come into being (*NE* 1140a10–14). Ross and Urmson's translation of '*tinōn*' and cognates as 'means' in the passages from *NE* 1112b12–19 would seem to corroborate this, insofar as the English expression 'means' suggests tools which can be used to cause certain effects. This would have implications for choice, since it would construe choice as thought concerning the causal conditions of one's ends.

I think this sort of construal can and should be resisted. A beginning to an explanation of why is that it seems to collapse all acts which are chosen into makings. Aristotle is clear about differentiating makings from actions (*praxes*) in his quasi-technical sense.

He says that the two are mutually exclusive (*NE* 1140a1–6). He also says that “the origin of action... is choice” (1139a31), and so actions are chosen. It follows then that not all acts which are chosen are makings.

We can begin resisting the view that for Aristotle deliberation, and *ipso facto* choice, concerns causal conditions by calling Ross and Urmson’s translation of ‘*tinōn*’ and cognates as ‘means’ into question. ‘*Tinōn*,’ as it appears in the above quote (at *NE* 1112b15), is likely the plural genitive form of the pronoun ‘*tis*.’ ‘*Tis*’ may in general be translated ‘any thing’ or ‘any one.’ Moreover, it and its cognates sometimes serve as the indefinite article ‘a’ or ‘an.’ Ross and Urmson’s translation ‘means,’ then, obscures the extraordinarily nondescript nature of the term as dummy pronoun.

With this in mind we can find a different stress in the Aristotle’s claim that deliberators “having the end set... consider *to pōs kai to dia tinōn*” of the end’s attainment. The stress does not fall on ‘*tinōn*’ but on on ‘*to pōs*’ and ‘*to dia*.’ Both expressions are nominalized forms of questions words, and may be translated ‘the how’ and ‘the by which,’ respectively. It is natural to read ‘*to dia*’ (‘the by which’) as referring to the instruments or tools ‘by which’ one achieves one’s end. Deliberation about ‘*to dia*’ then seems to be deliberation about the causal conditions of one’s end. But this is not so with ‘*to pōs*,’ which is sometimes translated ‘the manner.’ Deliberating about ‘*to pōs*,’ I suggest, is deliberating about the way in which to do something. And that is to deliberate not about the causal conditions but about the nature of one’s ends. This suggests that Aristotle’s notion of deliberation, and *ipso facto* choice, can concern both the causal conditions and the nature of one’s ends. In fact, Aristotle seems to register exactly this point when he explicitly acknowledges that deliberation can involve differing “subject[s] of investigation,” one involving *to dia*, the other *to pōs* (*NE*

1112b27–30).<sup>15</sup>

This distinction between subjects of deliberation interests us because it opens a way to understanding the sense of ‘choice’ which I have labeled ‘choice expressive of one’s values,’ and how this is a species of choice in the broader sense. Again, choice in the broader sense is thought or reasoning with a view to an end given in desire. This thought, we can now see, need not be thought which specifies the causal conditions (*dia*) of the desired end. Instead, the thought can specify the nature (*pōs*) of that end. So if I desire to pursue doing what I ought and deliberate about what this is, my choice can be a specification of some concrete action as being what one ought to do in the current situation.

Aristotle’s expression for doing what one ought is ‘*eu prattein*,’ which may be translated ‘doing well.’ He tells us that this label is interchangeable with to two others ‘*eu zēn*’ (‘living well’), and ‘*eudaimonian*’ (‘living the good life’). All three, in his vernacular, refer to “the highest good achievable by [human] action” (1095a14–19). This highest good is “complete” in the sense that it is “in itself worthy of pursuit,” not for the sake of something else (1097a24–3). It is also “self-sufficient” in the sense that it could not be made better through any addition (1097b7–21). Anything one ought to do is included in this good. So to have doing well or, equivalently, the good life as one’s end is to have an interest in doing what one ought.

Does anyone ever have anything so general or abstract as living a good life or doing well as their end? Apparently, Aristotle thinks the answer is yes. He says that doing

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle’s connectives ‘*hina*’ and ‘*hou henaka*,’ often translated ‘for the sake of which’ or ‘with a view to,’ as well as his phrase ‘*to pros to telos*,’ often translated ‘the things contributing to the end,’ both seem sufficiently broad to embrace deliberation both about *dia* and about *pōs*. This point, or similar ones, has been emphasized by several interpreters. See, e.g. Ackrill (1980); Korsgaard (1998), 214–215; McDowell (1998b), 25–26; Sorabji (1980), 202; Wiggins (1980), 223–224.

well “is itself an end” (*NE* 1140b6). This implies that he thinks that we can have a corresponding desire which provides this end. This sort of desire is what Aristotle calls ‘wish’ (*boulēsis*), a sort that, unlike anger and appetite, is not shared with non-rational animals (1111b12–13). Aristotle says that wish is “for *the* end” (1113a15, my emphasis). His use of the definite article here mirrors his calling the good life or doing well “*the* end in action” or, somewhat more explicitly, “*the* end in the unqualified sense” (1097b21, 1142b31, my emphases).

The interpretation that wish is a desire to do well or live a good life gets further support from the fact that Aristotle describes both the end given in wish and the good life as appearing to be different things to different people (*NE* 1095a20–24, 1113a22–29). How the object of wish appears will depend on the moral fiber of the wisher. Aristotle says that “each state of character has its own idea of the noble [*to kalon*] and the pleasant,” which is to say its own view of what is in fact in itself worthy of pursuit and so belongs to the good life. The good person will be the one whose character states have the right idea and so “see[s] the truth in each class of things” (1113a31–33).<sup>16</sup> The vicious, in contrast, will see the wrong things as worthy of pursuit.

To see some action as worthy of pursuit or belonging to the good life is already to have deliberated about the *pōs* of the end of living a good life or doing well. The result is a species of choice in which one specifies what, from her perspective, she ought to do. It is to this species that the label ‘choice expressive of one’s values’ is apt, since

<sup>16</sup> Additional support can be gathered from Aristotle’s observing that pleasant and painful things “destroy and pervert...beliefs about what is to be done” both in the context of discussing the object of wish (1113a34–b1) and in the discussion of practical wisdom (1140b11–19), which Aristotle elsewhere describes as a “true apprehension” of the unqualified end (1142b31–34). This is why the etymology of temperance (*sophrosunē*) reflects its role in “preserving practical wisdom (*phronēsis*)”: It prevents pleasant and painful things from obscuring one’s view of what is worthwhile (1140b11–12).

in it one determines what in this situation one thinks is valuable. All choice resulting from deliberation about the *pōs* of the end given by wish will be like this. So when the self-indulgent, for example, is described as having the wrong object of wish, this just is his making the wrong choices. By the same token, the incontinent person who see what is truly worthy of pursuit in this situation, *ipso facto* makes the right choice.

We now have the materials for stating the generic and specific senses of 'choice' explicitly. The generic sense is thought or reasoning with a view to an end given by desire, where "with a view to" is neutral to a concern with either the causal conditions (*dia*) or the nature (*pōs*) of the end. The specific sense is this with the added specification that the desire which provides the end is wish. In that case "with a view to" expresses a concern only with the nature of the end, and not its causal conditions.<sup>17</sup>

## 4 Equivocation

I have argued that there is sufficient evidence that Aristotle's use of the expression 'choice' is equivocal, and that the two senses bear a genus-species relationship. But this does not imply that Aristotle is consistently aware of the equivocality. If he is not, there is a danger of equivocation, i.e., illicitly sliding between senses.

I think Aristotle sometimes does equivocate between the senses. An example can be found, I contend, in his account of incontinence as a human failure made possible by our animal nature.

In *NE* VII.2 Aristotle sets out some problems for his account of incontinence to

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<sup>17</sup> I doubt whether it is intelligible to deliberate about the *dia* of the end given by wish without having already deliberated about the *pōs*. 'Doing well,' as I read it, is a formal notion; it needs to be specified concretely through deliberation about its *pōs* before one can begin to talk about or query its casual conditions.

solve. One of these is a question about what “kind of object” continence and incontinence concern (1146b3–5): Can any object spur the incontinent to abandon her choice, or just objects of a specific type; and, if the latter, which? The question is discussed and resolved primarily in VII.4, though the treatment continues through VII.7. Aristotle’s answer is that incontinence (at least in the “unqualified sense”) concerns the same objects as do temperance and self-indulgence. These are the natural bodily enjoyments of food and sex (1147b24–1148a22).

Why does Aristotle reach this conclusion? I think the answer is that he equivocates between senses of choice.

Aristotle’s question about the kind of object which incontinence concerns, then, is a question about what sort of object the incontinent person pursues when she acts without choice (and so goes against her values). This is evidently choice in the narrower sense. Aristotle’s answer to that question—that the objects are natural bodily enjoyments—however, seems to result from his implicitly employing the other sense of ‘choice,’ namely, thought with a view to an end. This is so because in humans the pursuit of bodily pleasures may still occur without the mediation of thought (cf. *DA* 433a25). Human beings still possess animal appetite (*epithumia*), which concerns bodily pleasures. So we can act without choice in this broader sense when we unthinkingly pursue food or sex.<sup>18</sup>

Given that this interpretation involves strapping Aristotle with erroneous reasoning, we may want to look for other explanations. One natural thought is that Aristotle’s

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<sup>18</sup> Broadie (1991), 269 dramatizes this aptly when she says that “for Aristotle, the paradigm of incontinence is the condition in which an agent, actively rational as a rule, sinks back to the original condition. The point is not merely that this person behaves irrationally because he acts against his better judgment, but that in so acting he pursues objects that he would have pursued had he never been touched by reason (cf. 1118a23–25).”

designation of the sphere of incontinence as bodily pleasures accords with the common usage of the Greek term. This natural thought can be forestalled, however, by the following two observations.

First is that it would be surprising for Aristotle to explicitly take up the question about what falls within the sphere of incontinence if he thought this was already clear by the common usage of the term. Arguably, he devotes four whole chapters to answering the question. A mere appeal to common usage would presumably be much quicker.

Second, Aristotle's treatment of the sphere of the central "qualified" cases of incontinence seems to involve the same logic as his treatment of the sphere of the unqualified cases. There are cases of "incontinence in respect of anger" (*NE* 1148b9–14). Anger is another form of desire that humans share with non-rational animals. So here too one's acting without choice in the narrower sense, and on account of anger, can occur through acting without choice in the broader sense. This is so because one may act on an end given by anger without the mediation of thought.

Why does Aristotle say that cases of incontinent anger are "qualified," and "less disgraceful than that in respect of the appetites" (1149a24–25)? The start to an answer seems to be that "anger seems to listen to reason to some extent, but to mishear it, as do hasty servants who run out before they have heard the whole of what one says, and then muddle the order, or as dogs bark if there is but a knock at the door, before looking to see if it is a friend" (1149a25–29). The primary cases of acting on anger are cases of enacting revenge after being slighted. In such cases, Aristotle says, "reason... informs us that we have been insulted or slighted, and anger, reasoning as it were that anything like this must be fought against, boils up straightaway" (1149a31–33). Ideally, anger arises when a battle is worth fighting, revenge worth enacting; in such cases it serves

its master, reason, by offering the end of revenge for reason to endorse and take up. But anger can be unruly and quick and so bypass its master's commands and best interests.

Anger then tends to cooperate with thought and reasoning, sometimes spurring one into action when one would deem this fit. But anger equally has a tendency to hastily overlook its master's command. This relationship to thought and reasoning, then, is much more complex than appetite's. The latter, in contrast, merely "springs to the enjoyment" of bodily pleasures with no sensitivity to a person's reasoning about her best interests or values (1149a34). For Aristotle, it is appetite's greater independence from thought and reasoning that explains why appetitive incontinence is the unqualified and more shameful variety. And this result supports the thesis that Aristotle's saying that incontinence concerns bodily enjoyments is a result of his feeling the need to explain incontinence as acting without choice in the broader of the two senses.

Of course, this gets Aristotle into trouble. As mentioned before, Aristotle acknowledges that the incontinent can calculate about how to satisfy her appetites. Her calculations, then, result in choice in the broader sense. Aristotle's limiting the unqualified cases of incontinence to pursuit of bodily enjoyment seemed to offer an explanation of how the incontinent acts without choice. It succeeds at explaining this for choice in the broader sense, insofar as appetite can lead to action without thought. But incontinent action can involve thought. And a different explanation is needed to explain the possibility of acting against choice in the narrower and clearly more germane sense. So Aristotle's limiting the unqualified cases of incontinence to pursuit of bodily enjoyments seems arbitrary. This arbitrariness, if anything, shows the influence of an equivocation in his thought.

This equivocation is unfortunate in part because it blinds Aristotle to an interesting kind of incontinence. Aristotle discusses incontinence spurred on by two of his three kinds of desires: appetite and anger. It is not hard to see how these can be contrary to wish. But he does not consider that wish may be contrary to wish. As interpreters have noted,<sup>19</sup> Aristotle seems to take for granted that people have relatively stable and self-consistent conceptions of what the good life consists in. But while this may be true of the practically wise person (*phronimos*), it is just not true for most of us. We often find ourselves torn between spending a weekend catching up on work or spending it enjoying quality time with friends and family, or between devoting any excess energy to increasing social justice or exploring intellectual pursuits. In those cases, one entertains conflicting views on what doing well, in the situation one is in, consists in. One can find oneself torn between these options, and end up acting on the one one thinks one should not, without this being spurred by appetite or anger. In this case, thought and reasoning itself impairs its own aims. When this happens, the asymmetry between the options might be explained not by the types of desire that proffer the competing ends but rather in terms of which end is the most consistent with all the things one values.

## 5 Conclusion

We have now seen more clearly how the involvement of reason and thought (e.g., 1112a16), on the one hand, and of preference and evaluation (e.g., 1146b23-24), on the other, are central to *prohairesis* as Aristotle understands it. The involvement of the former gives rise to a broader sense of '*prohairesis*' that figures in Aristotle's discussion of deliberation in Book III. The involvement of the latter gives rise to a narrower sense

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Anscombe (1965), 144.

that figures in Aristotle's discussion of incontinence in Book VII.

Both these senses resemble corresponding senses of the English expression 'choice.' When we say that something is a difficult choice, we expect that it will involve a lot of thought or reasoning. And when we say that choices make us who we are, this involves the idea of values and evaluation.

Given the resemblance between our and Aristotle's notion, including their equivocality, we may reasonably expect that Aristotle's discussion can make us wiser about the concept we too employ. I hope that a detailed specification of the senses of his expression and their relationship, like the one I offer here, can aid us in our learning from Aristotle's discussion.

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