What is Aristotelian Prohairesis?

What exactly is the moral phenomenon Aristotle picks out in his works by “prohairesis”? Interpreters of Aristotle head in several diverging directions. For some, prohairesis remains an unproblematic concept, whose entire nature and scope we understand well enough from its Nicomachean Ethics bk. 3.2. characterization as “deliberate choice”. For others, Aristotle’s conception of prohairesis is not quite so simple, clear, or straightforward. Without simply rejecting the N.E. 3.2 discussion, such interpreters sense that those passages cannot comprise the entirety of the story. Some suspect that a deep incoherence or lacuna underlies Aristotle’s numerous discussions and uses of prohairesis. Others attempt to rework an Aristotelian notion of prohairesis into something more amenable to (because more alike to) conceptions germane to later moral theories. Others more optimistically attempt to provide more or less integrated and systematic interpretations ranging across Aristotle’s corpus.

The challenge for these is to rightly knot motley threads from Aristotle’s writings together in ways that are faithful to texts and harmonious with the larger structure of Aristotle’s moral theory, and yet contribute some additional understanding. My own interpretation of Aristotelian prohairesis (in my view) solidly places me within this last camp. Understandably, some might regard my advocacy of a more extensive and robust conception of prohairesis as exemplifying imaginative shoehorning of Aristotle’s moral theory into confines of other, later moral theories.

In this short paper, I’ll first briefly present a “Standard Interpretation” (SI) of Aristotelian prohairesis, centered on N.E. 3.2. Second, I will bring together some (though not all) other passages from the Aristotelian corpus in which prohairesis is discussed. Third, I will suggest that implications of these passages raise problems for the SI, and will propose an alternate, more expansive interpretation of


2 I have outlined a version of the account of Aristotelian prohairesis I present here in “Value, Affectivity, and Virtue in Aristotle, Scheler, and Von Hildebrand,” in XXXXXXXXXXXX
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_prohairesis_ along lines suggested by the additional passages. For reasons of convenience and consistency, I will render _prohairesis_ here as “choice.” Due to limitations of length, I do not provide an account as full as that of the longer study I am presently working on, and I relegate portions of the argument and discussion to footnotes.

I. A “Standard Interpretation”

One would understandably expect Aristotle’s most definitive and determinative treatment of _prohairesis_ to occur in _N.E._ 3.2, particularly given the pains he takes distinguishing it from other moral phenomena, and the fact that he finally asks: “what is it and what sort of thing is it”? His answer is that it is a subset of the voluntary (_hekousion_), that it “is preceded by deliberation” (_probebouleumenon_), since it does “involve reason and thought”. This aspect of involving reasoning and deliberation is particularly important, explaining why according to Aristotle, animals lack and children do not yet possess it. He also makes a broader etymological point, namely that the very name signifies that it involves choosing one thing over or before another or others.

So, choice gets characterized as intrinsically comprising deliberation (_boulê, bouleusis_), whose nature Aristotle examines in the following chapter, specifying that it is concerned only with determining means for ends, not in assessing, comparing, or ordering ends themselves. Other passages reinforce this

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3 _ti oun ē poion ti estin_ (1112a13-4).

4 This also comes up in _Rhet._ 1.10, in terms of the connection between voluntariness and knowledge. “What is done voluntarily [prohairesis] is not always deliberately chosen, for everything that is chosen is done with knowledge” (1368b).

5 This aspect also comes up explicitly in _N.E._ 5.8, at 1135b9-11.

6 _meta logou kai dianoias_, (1112a15-6). It should not be overlooked (something that some translators have effectively concealed) that these passages employ the language of “appears”, suggesting a tentativeness to Aristotle’s formulations. On the other hand, in _Meta._ 11.8, Aristotle asserts “there is no choice without [or entirely independent of, _khôris_] thought [_dianoia_]” (1065a32-3).

7 Interestingly, in _Pol._ 1.1, Aristotle also speaks of the sexual union of male and female as not being “from deliberate choice” _(ouk ek proaireseis)_ , the reason being that like other animals and plants we have an instinctual desire to leave behind another, i.e. progeny (1252a28-30). In _Pol._ 3.5, he also excludes not only animals but also slaves from being able to pursue a life according to _prohairesis_, which makes sense, given that he also excludes them from participating in eudaemonia. (1280a32-4). Cf. also _N.E._ 7.6 1149b35.

8 _on pro heterôn haireton_ (1112a16-7).
connection, particularly prohairesis’ characterization as “deliberating desire [or, affectivity]” about matters that are up to us,” and his clarification that “what is deliberated about and what chosen are the same, except that what is chosen has already been determined [aphōrismenon], since the chosen is selected as a result from the process of deliberation.” The examples in these two chapters seem to bear out prohairesis’ intrinsic connection with deliberation, for example when he maintains that it cannot be rational desire (boulēsis), since we rationally desire ends, but choose only means for those ends. It thus seems reasonable to follow certain translators in rendering prohairesis as “deliberate choice.”

What other key passages feature in this SI? Certainly, Aristotle’s definitions of virtue (and vice) as such. In N.E. 2, we learn that virtuous action proceeds from “deliberate choice,” and that virtue is a state expressive of such “choice.” In fact, virtue and vice lie within our power as states we develop through actions, and thus we are morally responsible for them, precisely because it lies within our choice to engage in actions characteristic, and productive, of virtue or of vice. Again, in N.E. 6.2, choice gets brought into close parallel with deliberation, gets called “deliberative desire,” and is framed both as the determinative starting-point (arkhē) of actions and as informed in its turn by desire or affectivity (orexis) and reasoning towards some end. Passages in N.E., E.E., and D.A. consistently construe lack of

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9 “Affectivity,” as I have suggested elsewhere, arguably better captures the range of senses of orexis than does the standard translation as “desire.”

10 bouleutikē orexis tôn en humin (1113a11).

11 1113a2-5.

12 tôn pros to telos (1111b21-29). A corresponding passage can be found in E.E. 2.10.

13 Interestingly, prohairesis does not get explicitly discussed much when examining the virtues and vices at a greater level of specificity. . . . . . . One exception would be in the N.E. 3.8 examination of courage, specifically in the passages about courage inspired by thumos. When this is reinforced by the right prohairesis and the right end, this approximates to genuine courage (117a4-6). It also comes up in the discussion of truthfulness and boastfulness in N.E. 4.7, and more extensively in the N.E. 5 discussions of justice and injustice.

14 proairoumenos, 1105a

15 proairetikē (1106b35-1107a2). He asserts this again in N.E. 6.2 at 1139a23.

16 1113b3-22.

17 1139a7-11.

18 1139a24.
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self control (*akrasia*) as failure to abide by one’s deliberate choice faced with desire’s demands, and self-control (*enkratia*) as sticking with one’s resolve.

What is *prohairesis* on this account? It is voluntary, choice made between alternatives, informed by deliberation, selecting means to some end desired as good.\(^{19}\) It is closely connected with, though distinguishable from, other important moral phenomena. An ambiguity must be noted, for it denotes not only individual choices made on particular occasions, but also broader, longer lasting, more characteristic patterns of choice. If this were not the case, it would make no sense to regard virtue and vice as prohairetic. One deliberates about, and then chooses, what will move one towards one’s determinate end, in specific situations. But, one also deliberates on a higher level about what will move one towards one’s overarching end, happiness or *eudemonia* (in whatever shape one has conceived it). And so, one may deliberate, and then choose, on lower situational or on higher global levels, well or poorly, rightly or wrongly, and be correspondingly praised or criticized for it, and for the actions or omissions that follow from such deliberate choices.

This seems a highly intellectualist account, in which must deliberate, i.e. explicitly reason matters through, all (or at least much) of the time in moral matters. To possess a good *prohairesis* it seems that one must deliberate and choose rightly both at the lower, locally particularized level, and at a higher, more global level of one’s life and personality over time. Likewise, a bad *prohairesis*, whether as a single bad choice, a particular vicious disposition established in one’s character, or as the structure of one’s entire personality would equally seem to involve explicit deliberation determining means to a given (and bad or misconceived) end.

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\(^{19}\) It should be noted that not all *prohairesis* is as immediately connected with primarily moral matters. Aristotle uses the term in *Politics* to signify the intention or the purpose of a lawmaker, a political community, an institution, as at 1269b13-4, 1271a31-2, 1274a13, 1287b32-3, 1332a32-3. In *E.E.* \(^{2.5}\) he also discusses in passing two different sets of prohairetic states concerned with athletic training (1222a31-6). To be sure, these instances of *prohairesis* are aimed at some goods taken as ends (political ends in the *Politics* examples, health in the *E.E.* example), and so they do fall within the broader domain of moral values and practical reasoning. In *Meta.* 5.12, there is also a brief discussion of doing things well (*kalós*) by doing them according to one’s *prohairesis* (1019a23-6).
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II. Other Relevant Passages.

In Aristotle’s works, people are morally evaluated specifically on the basis of choice. Unsurprisingly, the reasons Aristotle first adduces for thematically studying *prohairesis* in the *N.E.* 3.2. discussion are that it is “so intimately connected with virtue” (*oikeiotaton . . . tēi aretēi*) and permits “better judging of people’s characters than do actions.” This makes sense, given that virtue and vice involve, express, and are reciprocally produced by and productive of *prohairesis*. In *Poetics*, it is consistently tied to character, actions, and discourse, the latter of which reveal and embody *prohairesis*. It plays an important role in Aristotle’s *N.E.* 8 -9 treatment of friendship as well, where “the return one should render [to one’s friend] is based on [their] choice,” for this in turn is determinative of the friend and of virtue. *Rhetoric* 1 also mentions acting in accordance with (good) choice as characteristic of a good person.

The association needn’t necessarily be with good character, however; Aristotle distinguishes between the sophist and the dialectical philosopher precisely on the basis of their *prohairesis*, the choice and intention exhibited by the use to which they turn argument. Interestingly, it is the sophist who acts “in accordance with choice” (*kata prohairesin*), whereas the dialectician acts “in accordance with the

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20 1111b6-7.

21 Aristotle hesitates in *N.E.* 2.5 over whether virtue and vice are in fact types of (*tines*) choice, or whether they essentially involve (*ouk aneu*) choice (1106a3-4). Cf. also the *N.E.* 3.4 discussion which definitively decides virtue and vice are voluntary, precisely because action done purposively, i.e. for an end, are in accordance with moral choice (*kata proairesin*, 1113b4-5)

22 Aristotle tells us: “character is that which reveals moral choice, i.e. what sorts of things . . . a person either chooses [*proaireintei*] or avoids” (1450b7), and “discourse and action make the moral choice evident, whatever it may be. If good [discourse and actions], then good [*prohairesis*]” (1454a17-8). This is echoed by *Rhet.* 3.16, where Aristotle advises (in the narrative of a speech, i.e. the *diēgēsis*): “one thing is to make the *prohairesis* clear, for as is the moral purpose so is the character. And what makes the moral character of this or that sort, is the end. In *Rhet.* 2.21, one particular type of discourse, the maxim (*hē gnomē*) is focused upon as a locus where *prohairesis* can easily be displayed, either by the very language one uses, or by providing explanation.

23 1164b2. See *Politics* 3.9 as well. In a sense, the relations comprised under Aristotelian “friendship” offer great scope for displaying one’s character, one’s *prohairesis* – marked by a great degree of freedom and voluntariness – cf. EE. Differences of *prohairesis* can create problems, as evidenced by a passage in *Pol.* 5.8, which speaks of factional strife arising “dia enantiotēta tēs proairesēs” (1312b3), i.e. due to fundamental conflict of moral perspectives and commitments.

24 *idion de tou spoudaiou to kata proairesin* (1367b). Aristotle then goes on to rather cynically provide advice habout ow one might produce such an impression, even if the person does not possess a good prohairesis!
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discipline [of argumentation]”, i.e. using it rightly, according to norms discernible within it. Speaking in more general terms about wrongdoing, Aristotle tells us that “those who choose [proairountai] do so because of vice or lack of self-control.” In distinguishing between degrees of wrongdoing and responsibility, whether a person actually chooses to do wrong plays an important role in Aristotle’s views on how the act and the person ought to be treated. For, “wrongdoing and vice reside in the choice”, just as much as does genuine moral goodness. In fact, the very names of some classes of actions denote their bad moral purpose.

Clearly, choice is a nexus and a target for moral evaluation. What makes it good or bad? In N.E. 6, Aristotle tells us: “in order for the choice to be good [spoudaia], the rational faculty [logos] must be true and the affectivity [orexis] must be right, and the affectivity must respond accordingly to the things the rational faculty shows it. This is precisely what “truth in action” or “practical truth,” concerned with practical or productive activity consists in. There is a significant reciprocity on the part of the rational faculty, as well since the truth it possesses must itself accord with rightly structured affectivity.

This juncture of practical intellect and affectivity is essential to Aristotle’s conception of prohairesis, which is in fact where they meet and interfuse or interfere with each other. He signals this interconnection of intellect and affectivity, reason and desire, by stating “choice is either affectively imbued intellect or ___

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25 Rhet. 1.1, 1355b. Meta. 4.2 tells us that dialecticians (in this case, those who just practice dialectic, without going on to further study) and philosophers also differ in terms of their choice of life (tou biou tēi proairesēi, 1004b25). Along these very lines, in N.E. 1.12, Aristotle speaks of the process of inquiry carried out in the N.E. (and thus presumably, also Pol., E.E. and possibly Rhet.) as itself constituting a prohairesis, a valuable project which he thinks ought to be kept to, or seen through (1102a13-4).

26 These presumably reflect, as well as critically examine, those of Greek society.

27 1374a. N.E. 5.8 and Rhet 1.13 carry out similar classifications of wrong or injurious acts into things turning out badly (atukhēma), culpable mistakes (hamariēmata) and actual wrongs or injustices (adikēmata). The latter of which might occur through anger or another passion, in which case it is unjust but the person who did the injustice is not unjust. Or, it might stem from the person who is unjust and vicious, specifically from their choice (ek proaireseōs, 1135b11-25). It ought to be pointed out as well that the classic notion of the “tragic flaw,” as discussed in Poetics 1.13, fits into this schema as well. The tragic hero, according to Aristotle, is to be undergo a reversal of fortune, not due to vice but because of a great culpable error (mē dia mokthērian alla dia hamartian megalēn, 1453a14-5)

28 Examples Aristotle brings up in Rhet. 1 are wanton insult (hubris) and theft (klopis, 1374a). This passage is reminiscent of his discussions in N.E. about kinds of actions that do not admit of a mean, since they are necessarily wrong.

29 homologōs ekhousa tēi orexei tēi orthēi (1139a24-31).
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intelligently oriented affectivity” (ἐορτικός nous... ἐορξίς διανοητικῆ), following this up by emphasizing a near-identity (as far as moral action is concerned) between the human being and choice.

In N.E. 6.12, Aristotle tells us virtue rightly directs us towards ends, making the aim,30 and in fact, the prohairesis, right.31 Practical wisdom or prudence (phronēsis), by contrast, ensures that the right means to the end are determined.32 The relation between these in terms of means and ends, and thus prohairesis (and deliberation and rational desire) is not so simple, however, or strictly dichotomous.

Virtue in the full sense cannot exist without prudence,33 not least because virtue is “a state in accordance with prudence,”34 i.e. “a state not only in accordance with right reason [kata ton orthon logon], but which is accompanied by it,” since “in these matters, prudence is right reason.”35 This is precisely why “there cannot be right prohairesis without prudence or without virtue,” since these enable us to rightly grasp and act in relation to both means and ends.36

This formulation must not be interpreted and applied in too strict a fashion, however, for both the self-controlled and uncontrolled person do possess a prohairesis that is more or less right, i.e. along the lines of what virtue and prudence would dictate or produce,37 though not caused by the presence of virtue or prudence in the person. The self-controlled person follows or remains in it,38 while the uncontrolled does not do this, but does still recognize it, and even regrets abandoning it. The vicious person, by contrast, “remains in”39 and acts “according to choice.”40 Their choices are skewed because they

30 to skopon (1144a8-9).
31 1144a20-1.
32 1144a9.
33 1144b17.
34 1144b25.
35 1144b26-8.
36 1145a4-6.
37 It ought to be pointed out as well that virtue and vice admit of degrees of development for Aristotle
38 This begins to lead towards the suggestion that there can be higher and lower-order prohairesis, a capacity to deliberately shape our character
39 1150a30.
40 1151a8.
correspond with wrong starting points for action, i.e. ends, since vice “corrupts” those. In fact, the mistaken moral choice of a vicious person partly consists in making the wrong things into ends, for instance in the case of the self-indulgent person, “who pursues excesses of pleasures or pleasures excessively, through their own choice, for the sake of those very pleasures, not for the sake of something else.”

This brings us to a last important point in evaluating prohairesis. It is always determinately oriented by some end(s), in the process grasping, realizing, even ordering matters as good and bad, understanding them under aspects of what we can broadly call “moral values.” Here, I’ll confine myself to noting three dimensions to this. First, Aristotle explicitly notes distinct but intersecting moral values as matters of prohairesis, for example in N.E. 2.3, where there are “three [sets of values] of concern for [eis] moral choices [haireses] and avoidances [phugas].” The positive ranges are the noble (kalon), the useful or profitable (sumpheron), and the pleasant (hedon); the negative are the base (aiskhron), harmful (blaberon), and painful (luperon). Clearly to these ought to be added the just (dikaion) and unjust (adikon).

Second, as that passage continues, the good person is likely to get these values right (katorthōtikos estin), and the bad person who is likely to make mistakes (hamartētikos). In N.E. 3.4, the good person embodies a correct standard and judges accordingly when it comes to such matters, in particular about what genuinely is noble and pleasant. Aristotle explicitly focuses on hexis, i.e. their moral state, and bouleusis, i.e. their rational desire (for ends perceived as good) in that passage literally sandwiched between two connected discussions thematizing choice, the second of which argues that virtue and vice are voluntary not because they express prohairesis, but because they are cumulatively produced by moral choice.

Third, going back to prohairesis’ etymology, which involves the sense of taking or choosing, and the sense of comparing and setting things over each other, we must now recognize that prohairesis is not just selection among possible means to previously given desired or rationally determined ends. It extends

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41 1150a29-31.
42 1104b.
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to ordering goods and values in relation to each other in ongoing practical life, a determinate relation of the person and their choices, moral habits, actions, even emotional responses and relationships to what we can recognize as a “hierarchy of values.”

III. Expanding the SI

These admittedly brief peregrinations through Aristotle’s texts suggest an understanding of prohairesis incorporating but also going beyond the SI. In this last section I would like to offer outlines of what such an expanded model would look like. My view as an interpreter of Aristotle is that his discussions of and references to *prohairesis* are understandably confusing because he didn’t adequately distinguish different, though connected, senses of the term, corresponding to different, analogically related sides of the phenomenon. I intend this last section to do two interrelated things. One is to disentangle several of these senses. The other is to suggest why the SI has to be challenged and expanded.

Let’s begin with the latter. We’ve seen that prohairesis is a source for intentional human action, and that it provides a locus for moral evaluation of a person, as well as their actions, moral habits or states, and structures of motivation and valuing. It provides a window into a person’s character, precisely because it is woven into it at so many points, inextricably connected with virtue and vice, desires and practical reasoning, ends and means, development or degeneration, even self-control or its lack. One of the key questions we have to ask is this: does prohairesis always, at every point, explicitly involve deliberation about means to given ends? Granted, in many cases, even many paradigmatic cases, it does. But is moral choice, what makes a person a good or bad person, always a matter of practical reasoning, setting before oneself some good understood as an end, examining the possible means, assessing and comparing them in terms of their own various goodness or badness, selecting one of them, perhaps even reasoning further about what means would best lead to that particular means?

Is it only on such an intellectual basis that people do choose and act, establish or express their characters? When we say a person is good or bad, that this goodness or badness is embodied in their choices, their motivations, their priorities, what they apparently desire and value. Or, is the affective,
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habitual, and relational basis of moral life just as important, equally determinative in a person’s choices, the choices that make him or her the kind of person he or she is? We might try to say that moral choice is always a matter of previously worked out deliberation, but we know this isn’t the case. Alternately, we might construe it as involving deliberation in a more shadowy manner, perhaps hypothetically or counterfactually (“if I were to deliberate about this, it would look like. . .”) or perhaps understood as a more implicit process. The good person not only can reason rightly about means and ends, but also is rightly oriented affectively in those manners and matters. When it comes to moral pre-ference (pro-hairesis), while the good person acts and chooses rationally, with right affectivity consonant to true reason, they often do so without any explicit process of practical reasoning. So, there is good reason to decouple prohairesis from necessary connection with deliberation in a strict sense.

What about means and ends? Is it true that we deliberate solely about means, inquiring into, acquiring, determining, reevaluating ends only by other means (virtue, habituation, rational desire)? Is it true that our moral choice concerns only means? Or do we ever call our ends into question, realize that we have been pursuing the wrong ends, guiding ourselves by them in reason, habit, feeling, and action? Do we ever decide upon the need for moral reformation, to right our already wrongly established course? Is this an experience available to a strict Aristotelian? Certainly in a trivial sense, since one can always displace the “end” and its considerations to a reconceptualized eudaimonia. But, in a more robust sense, again, we ought to ask: what are people are morally praised and blamed for? Is it not at least in part for their very choice, their commitment to and conscious endorsement of ends, their orderings and prioritizations of goods, their hierarchies of values? A question remaining open (and attractive) is whether Aristotelian prohairesis can be extended to such extent of bearing upon (at least some) ends.

The standard interpretation is (to repurpose an expression from Leibniz) true in affirmation, but false in denial and restrictiveness. I propose we view prohairesis as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon, corresponding an analogical term, whose senses Aristotle does not rigorously distinguish. At present, I would distinguish three different senses and levels of prohairesis. The first sense denotes particular morally significant choices made by a person in specific circumstances, voluntary and most likely involving deliberation (exclusively about means) to some extent. We ought to distinguish a second,
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wider sense, transcending but integrating individual choices so as to form an identifiable and specific pattern. Particular virtues and vices, as well as self-control and its lack, figure in here, at a level where deliberation will often, but not always, be involved. I would like to suggest that we also understand Aristotelian *prohairesis* at a third, more substantive level, the nexus of the moral person, a manifold of fundamental (and integrated or discordant) attitudes, beliefs, choices, actions, and affectivity. I would further suggest that at this third, global level of prohairesis, the person would be involved in, and responsible for, choice of their ends as well as of means.