Prohairesis and a Stoic-Inspired Feminist Autonomy

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Abstract: The idea that the ancient Stoics are (proto)feminists is relatively common. Even those critical of this position acknowledge that certain features of Stoicism render the philosophical program appropriate for a feminist reimagining. Yet less attention has been paid to developing a positive theory of Stoic feminism. I begin this task by outlining Stoic insights for a feminist conception of personal autonomy. I argue that, present in the Stoic doctrine of *prohairesis*, we find a dual conception of personal autonomy according to which socially constructed selves maintain an individualist autonomy. This individualist view of autonomy is in line with Stoic compatibilism about freedom and selfhood, which I use as structural analogies to motivate my account. I then highlight potential feminist payoffs of a Stoic-inspired view, particularly for the contemporary feminist debate about autonomy under oppression.

Keywords: autonomy, Epictetus, feminism, oppression, *prohairesis*, Stoicism.

Introduction

Relational autonomy is a collection of theories designed to take seriously a feminist idea that both selfhood and autonomy are socially constructed. Traditional accounts of autonomy are dismissed because they presuppose an individualistic conception of the self, and because they posit an individualistic, rationalistic, and masculinist conception of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 3). This former claim arises in part because the character ideal of a perfectly autonomous man has been someone who is wholly self-made and independent from social relationships, and in part because the attribution of autonomy has typically required that selves are atomistic, isolated individuals (cf. Code 2000). The latter claim arises because of the *internalist* nature of mainstream accounts of autonomy. Internalist accounts define autonomy by appealing to internal features of persons; agents' preferences, beliefs, and actions are autonomous based on their psychological states, and specifically by the processes through which they come to form or undertake these preferences, beliefs, and actions.

The problem with both types of individualism, according to relational autonomy theorists, is that they prevent an accurate understanding of the social realities of marginalized and oppressed groups. Specifically, they cannot account for the ways that oppression threatens autonomy. Instead, relational autonomy theorists hold that autonomy is partially constituted by social circumstances rather than just by internal psychological states. They embrace a type of view called *externalism*, according to which social relationships make up at least part of

what it means to be autonomous. A key motivation for relational theories of autonomy, then, is that social accounts of selfhood and autonomy can better conceptualize and work to eliminate oppression. Theories of relational autonomy are therefore *pure social* views of personal autonomy: both the self and autonomy are socially constituted.

However, I believe it is possible to build an internalist conception of personal autonomy without denying the social nature of selves or the causal impact of social relationships on autonomy. We can call this a *dual* conception of personal autonomy because it denies the central intuition of pure social views – that both selfhood and autonomy must be socially constructed in order to build a distinctly feminist account of autonomy.

Motivation for such a dual view can be found in ancient Stoicism. In fact, dual views of other phenomena arise across the Stoic program. Their view of freedom maintains that we are both determined and free, and their view of selfhood holds that we have both individual and socially constructed identities; they are *compatibilists* in both arenas. I consider the implications of embracing a similar sort of compatibilism about personal autonomy. Using the Stoics' views of both freedom and identity as structural analogies, and drawing from Epictetus' discussion of *prohairesis*, I outline Stoic insights for a feminist conception of personal autonomy – a compatibilist project that acknowledges the social nature of selves while maintaining an individualism, or internalism, about autonomy.

Though a Stoic-inspired account of autonomy would be internalist, I argue that there are potential payoffs for the contemporary feminist debate about autonomy under oppression; the structure of Stoic compatibilism thus provides an avenue of response for feminists who wish to question pure social accounts of autonomy. The Stoic insights I outline can therefore apply to a robustly feminist theory of autonomy. I see this project as an extension of arguments which hold that the Stoics are feminists (Hill 2001, 2020; Grahn-Wilder 2018), or at least that Stoicism as a program is compatible with feminism (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014). Taking these arguments seriously, I offer one small piece of a positive theory of Stoic feminism. While I will ground my discussion in Stoic texts, including especially the works of Epictetus, this paper is not primarily an exegetical project; rather, I enter the discussion as a contemporary Stoic examining how these ancient texts might provide a new angle from which to examine current debates in feminist autonomy.[1]

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[1] Here I follow Seneca: "Will I not walk in the footsteps of my predecessors? I will indeed use the ancient road – but if I find another route that is more direct and has fewer ups and downs, I will stake out that one. Those who advanced these doctrines before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth lies open to all; it has not yet been taken over. Much is left also for those yet to come." (*Ep*. 33.11; Stephens 2020, 22)

1. Epictetus on *Prohairesis*

The first step in highlighting Stoic insights for feminist autonomy is to understand how autonomy functions within Stoic ethics. To this end, I outline the concept of *prohairesis* as employed by Epictetus.[2] I believe we have reason to understand *prohairesis* as a sort of personal autonomy, so I will motivate this reading by providing a brief overview of the concept and connecting it to contemporary discussions of autonomy. Despite some difficulties with constructing a robust account of Stoic autonomy, there are philosophical and interpretive benefits for reading *prohairesis* in broadly this way, especially as contemporary Stoics keen to apply Stoic principles to current philosophical debates.[3]

A key distinction for Epictetus is that between what is up to us and what is not up to us. Things that are up to us include "conception, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything that is our own doing." (E1)[4] Also within our control are our power of assent and how we use impressions (D II.18). Things that are not up to us include whatever is not wholly within our power, including "our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing." (E1) This distinction between up to us and not up to us tracks the difference between internals and externals. Epictetus calls internals those things that are within our sphere of control, while externals fall outside of it. Externals, or things that are not up to us, should not bother or hinder us, Epictetus argues; the only things that should concern us are internals – those things which are up to us. Ideally, we will learn that only internals are the site of moral value (D II.1), and regard externals as mere indifferents.[5]

For Epictetus, *prohairesis* is something that is up to us. In fact, it is the quintessential internal; at times, Epictetus argues that *only* our *prohairesis* is within our control (D II.15.1). While we do not have power over the way that impressions impact us, we can determine for ourselves how we react to these impressions, how we form judgments based upon them, and whether or not we assent to them. All of these matters are determined by *prohairesis*, which tells us what to desire and believe as well as how to act (D II.23). Because *prohairesis* is quintessentially within our control, Epictetus likens it to our inner self, true self, or "the 'I' of personal identity." (Kahn 1988, 253) It is the seat of our personal autonomy; it helps make up who we are and determines how we act in the world.

Despite the central importance of *prohairesis* within Epictetan ethics, there is disagreement about how it is best translated. Various translations include 'volition;' (Long 2004; Stephens 2007) 'the will' or 'free will;' (Dobbin 1991; Frede

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[2] I limit my discussion of *prohairesis* to Epictetus due to the central role it plays in his ethics, and to the lack of this concept in other (especially early) Stoics (Kahn 1988; Dobbin 1991) – although there is a connection to Panaetius.

[3] Thanks to Jonathan Trerise for pressing me on this point.

[4] I use Oldfather's translation of Epictetus throughout.

[5] For a detailed discussion of Epictetus' arguments regarding why we should only seek internals, see Stephens 2007, 10-16.

2011) and 'moral purpose,' (Oldfather 1998) 'moral choice,' (Kahn 1988)[6] or 'good moral character.' (Hill 2020) But, in many discussions, *prohairesis* is also linked to personal autonomy by use of the terms autonomy or agency in its description (Dobbin 1991, 121-2; Stephens 2007, 18; Frede 2011, 80).[7] For example, Dobbin notes in his discussion of *prohairesis* that "Epictetus writes from the internal perspective, in describing man's unmistakable sense of personal autonomy," (1991, 121-2) and Stephens indicates that, for Epictetus, our *prohairesis* gives us "complete autonomy regarding things 'up to [us].'" (2007, 18) This indicates a tight connection between *prohairesis* and our current understanding of personal autonomy.

In fact, Epictetus' language about *prohairesis* is strikingly similar to contemporary discourse about personal autonomy. *Prohairesis* is something that gives us the power to choose between options (*Simpl.* 6.38-9). It is an internal power of persons, and as the source of our true selves, mimics mainstream ideas about autonomy as an inner citadel that helps define who we are as individuals (cf. Christman 1989, 3).[8] The association between autonomy and our inner selves aligns Epictetus with internalist accounts of autonomy, which similarly hold that our autonomy is constituted by internal psychological states or processes. I return to this point below.

Epictetus' insistence that *prohairesis* is a capacity also mimics current discussions of personal autonomy. He suggests in several places that our *prohairesis* is an invincible power, "free, unhindered, and unimpeded." (E1) He argues, for example, that externals cannot in themselves corrupt our *prohairesis*; only our own autonomy can do this (D I.19; I.29). This is consistent with the Stoic view that the virtuous person is invulnerable to harm. We should read his insistence as the setting out of an *ideal* or a *capacity*. In practice it is not the case that our autonomy will always remain unthwarted by externals. As an ideal, *prohairesis* may be "free, unhindered, and unimpeded," (E1) but, in practice, we often have to respond to externals that impact us in ways that both align with this ideal and depart from it. Many contemporary autonomy theorists similarly understand autonomy as an ideal (cf. Oshana 2006), even though non-ideal circumstances might impact the way we exercise our autonomy (Khader 2020).

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[6] In Kahn, *prohairesis* as moral choice is linked to the will and to Seneca's use of *voluntas* (1988, 253-4). In Dobbin it is connected to Cicero's use of the same term (1991, 122).

[7] It is also sometimes linked to freedom, or even to freedom and autonomy together, as if these terms referred to the same concept. I think we have reason to believe that the Stoics understand *prohairesis* as distinct from freedom (*eleutheria*) (Bobzien 1998), at least in part because they utilize separate terms for each. While freedom and autonomy are adjacent concepts, they are not identical. This is complicated by the fact that, in English, we often use the terms interchangeably, and that the two concepts are often linked (Kahn 1988, 235; Bobzien 1998, 330-331).

[8] Even feminists who critique the inner citadel model can accept that personal autonomy helps define who we are. Mackenzie and Stoljar, for example, argue that autonomy is 'the defining characteristic of free moral agents.' (2000, 5)

This idea that autonomy is a capacity we *possess* that we may sometimes struggle to *exercise* is present in Epictetus as well (cf. *Simpl.* 10.10-20).

But how, specifically, can we use the concept of *prohairesis* to inspire a contemporary theory of feminist autonomy? To answer this question, I turn to a discussion of the Stoics' compatibilist views of freedom and personal identity.

2. Dual Freedom

The Stoics are causal determinists, believing that everything in the universe is governed by fate. However, they also want to make room for moral responsibility, which requires that humans are to some extent free. This combination of views renders the Stoics compatibilists. One way to understand Stoic compatibilism is by appealing to their arguments about causation. In this section, I present a very brief overview of Stoic causal theory and then explain the implications for my argument that this view can serve as a structural analogy for a theory of personal autonomy.[9]

Consider an analogy drawn by Chrysippus between our character and a rolling cylinder (Cic. *Fat.* 42–3). The cylinder's rolling is caused by two things: an initial push that begins the cylinder's path, and an innate disposition of the cylinder toward rollability. The initial push, coming from an external source, is a necessary condition for the cylinder's movement. While the push is necessary, it is not sufficient. The innate disposition toward rollability, occurring within the cylinder itself, is what ultimately causes the cylinder to move; were the cylinder to possess a different disposition, even an external push would not compel it to roll. The external push is analogous to what the Stoics call antecedent causes of human action,[10] while the innate disposition is analogous to perfect causes (Cic. *Fat.* 41).[11] Perfect causes, the ultimate cause of actions from which we derive responsibility, occur within the object or agent. Fate, for the Stoics, is made up of antecedent causes rather than perfect causes. Perfect causes – without which actions cannot occur – are left up to agents; this is why agents are responsible for their actions.[12] As Bobzien explains, "Any comprehensive explanation of the action would involve the agent as the immediate and decisive causal factor of the action." (1998, 255)

When applied to human action, specifically, the case becomes slightly more complicated since humans uniquely possess the power of assent (Hankinson 1999, 492). In the case of the cylinder, an external push and an internal disposition are sufficient to produce action; the cylinder does not rationally agree to being moved.

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[9] For more detailed discussions, see Frede 1980; Bobzien 1998 (especially chap. 6); Hankinson 1999.

[10] More specifically, a proximate antecedent cause.

[11] Although see Bobzien 1998, 261.

[12] This does not mean that perfect causes exist entirely separate from fate; this would be to deny the Stoics' causal determinism. The view is rather that our assent to action is *initiated* by antecedent causes but not made necessary by them (Bobzien 1998, 258).

But human beings are different. We possess both internal dispositions and the ability to actualize these dispositions (or not). The Stoics call this ability to actualize, or to rationally agree to action, the power of assent. Very briefly then, extending the cylinder analogy, we get the following causes for human action. The antecedent cause maps onto impressions which strike us from the outside. These impressions act on our internal dispositions, the combination of which creates an impulse to action. While we have no control over the impressions themselves, we must either assent to an occurrent impulse and act or withhold assent and refuse to act (Sen. *Ep.* 113). This assent, or withholding of assent, is up to us. This model of causation thus creates a realm of free action within a deterministic system.

Central to Stoic compatibilism about freedom, then, is a dual causality: there are external and internal causes working together to produce an effect. One type of cause, external antecedent causes, are not within our control. The other type of cause, internal causes, including the power of assent, are within our control and therefore preserve the possibility of moral responsibility. This dual model of freedom, of internal and external, mapping onto the Stoic distinction between that which is up to us and that which is not up to us, provides a structural analogy for a Stoic-inspired theory of autonomy. As I show below, personal autonomy is also potentially causally impacted by external or social factors. However, just as external causes are not the complete story of Stoic freedom, they are not the complete story of a Stoic-inspired autonomy. Though external features may *contribute to* our autonomy, they do not on their own *constitute* it; this constitutive role is played by features internal to the agent.

3. Dual Identity

Just as the Stoics have a dual or compatibilist model of freedom, they also have a dual model of personal identity,[13] according to which we are both individual and socially situated selves. This model is apparent in several places, including the concept of *oikeiosis*, the Panaetian circles of obligation or *personae*, and Epictetus' theory of self-identity. In all of these places, the Stoics believe that there is no contradiction in supposing that we are both individual selves and social beings – while our many relationships contribute to who we are, what duties we have, and how we enact the virtues, we are still individuals capable of choice within these social spheres.

The Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*, or 'being akin to' or 'belonging to,' is at the center of the Stoic command to live in accordance with nature (DL VII.85). It is also central to their cosmopolitanism, since we are meant to feel an affinity toward all other rational beings. But it is not just to other rational beings that we are meant to feel a kinship; we are also fundamentally akin to ourselves, standing in a

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[13] Bates calls this the 'dual aspect of self-identity' in Epictetus (2014, 152), and Rorty references a 'Janus-faced' human nature in Stoicism as both particular and universal (1996, 350). Reydams-Schils also finds a duality in the Stoic definition of the self (2005, 16).

relationship of self-*oikeiosis* (Reydams-Schils 2005, 26; Stephens 2020, 32; Hill and Nidumolu 2021). This self-*oikeiosis* is what allows us to understand that we are "cognitively and physically individuated from others," and that our actions and decisions belong to us (Hill and Nidumolu 2021, 12). This understanding, in turn, is crucial for personal autonomy since we cannot self-govern without being (in some sense) separate individuals. However, this does not mean that we are social atoms; we are also always socially embedded (Reydams-Schils 2005, 17).[14] The concepts of *oikeiosis* and self-*oikeiosis* capture this dual identity.

But the Stoic dual model of identity is clearest in the work of Panaetius discussed by Cicero and accepted by Epictetus.[15] Cicero explains that, on the Panaetian view, we have two *personae* by nature: the first is our rational nature, which we share in common with all humankind, and the second is our individual nature, made up of our unique traits and endowments (Cic. *De Offic*. I.30.107). In addition to these two *personae*, Panaetius adds two others: a sphere of various relationships, and a sphere of individual choice (Cic. *De Offic*. I.30.115). The combination of individualism and social situatedness is apparent in both pairs of two *personae* (Grahn-Wilder 2018, 193-4): in the two *personae* granted by nature, we have both individual traits and traits that we share in common with others; in the second pair of two *personae*, we are individual persons situated amongst others and holding various duties and responsibilities toward them. In all four *personae*, it is our nature as individuals as well as our particular social circumstances that contribute to personal identity (Asmis 1990, 227), and to the decisions we make (Cic. *De Offic*. I.118-120).

Epictetus, too, accepts this Panaetian view (D II.10, III.23.4-5), according to which both our social identity and individual identity work together harmoniously to make us who we are (Rorty 1996, 352; Bates 2014, 154). For Epictetus, we are fundamentally individual persons who are also, secondarily, socially constructed. We are "individual people who live within particular

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[14] Epictetus makes our social embeddedness clear. He says: "What, then, is the profession of a citizen? To treat nothing as a matter of private profit, not to plan about anything as though he were a detached unit, but to act like the foot or the hand, which, if they had the faculty of reason and understood the constitution of nature, would never exercise choice or desire in any other way but by reference to the whole." (D II.10)

[15] There is disagreement about whether or not Epictetus' discussion of social roles is influenced by the four *personae*. Brian E. Johnson (2014), for example, argues that we do a disservice to Epictetus if we understand his role ethics as a direct descendent of Panaetius. A full response to Johnson is beyond the scope of this paper; however, I am not sure that viewing Epictetus as influenced by Panaetius requires making Epictetus a mere 'appendix,' as Johnson claims, nor does it mean that we must 'lose important details of Epictetus's account.' (2014, 136) Certainly there are differences between the accounts, as Johnson notes, but noting these differences does not require dismissing the many similarities any more than commenting on the similarities requires ignoring the unique contributions of Epictetus. The common use of the playwright example especially suggests to me that Epictetus is at least influenced by Panaetius (Cic. *De Offic*. I.113).

constraints: a certain time; a certain place; with certain other people with various personalities in a variety of relationships." (Bates 2014, 156) Our socially constructed identity is based on externals and is not up to us; Epictetus likens this aspect of our identity to acting in a play, where our character is "determined by the Playwright."[16] (E17) However, our essential nature is as an individual self with unique desires and intentions (Long 2004, 92). Many of our social relationships are inherited by us (Christman 2009, 45),[17] but the way we act within, and respond to, these relationships is something that we can decide. We may not write the play, but we choose how to act it out. The individual aspect of our identity is within our control, and without it we could not make use of our *prohairesis*.

Admittedly, the analogy of the Playwright is a source of criticism for Epictetus, since it is argued that this passage demonstrates how concessive he is to cultural conservatism (cf. McBride 2021). However, as contemporary Stoics we need not read the analogy this way. We can acknowledge that, in fact, we *are* cast into plays that we do not write; this is part of what it means to be socially constructed. Many of our relationships are unchosen by us and yet we find ourselves embedded in them anyway. But these relationships as well as our chosen relationships are open to revision; we have the freedom to end the roles we play and take up others of the same kind. To do so is to *co-write* the play.[18] Moreover, when Epictetus tells us to "play admirably the role assigned to [us]," (E17) contemporary Stoics could examine what it means to play a role 'admirably.' Acting admirably within systemic oppression might demand resistance (Hay 2011). In short, acknowledging the social aspect of our identities does not require a commitment to cultural conservatism.

To sum up, the structure of dual identity is similar to the structure of dual freedom. There are both external and internal causes of personal identity. Social relationships are external causes; they are often unchosen and therefore not up to us. Internal causes include our unique traits and desires as individual beings; these things arise from within us, more specifically from our *prohairesis*, and are therefore up to us. Just as Stoic compatibilism about freedom provides a structural analogy for a neo-Stoic personal autonomy, compatibilism about personal identity can as well. I now turn to a discussion of Stoic insights for contemporary autonomy.

4. Dual Autonomy

Using freedom and identity as structural analogies for a proposed compatibilism about personal autonomy is appropriate since both freedom and identity are

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[16] Note the similarities to the Panaetian example of acting in a play (Cic. *De Offic*. I.113).
[17] John Christman makes this point as part of his theory of personal autonomy. He notes that our relationships, and the values we derive from them, are often inherited. However, we may still autonomously endorse them. I discuss this point further in my discussion of adaptive preferences, below.
[18] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

closely related to personal autonomy. We often understand autonomy as a sort of freedom of the self, where autonomy is the self's ability to choose and freedom is the ability to act based on these choices (*Simpl.* 6.38-9). The key distinction in the concepts of freedom and identity between internal and external, which maps onto the Epictetan distinction between that which is up to us (internal features) and that which is not up to us (external factors), is a distinction central to his discussion of personal autonomy, as well. In this section, I situate Epictetus as an internalist about autonomy, and then briefly highlight Stoic insights for personal autonomy – an internalist account modeled on *prohairesis* and structured according to Stoic compatibilism about freedom and identity. In particular, I examine the Stoic-inspired ideas that socially constructed persons can maintain an individualist autonomy, and that external features play a contributory rather than a constitutive role in our autonomy. These ideas are both significant because they help carve a middle ground between strongly externalist and strongly internalist theories of autonomy – the former of which place too much determinative weight on social relationships and the latter of which are charged with not weighing them heavily enough. A compatibilist view can readily acknowledge both the social nature of selves and the causal impact of relationships on personal autonomy, without granting them the stronger, constitutive role that they play within externalist accounts.

As I have shown, there is a common structure to Stoic compatibilism about self-identity and freedom – there are both internal and external factors that contribute to each. In a Stoic model of identity, we are fundamentally individual persons, yet we are also secondarily situated in social relationships (Bates 2014). For example, in the Panaetian model accepted by Epictetus, one sphere of identity is made up of our various relationships, which are externals and not up to us. A second sphere is made up of individual choices, which are internals and therefore up to us. It is this sphere that constitutes the 'I' of personal identity (Kahn 1988, 253), which allows us to understand that we are differentiated from others in a way that makes our actions truly ours (Hill and Nidumolu 2021, 12). In a Stoic model of freedom, there are external antecedent causes that initiate action – like the push that begins the cylinder's rolling (Cic. *Fat.* 42–3) – yet internal causes, like our power of assent, are ultimately responsible for what we do (Bobzien 1998, 255). Just as in the model of identity, external antecedent causes are not up to us, while the internal power of assent is within our control. Put another way, in both cases external causes are *contributory* factors, but internal causes are *constitutive*.

We can structure personal autonomy in an analogous way, based largely on Epictetus' discussion of *prohairesis*, which maps onto an internalist account of autonomy. Recall that internalism is a view which holds that autonomy is determined by internal, psychological states of persons, including (for example) how we deliberate about preferences or actions, or whether or not we endorse preferences or actions upon reflection. Internalism is contrasted with externalism, which holds that features of our social environment determine our autonomy

status; to be autonomous, a person must exist in specific autonomy-enabling social conditions, such as a lack of domination or oppression (Oshana 2015; Warriner 2015; Johnston 2017; Mackenzie 2019). Contemporary feminist Marina Oshana explains the contrast in her endorsement of externalism: "Autonomy is not decided 'from within,' or on the basis of the evaluational perspective of the individual whose autonomy is at stake," she argues, "external criteria constitute autonomy and external criteria measure autonomy." (Oshana 2006, 50) Epictetus disagrees with the sort of view adopted by Oshana. As an internal, autonomy must be a capacity within us rather than something occurring externally; this is required by his insistence that *prohairesis* is up to us. Whether or not we exist under systemic oppression is not within our control, and therefore cannot determine *prohairesis*.[19]

Moreover, Epictetus clearly distinguishes between externals and autonomy in a way that an externalist cannot:

> 'But,' says someone, 'if a person subjects me to the fear of death, he compels me.'
> 'No, *it is not what you are subjected to that impels you*, but the fact that you decide it is better for you to do something of the sort than to die. Once more, then, it is the *decision of your own will which compelled you*, that is, moral purpose [*prohairesis*] compelled moral purpose.' (D I.17, emphasis mine)[20]

In this passage, Epictetus considers the idea that things outside of us, which are not up to us, could be the cause of our actions. He dismisses this idea and argues that it is our autonomy *responding to these externals* that determines how we act. This argument relies on there being a distinction between the determinants of our autonomy and the external features of our environment. This distinction means that Epictetus simply cannot be an externalist about autonomy.

Although externals do not constitute our autonomy as they would for an externalist, Epictetus acknowledges in several places that they are still related. On his view, internal features of persons *constitute* what it means to be an autonomous agent, even though externals may *contribute* to it. This is structurally similar to the way that social relationships contribute to our identity even though our individual traits fundamentally constitute it, and the way that antecedent causes contribute to our actions even though ultimately they are determined by us. For example: "What, then, are the external things? *They are materials for the moral purpose* [*prohairesis*], in dealing with which it will find its own proper good or evil." (D I.29, emphasis mine) Here Epictetus notes that our *prohairesis* directs us in a way that may be influenced by externals; even though the externals

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[19] As I note below, there is liberatory potential to the idea that *prohairesis* perseveres through systemic oppression; in particular, this view can empower the oppressed who are trying to maintain agency in the face of injustice. Epictetus' own lived experiences as a slave may have contributed to his insistence that *prohairesis* is something up to us and not constituted by unjust externals. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for noting Epictetus' possible motivation here.

[20] Remember that this is a Stoic-*inspired* view, so we need not accept the claim that threats of death cannot compel us in order to accept the distinction between autonomy and externals.

themselves are not the site of moral value, the way our autonomy *responds* to these externals is. In fact, Epictetus even acknowledges that externals can injure us – "Where there is some loss affecting our body or our property, there we count it injury…" (D II.10.27) – but he resists the idea that they can injure our *prohairesis* understood as an ideal capacity (D II.10.27-30).

That externals and autonomy are related means that his internalist account can acknowledge the extent to which social factors influence or impact an agent's autonomy, which in actuality often departs from its ideal. Although Epictetus argues that *prohairesis* is 'by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded,' (E1) I have argued that this is a claim about autonomy as a capacity we possess, while in actuality we often fall short of this ideal.[21] Indeed, Epictetus readily acknowledges how difficult it is to achieve this ideal, as when he draws a distinction between the educated and the uninstructed person, the latter of whom allows their *prohairesis* to be led entirely by externals rather than by their own autonomy (D I.29). While the Stoic sage is able to realize the true nature of *prohairesis* as unimpeded, the autonomy of Stoic progressors – that is, most of us – is often influenced by externals (Long 2004, 217).

Finally, the fact that Epictetus is an internalist does not mean that he fails to take seriously the social nature of persons, as we have seen. His endorsement of the four *personae* clearly shows that he accepts, to some degree, the social construction of selves. That he holds both views – internalism and social construction – is significant, since it demonstrates that it is possible to hold both views simultaneously. Though for an internalist autonomy is a feature of individual persons, and is therefore in some sense individualistic, persons are deeply socially embedded. Epictetus thus teaches that internalist accounts of autonomy need not ignore the social nature of persons, even though this is a common contemporary criticism (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 16). Contemporary internalists have also argued for this sort of dual model. For example, John Christman argues that "there is nothing about a social conception of the 'self' that is incompatible with an individual conception of autonomy." (2004, 246)[22] Here, Christman defends what I am calling, following the Stoics, a compatibilism about personal autonomy – social selves can still maintain an individualist (or internalist) autonomy.

That internalism is compatible with social construction is one insight that we can apply to a contemporary Stoic-inspired theory of personal autonomy; this is what renders such an account a dual model rather than a pure social model. But there are other insights that we can apply as well. In particular, we can look to Stoic compatibilism about freedom and identity to see how compatibilism about

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[21] There is also a distinction to be drawn between autonomy as ideal capacity and the ability to exercise this capacity, which would be a claim about *eleutheria* (D II.1).

[22] Christman also provides a valuable disambiguation of what it means to say that selves are socially constructed, noting that there are more and less plausible ways to understand this claim (2004, 144-146).

autonomy is meant to work. It is here that we draw on the distinction between contributory and constitutive roles of externals.

A common contemporary criticism of internalist autonomy is that it cannot adequately acknowledge the ways in which external social relationships, including especially relationships of domination and oppression, impact our personal autonomy. The claim is that externals must play a constitutive role in our autonomy if we are to give them the serious attention they deserve in our social-political theorizing. But, using insights from Stoicism, we can see that this is not the case. Like Epictetus, contemporary internalists about autonomy acknowledge that our autonomy can sometimes be undermined by social circumstances. What matters is the mechanism by which this undermining occurs. For externalists, oppressive circumstances on their own undermine autonomy, since autonomy consists in the presence of autonomy-enabling social conditions. For example, externalist Rebekah Johnston argues that our social positioning "in terms of status *itself*, and not just *that* one must react or *how* one reacts to this positioning, matters to autonomy." (2017, 319) This constitutive claim amounts to an argument that non-oppressive social circumstances are *required*, or are *necessary conditions*, for autonomy (Oshana 2006; Mackenzie 2008; Stoljar 2015).

Contrast this externalist position with Epictetus, who says that externals are 'materials for' our *prohairesis* rather than constituents of it (D I.29). This is reflective of the internalist position according to which oppressive circumstances may undermine autonomy by distorting the psychological processes that an agent undergoes when determining how to act. For example, internalist Andrea Westlund (2009) argues that oppressive socialization may deprive us of our ability to answer for our actions; we may act automatically, without critical reflection, and without being able to explain the reasons behind what we do. Here it is the *causal impact* of externals on agents that may threaten their autonomy, not the presence of these externals as such.[23] This is a causal, contributory claim

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[23] An example may help illuminate the distinction between internalist and externalist accounts. Consider the case of Yan, who is routinely sexually harassed at work. This harassment takes place within a broader system of sexist oppression that contributes to the idea that women's claims are 'hysterical' and that harms of harassment need not be taken seriously as oppressive harms. Yan reports the behavior to her boss and human resources and is motivated by her experience to take up feminist activist work in her local community. In other words, she actively resists her oppression. On an externalist account, even active resisters like Yan fail to be autonomous since they exist in oppressive circumstances that definitionally undermine their autonomy (Oshana 2015). Because external circumstances constitute autonomy, and because these external circumstances must be rid of oppression in order for an agent to be autonomous, Yan cannot be autonomous under our current system of sexist oppression. An internalist, on the other hand, might argue that active resisters like Yan are often *exemplars* of autonomy (Meyers 2000). Even though Yan lives in a world in which women's claims are not taken seriously, she can still autonomously choose to fight against her oppression. Her autonomy can persist because unjust externals, while they may contribute to her autonomy status, do not constitute it. To use Epictetus' language, the decision to resist is *up to her*.

rather than a constitutive one. As Christman explains, for externalists "social conditions of some sort must be named as conceptually necessary requirements of autonomy rather than, say, contributory factors." (2004, 147-148) Internalists replace this conceptual claim with a contingent one, in a way reminiscent of Epictetus – it is the way our *prohairesis* responds to externals, rather than the externals themselves, that determines how well our autonomy lives up to its ideal. But this does not mean that externals are entirely irrelevant to autonomy – not even for the Stoics!

These two key insights – that internalist accounts of autonomy can readily incorporate the social construction of persons, and that such accounts acknowledge the causal (but not constitutive) impact of social factors on our autonomy – have potentially significant feminist payoffs. Before turning to a discussion of these payoffs, however, I should address looming objections.

5. Can There be a Stoic Feminist Autonomy?

It is now a relatively common view that the Stoics are feminists or proto-feminists, or that Stoicism as a philosophical program is conducive to feminism. Different features of Stoicism have been offered as support for this claim. For example, the Stoics believe that everyone, regardless of gender, has equal citizenship in the *cosmopolis*. They also argue that women are equally capable of exercising reason (Hill 2001). However, there are initial reasons to doubt the connection between ancient Stoicism and contemporary feminist debates about *autonomy*. I consider three potential objections to the feasibility of my project as a feminist project: an objection from rationality, an objection from individualism, and an objection from adaptive preferences.

First, at times the Stoics might seem committed to exactly the sort of rationalistic model of autonomy that has led feminists to question the usefulness of the concept. It is true, for example, that the Stoics draw a tight connection between *prohairesis* and reason and insist that only our rational faculties are wholly within our control. This has led some scholars to note an association between Stoicism and toxic masculinity (Táíwò 2020),[24] or to connect Stoicism with patriarchal societies that instruct men to practice 'emotional stoicism,' shutting down emotions if they become too much to bear (Hooks 2004; Táíwò 2020).

Second, the Stoic challenge to understand those with whom we are in close relationships as externals or indifferents might seem to promote an unacceptable sort of individualism. It might look like an encouragement to strive for complete independence from social circumstances.[25] If it is the case both that we should

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[24] On Stoicism and toxic masculinity, see also Zuckerberg (2018).
[25] Isaiah Berlin seems to attribute this view to the Stoics. He argues that, on an individualistic conception of autonomy, we may be tempted to escape 'into the inner fortress of [our] true sel[ves],' (2008, 185) what he calls a retreat into the inner citadel (2008, 181).

only desire those things which are up to us, and that our social relationships are out of our control, then a way to achieve *eudaimonia* would be to remove ourselves from these relationships. The goal of *eudaimonia* would be achieved only by "doing away with all of our social attachments and retreating into the inner citadel of the soul." (Braicovich 2010, 204) But feminists have argued against the inner citadel model of autonomy, claiming that such independence is neither possible nor desirable and traditional theories of autonomy have been rejected on these grounds.

Finally, the Stoic move to maintain autonomy in the face of social injustice may be thought objectionable since it seems to require adaptive preferences. Stoics like Epictetus argue that being averse to something leads to misfortune if the circumstances to which we are averse actually obtain. If, however, we can control our aversions so that we are only averse to things within our power, then we will never meet misfortune (E1). This looks like an endorsement of adaptive preferences, which arise when people come to hold preferences that are oppressive to them (Cudd 2006, 181). For example, women might adapt their preferences so that they no longer desire to hold positions of power in the workplace, since submissiveness is a trait thought to be appropriate for women under patriarchy. That their preference aligns with the values of their own systemic oppression is what renders the preference adaptive. Compare this with Epictetus, who says: "Whoever, therefore, wants to be free, let him neither wish for anything, nor avoid anything, that is under the control of others; or else he is necessarily a slave." (E14) Here it seems Epictetus tells us to adapt our wishes so that we no longer desire things that are outside our sphere of influence. Commentators have noted this feature of Stoicism, calling it a "morally repellent consequence" of Stoic autonomy (Zimmerman 2000, 25).[26] This criticism also applies in the political sphere. If we can preserve autonomy only by adjusting our desires to current circumstances, then Stoic autonomy is insufficient for feminist political goals; if we must merely adapt our preferences to injustice, the Stoic program gives us "pessimism about prospects for changing such oppressive circumstances." (Zimmerman 2000, 28) Instead of working to eliminate oppression we should accept it as our lot. We should become like the dog who chooses to run alongside the cart so that he is not dragged behind it. "Resistance is futile," teach the Stoics, "insurrectionists will be dragged." (McBride 2021, 114)

I believe these objections rest on misunderstandings of Stoicism and that therefore they do not provide reason to doubt the feminist potential of this project. Regarding the objection from rationality, presumably what is objectionable about rationality is not rationality *per se*, but rather that it has been attributed exclusively to men and denied to women. The opposite of rationality, which in this objection is emotion, has been ascribed to women and denied to men. Rationality

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[26] This is how Isaiah Berlin understands Stoic freedom – that "I could render men (including myself) free by conditioning them into losing the original desires which I have decided not to satisfy." (2008, 31) He attributes this view specifically to Epictetus and Cicero.

is then praised while emotion is denigrated. In other words, it is the gendered nature of rationality that makes it objectionable. But the Stoics explicitly reject the idea that rationality is male-coded; rationality is granted to all people, regardless of gender (Hill 2001; Grahn-Wilder 2018, 195). Rationality is simply not a masculine trait, nor is emotion a particularly feminine trait; people of all genders are equally capable of feeling emotion, and equally capable of exercising reason. The gender-neutral nature of rationality for the Stoics robs the objection of some weight.

Second, the objection from individualism does not properly situate Stoic autonomy within Stoic ethics. I have shown that the Stoics do not fail to appreciate the socially embedded nature of human beings. Indeed, one reason the Stoics emphasize the distinction between up to us and not up to us is because they take seriously the potentially devastating impact of externals. To attribute to the Stoics a thoroughgoing disregard for relationships is to misunderstand their views of socially constituted identity and social obligations. Nor do the Stoics recommend wholly removing ourselves from our social ties. In fact, we have strict duties to those around us based on our particular relationships with them (E30; *Simpl.* 82.47-91.24). Withdrawing into ourselves at the expense of those around us would be a clear violation of our social duties (Reydams-Schils 2005, 17).

Finally, there are two ways to respond to the adaptive preferences objection. The first is to examine exactly what is wrong with adaptive preferences in the first place; merely pointing out that a preference is adaptive is not sufficient to demonstrate that the preference is problematic. A standard argument holds that adaptive preferences are objectionable because they are autonomy deficits (cf. Cudd 2006). But this is not always the case. It is true that we may sometimes choose to align our preferences with oppressive circumstances, but several feminists have argued that this choice may still be an autonomous one (Narayan 2002; Khader 2011; Sperry 2013).[27] Indeed, Epictetus seems to endorse a version of this feminist view in response to the objection from deficiency, which argues – against Epictetus' view of *prohairesis* – that deficiency may compel us to desire certain things, in which case these desires would not be up to us:

> Some of these people say that deficiency is the cause [of 'belief and desire, and in general choice and *prohairesis*.' (*Simpl.* 8.38-39)] For is there anyone hungry or thirsty or shivering who does not desire food and drink and warmth, whether

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[27] For example, Elizabeth Sperry devises the case of Cath, a women's rights attorney who decides to shave her legs since judges treat female attorneys better if they wear skirts in the courtroom (2013, 893). Cath's preference to shave her legs aligns with an oppressive expectation that women's bodies should be smooth and hairless. However, Cath has thought carefully about the pros and cons of shaving, and has determined that, for her, the benefits outweigh the costs. Sperry argues that the mere fact that Cath's preference aligns with patriarchal expectations is not sufficient to show that the preference is inappropriately adaptive. Her choice to shave her legs is still autonomous. For the difference between adaptive preferences and inappropriately adaptive preferences, see Khader (2011).

> they wish to or not? Is there anyone ill who does not desire health? (*Simpl.* 8.42-5)

Epictetus' response is that *prohairesis* and deficiency are compatible and that the person who desires food in the face of hunger may do so autonomously:

> But we ought to respond to the objection from deficiency that deficiency does not *implant* desire… Rather, what is capable of desiring, when it becomes deficient in something, *manifests its desire* in order to help with the deficiency. (*Simpl.* 9.43-52; emphasis mine)

In other words, while our preferences may sometimes be informed by our circumstances, they are not wholly determined by them; preferences that are adapted may also be autonomous.[28]

However, the worry remains that endorsing adaptive preferences might promote idleness in the face of injustice. This concern is a value theoretic version of the lazy syllogism (*De Fat.* 28), which charges the Stoics with promoting inaction. This is Zimmerman's point when he argues that Stoicism cannot provide us with the tools to fight oppression (2000, 28), since we should merely adapt our preferences to whatever injustices currently befall us as a way to avoid perturbation. In fact, though, the Stoics do not hold that we should just ignore or, worse, embrace injustice. The Stoics are clear that we exist in many sets of relationships and that acting appropriately toward those with whom we are in relationships is a matter of justice (*Simpl.* 82; E30). This includes acting appropriately toward fellow citizens (*Simpl.* 83.40). For example, Simplicius takes Epictetus' example of dining at a banquet (E36)[29] to make a point about our broader obligations of justice, or making sure that each person gets what she is owed (*Simpl.* 125). Simplicius urges us, as a matter of justice, to ensure that each person gets her share. This is one example of a place where the Stoics argue that we should act as justice demands.

Another response would be to grant that Stoicism does not *guarantee* that one will be a progressive about cultural change.[30] After all, the Stoics themselves tended toward cultural conservatism. However, if someone adopts a progressive social program, Stoicism offers tools for the fight against injustice.[31] Just as critics highlight the Stoics' focus on passivity, acceptance, and indifference, a contemporary Stoic could highlight the tools they provide for sustained resistance

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[28] It is important here to emphasize that adaptive preferences *may sometimes* be autonomous. My claim is not that adaptive preferences are *always* autonomous, but rather that we simply need more information to determine whether an adaptive preference is autonomous.

[29] "So whenever you eat in company with someone, remember to consider not only the value of the things set before you for the body, but also to preserve your respect for your fellow banqueter."

[30] Thanks to Scott Aikin for this point.

[31] See, for example, Whiting and Konstantakos (2021).

(Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014, 21; Norlock 2019, 8). Eliminating oppression is a long, difficult struggle. Stoicism can help us persist.[32]

6. Stoic Autonomy and Feminism

The connection between *prohairesis* and feminism has already been drawn by those who wish to argue either that the Stoics are (proto)feminists or that Stoicism is appropriate for a feminist reimagining. The focus of these discussions has been on Stoicism's insistence that all people, regardless of gender, share a capacity for reasoned choice through *prohairesis* (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014, 19; Hill 2020, 399). But these arguments show that the equal possession of autonomy is itself a feminist idea; they do not yet demonstrate why *the structure of* the autonomy that we all equally possess is similarly fit for contemporary feminist debates. With objections set aside, I can move on to discuss positive feminist applications of Stoic insights for a compatibilist theory of autonomy.

Feminism is practically oriented; it is not merely a collection of theories, but it is also meant to have real-world implications for the recognition and combatting of sexist oppression. It shares this in common with Stoicism – it is meant to be practiced and lived, not just theorized. It is therefore a desideratum of any successful feminist theory that it makes contact with conditions on the ground. A Stoic-inspired compatibilist theory of autonomy is able to do just that, precisely because of its compatibilism. More specifically, the Stoic insight that externals are contributory to, rather than constitutive of, autonomy, has particular liberatory potential.

This contributory claim relates to Stoic invulnerability, or the idea that the virtuous person cannot be harmed – even by injustice. Consider Epictetus: "But this control over the moral purpose [*prohairesis*] is my true business, and in it neither shall a tyrant hinder me against my will, nor the multitude the single individual, nor the stronger man the weaker." (D IV.5.34) *Prohairesis* is something we can maintain even in the face of tyranny, but this does not make tyranny acceptable, nor does it mean that tyranny is good for us, nor still does it mean we should resign ourselves to the will of the tyrant. Rather, the lesson from this passage is that it is possible to be oppressed and yet remain autonomous agents. And, since *prohairesis* is our inner self or true self (Kahn 1988, 253), *we* survive oppression and injustice. This idea is empowering, especially since oppression is often dehumanizing.

Compare this to externalists, who are committed to the claim that oppression and autonomy are incompatible (cf. Stoljar 2015; Warriner 2015); for the externalist, autonomy cannot survive injustice. This results because of the constitutive role played by externals on such accounts (Khader 2020). Under oppression, on such a view, autonomy is irreparably damaged in a way that can only be repaired through large-scale social change and the eradication of unjust

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[32] I discuss this point in more detail below.

domination. A worry is that such theories eliminate autonomy for the oppressed; if a lack of oppression and domination is required for autonomy, then many of us lack autonomy in our current non-ideal world. Externalists "ask agents to act as though very real obstacles are absent," (Khader 2020, 25) while Stoicism readily acknowledges the daily obstacles we face. Stoicism, in other words, is *designed* for the non-ideal. Our autonomy can survive even in the face of injustice.

I believe the persistence of autonomy is necessary for sustained resistance. Retaining a sense of ourselves as self-directing agents is required to navigate and overcome the difficult situations we face under oppression. As Epictetus argues, *prohairesis* allows us to 'confront [our] external impression' and 'not be carried away by it;' instead, we can say, "Wait for me a little, O impression; allow me to see who you are, and what you are an impression of; allow me to put you to the test." (D II.18.24-5) If we lose a sense of ourselves as self-directing agents, we may be passively 'carried away' by impressions. A woman may succumb to socialization that tells her she is less worthy than her male counterparts, or that she should merely acquiesce to the will of those around her – in other words, "an oppressed person can become what everyone already believes her to be." (Hay 2011, 26) People who resist, on the other hand, are able to reflect on their socialization and their preferences, and then act accordingly. This ability is a key part of what we call autonomy.

Kathryn Norlock, drawing on Lisa Tessman, notes that the political resister "will be in a position of perpetual struggle, with a constant demand for the virtues of resistance." (Tessman 2005, 205; Norlock 2019, 14) "Stoicism," she notes, "does not then allow us to shrug and give up, because we are also constrained to work out what we can do, rather than pretend we are not agents at all." (Norlock 2019, 15) If domination and oppression rob us of autonomy, why should we not merely 'shrug and give up?' (ibid.) But on a Stoic-inspired compatibilist theory of autonomy, we remain agents even though we are oppressed. Although our *prohairesis* is not the perfect autonomy of the sage, we are still able to control those things that are up to us. This includes the attitudes with which we meet new challenges, the stamina we bring to persistent injustices, and the knowledge that we can wake up tomorrow and decide to try again. These tools are not to be underestimated, and they depend upon us retaining our autonomy.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I apply Stoic insights to the contemporary feminist debate about autonomy under oppression. I argue that in Epictetus' concept of *prohairesis* we find an account of personal autonomy that can be structured analogously to Stoic compatibilism about both freedom and self-identity. According to the Stoic account of freedom, we are both determined and free. External antecedent causes are initial contributors to our actions, but our internal ability to assent is what ultimately constitutes free action in a deterministic system. According to the Stoic account of identity, we are both socially constructed and individual selves. Our

social embeddedness contributes to who we are, but our individual traits ultimately constitute our personal identity. On both accounts, external factors play a contributory role, while internal features play a constitutive role.

By analogy, a Stoic-inspired conception of personal autonomy would allow external social factors to contribute to our autonomy without yet allowing them to constitute autonomy. Such a conception would be an internalist account of personal autonomy, according to which autonomy is determined by psychological states or processes within persons. I contrast this type of account with externalism about personal autonomy, a type of view which holds that social factors play a constitutive role in an agent's autonomy. According to externalism, a person must exist in specific autonomy-enabling social conditions, specifically conditions free from domination and oppression, in order to be autonomous. This sort of view leads to the conclusion that oppressed agents lack autonomy. A Stoic-inspired compatibilist view, on the other hand, allows autonomy to persist through oppression. I argue that a Stoic-inspired compatibilist view is therefore fit for feminist theorizing, since it allows for continued feminist resistance against sexist oppression.[33]

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