Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113ᵇ7-8 and free choice

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1. *EN* 1113ᵇ7-8 and its putative role as evidence for indeterminist free choice

One of the various arguments proposed in favour of the claim that Aristotle had an indeterminist notion of free choice is based on a sentence in the first paragraph of book 3 chapter 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here is a much-quoted translation of this sentence:

> (**A**) (1) For where we are free to act we are also free to refrain from acting, (2) and where we are able to say No we are also able to say Yes. (Arist. *EN* 1113ᵇ7-8, tr. Rackham 1926)

The phrases 'we are free to' and 'we are able to' both translate *eph' hêmin <estin>* (ἐφ' ἡμῖν <ἔστιν>).[1] The fact that *eph' hêmin <estin>* underlies both clauses is made explicit in a more recent rendering:

> (**B**) (1) For when acting depends on us, not acting does so too, (2) and when saying no does so, saying yes does too. (tr. Rowe 2002)

The sentence translated by (**A**) and (**B**) is a central sentence of a central passage in which Aristotle is concerned with certain things that are *eph' hêmin*. To see why this sentence is thought to support indeterminist free choice, we first need to see what indeterminist free choice is. Authors often do not provide a definition, but the following account should be sufficiently general to cover the various relevant views:

> An agent is undetermined, and thus free, in their choice (*prohairesis*), if at the moment of making their choice, what choice they make is not fully or sufficiently determined by preceding, and/or simultaneously existing, causes. At the moment of the agent's making the choice, no causal factors prevent them from not making that choice.[2]

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[1] More literal common English translations of *eph' hêmin <estin>* are 'it is up to us', 'it is in our power', 'it lies with us', 'it depends on us'. Context determines what translation is most suitable. For a detailed discussion of Aristotle's use of *eph' hêmin* see Meyer in chapter 6 of this volume.

[2] This formulation allows for the possibility that agents are sufficient causes of their actions, but are themselves unpredetermined in what choice they make. Cf. e.g. Bobzien, 1998: 133-4.

The argument for undetermined choice is introduced or implied by several Aristotle scholars. One author who recently supported his claim that for Aristotle choice is causally undetermined with the sentence that corresponds to (**A**) and (**B**) is Pierre Destrée. He argues that it is Aristotle's view that human agents, when they act, could have done otherwise "in the strong sense, implying the idea of freedom of choice" (Destrée 2011: 289-96). He regards the sentence behind (**A**) as "the most crucial […] passage" for his case (Destrée 2011: 289).[3] Here is what he says:

> The first thing to be noted is the force of the expressions 'saying Yes', and 'saying No': 'For when acting depends on us, not acting does so too, and when saying No does so, saying Yes does too'.[4] It is obvious that Aristotle is here relying on a common way of thinking about our actions: in any case where we can say Yes, we also have the very possibility of saying No. In other words, we only voluntarily do something when we have the possibility of saying 'No, I will not do it'. (Destrée 2011: 292)

And a little further down:

> And since one always has the very possibility of saying either Yes, or No, it means that acting this or that way depends on the way one will answer in the given case. In sum, from the way Aristotle relies on the connection that we commonly presume between speaking ('Yes', 'No') and action (compliance or refusal), it seems to be beyond any reasonable doubt, as S. Broadie very aptly says, that Aristotle assumes that "the agent is at least implicitly aware of the options as options" (1991: 153)" and that, one might add, the agent has the real possibility, or the choice, to go for one option instead of the other. (Destrée 2011: 292; cf. also 294, n. 11)

"Real possibility" is one of Destrée's ways of expressing causal indeterminism. He takes the 'yes' and 'no' as practical, or action-related. He regards them as short for 'yes, I will do it', 'no, I won't do it'. He also maintains that Aristotle assumes a corresponding connection between speaking and action, where 'yes' leads to compliance, 'no' to refusal.

And here is Christof Rapp, referring to the Greek underlying (**A**):

> eine Handlung um ihrer selbst willen wählen heisst gerade, dass wir diese Handlung und ihre immanenten Ziele selbst für zustimmungswürdig halten. Weil wir diese Zustimmung auch nicht geben könnten (III 7, 1113[b]7 ff.) sind wir für Handlungen, die wir um ihrer selbst willen wählen, voll verantwortlich. (Rapp 1995: 131)

Another author who has connected the sentence with free choice is Sarah Broadie. Here is a quote from her *Ethics with Aristotle* on our sentence:

> At *NE* 1113[b]7-11, Aristotle speaks of 'it depends on him' in terms of 'Yes' and 'No', and says that if the 'Yes' depends on the agent, so does the 'No' and conversely.[5] The saying of 'Yes' or 'No' is practical, in that when F depends on the agent, if F occurs it is because the agent said 'Yes' to F, or refused to say 'No' to it , or because he said 'No' or refused to say 'Yes' to not-F. However, this formulation assumes that it is indeed open to one to say 'Yes' or 'No'. (Broadie 1991: 153; cf. 154, 156, 159 and n. 31)

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[3] In fact, Destrée says this of his text T1, which includes, in addition to (**A**), *EN* 1113b8-14. But at 292 Destrée admits that the following two sentences are not strong evidence in favour of free choice, so this leaves (**A**), which is what he explicitly uses as evidence.

[4] This is Destrée's version of (**A**).

[5] There is no phrase corresponding to "and conversely" in the Greek.

As for Destrée, for Broadie an agent's saying 'Yes' and 'No' corresponds to the affirmation or refusal of *an action* and is in this sense *practical*. Human action presupposes such an act of affirmation (saying 'Yes') for action, an act of negation (saying 'No') for refraining. It is open to, or undetermined for, agents to affirm or refuse action by saying 'Yes' and 'No'. And these undetermined acts of affirmation or refusal cannot be prevented by force (cf. also Broadie 1991: 156). Broadie rightly assumes that Aristotle was – as far as his extant writings go – not aware of any debate that contrasts free choice with causal determinism. However, she believes that for Aristotle choice is causally undetermined and that this is supported by the Greek sentence underlying (**A**) (Broadie 1991: 158). She concludes that "Aristotle may […] be described as a proto-indeterminist" (Broadie 1991: 158).[6]

In the same vein, Francis Sparshott writes about the passage that contains (**A**):"This is Aristotle's essential thesis: our vices and virtues are the outcome of our choices, and *whenever we choose to say yes we could choose to say no*," (Sparshott 1994: 130, about *EN* 1113ᵇ3-21) and that for Aristotle "it is still true that choices involve saying yes or no, that *whoever says yes can say no and vice versa*. (Sparshott 1994: 134, n. 82. Italics mine)[7]

The interpretation of the sentence behind (**A**) and (**B**) as evidence for free choice is not a phenomenon that has its beginnings in the 1990s. Here is a paraphrase of our passage by George Stock from 1897. Stock rewrites the *Nichomachean Ethics* as dialogue, and here he has Aristotle speak:

> But when I speak of the voluntariness of virtue or vice, you must understand me to mean that the virtuous or vicious man is a free agent, that there is no force acting upon him except what comes from his own nature, except, in fact, himself. If he knows the right and the wrong, *it is as open to him to choose the one as the other*. Where he can do, he can refrain from doing, *and where he can say 'no', he can say 'yes'*. (Stock 1897: 179. Italics mine)[8]

Let this suffice as evidence that (**A**) and similar translations of *EN* 1113ᵇ7-8 have been used by Aristotle scholars to support their thesis that Aristotle propounded free choice or indeterminist choice. Now to get from (**A**) to indeterminist free choice one needs to supplement two interpretative steps.

The first interpretative step is that the Yes and No are taken as practical: 'saying no' and 'saying yes' are understood as shorthand for 'saying yes *to doing* something' and 'saying no *to doing* something', where the saying either denotes something like an internal soliloquy that accompanies the act of choosing; or where 'saying yes' or 'saying no' is Aristotle's *metaphorical* way of expressing 'choosing

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[6] Broadie also interprets *EE* 1222b41 ff. in terms of agents saying 'yes' or 'no', and concludes that for Aristotle the agent's 'yes' or 'no' would be contingent (ibid. 159). Cf. also Broadie's discussion of the no and the yes in her introduction to Broadie/Rowe 2002: 40.

[7] The "vice versa" is Sparshott's addition. There is no corresponding phrase in the Greek.

[8] Cf. also vol.1 of Hammerton 1936, from the summary of Aristotle's *EN* V 3: "Choice is not the same thing as a voluntary act; nor is it desire, or emotion, or exactly 'wish', since we may wish for, but cannot make choice of, the unattainable. Nor is it deliberation – rather, it is the act of decision following deliberation. If man has the power to say yes, he has equally the power to say no, and is master of his own action." This clearly connects the saying Yes and saying No with choice *qua* an act of decision.

not to act' and 'choosing to act'. This interpretation of 'yes' and 'no' as practical also implies that in (**A**)(2) two possible *choices or choosings* are at issue: (i) to choose not to act and (ii) to choose to act. Yet, the Greek of (**A**)(1) only has 'to act'; 'not to act'. So the expected parallel would be 'to choose (to act)'; 'not to choose (to act)'; rather than 'to choose to act'; 'to choose not to act'. Quite generally, there is no textual evidence that Aristotle ever discusses an agent's alternative options (i) to choose to do *x* and (ii) to choose not to do *x* – as opposed to (i) to choose to do *x* and (ii) not to choose to do *x*. The interpretation of 'yes' and 'no' as practical is by no means the only option. For example, as Christopher Taylor notes, Aristotle could instead be talking about it being up to us (*eph' hêmin*) what *to say*: "Saying Yes and No may be given as another example of opposites which are equally up to us, just as acting and not acting are." (Taylor 2006: 164)[9]

The second interpretative step is from choice to indeterminist choice: One needs to interpret Aristotle's – presumed – statement that it is up to us to choose to do or not to do something as implying that the choice is causally undetermined. Thus it must not be fully determined by the agent's character and deliberation as jointly sufficient causes. But as Stephen Everson and Michael Pakaluk have independently noted, the 'saying yes' and 'saying no' in their versions of (**A**), even if interpreted as practical (as they both do), does not entail that the choice at issue is causally undetermined.[10] And since (**A**) is used by several of the above-quoted scholars *as support for* their thesis that for Aristotle choice is causally undetermined, this second interpretative step to indeterminist choice cannot simply be assumed. It needs to be argued for.

2. How to translate the sentence *EN* 1113[b]7-8 from the Greek

Having made a big spiel about these three points regarding (**A**), I now abandon them together with (**A**) until further notice. Instead, I turn to the Greek lines of which (**A**) is purported to be a translation. I start by looking at these lines, in isolation from their linguistic context. (**C**) provides the Greek:

(**C**)(1) ἐν οἷς γὰρ ἐφ' ἡμῖν τὸ πράττειν, καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν, (2) καὶ ἐν οἷς τὸ μή, καὶ τὸ ναί·

There are no variants for our sentence in the *apparatus criticus*. (**D**) and (**E**) are two word-for-word literal (and thus somewhat unsightly) translations:

(**D**)(1) For, where to act is up to us, also to not act <is up to us>, (2) and where to not <is up to us>, also to yes <is up to us>.[11]

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[9] Then again, Aristotle may think of saying as a kind of action (see e.g. Arist. *EE* 1225a27-33). Either way, saying and believing would come apart. For Aristotle suggests both in *De Anima* (427b20) and in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1226a1-3) that belief (*doxa*) is not up to us (*eph' hêmin*). It would of course be a perfectly reasonable view that the two come apart in this way.

[10] See Pakaluk 2005: 144-5, Everson 1990: 90. Broadie is aware of this point, too; cf. Broadie 1991: 156.

[11] Here and below I stick to the awkward infinitive-splitting 'to not act' instead of 'not to act' in order to provide maximal structural agreement with the Greek.

(**E**)(1) For, where (the) acting is up to us to act, also (the) not acting is up to us, (2) and where (the) not <is up to us>, also (the) yes <is up to us>.

The insertions in angled brackets in (**D**) and (**E**) seem not to be questioned by anyone.[12] So I will not argue for them. (**D**) and (**E**) differ as follows. (**D**) keeps the syntactical role of the Greek *to* (τὸ) the same in (1) and (2), i.e. as introducing an infinitival clause; in (2) these clauses would be abbreviated. (**E**) replicates the grammatical category of the Greek word *to* (as definite article) by adding the English 'the' in brackets. It does not imply a parallelism of infinitival clauses between (1) and (2). I do not see how one can retain both points in one translation, which is why I have opted for two.

Now to the points that matter: (i) There is no word for 'saying', or for anything similar, in the Greek text. In any rendering that has a verb of saying, meaning, intending, etc., this verb is an *addition* by the translator. And in adding such a verb, translators imply that they read or interpret the passage in a particular way. This way is likely to be along the lines presented in the first section. (As we have seen, such a reading implies neither that Aristotle maintains causal indeterminism nor that he expresses that *choices* are up to us, as opposed to actions or utterances). (ii) There is no word for 'no' in the Greek text. The word that appears to have been translated by 'no' does not mean 'no', and in the present use it means 'not'.

For something like (**A**) to be justified as a translation of (**C**), we hence should want at least two of the following three points satisfied: **2.1.** We would want some textual parallels, in which the Greek for 'to not […] to yes' has the meaning of 'to say "no" […] to say "yes" ', with a verb of saying either explicitly given or indubitably understood; these passages should preferably be by Aristotle, or roughly from Aristotle's time (plus/minus 500 years, say). **2.2.** We would want an explanation as to how exactly to read (**C**) to mean something like (**A**), i.e. involving a verb of saying and 'yes' and 'no'. **2.3.** We would want there to be no reasonable alternative interpretation that avoids inserting a verb of saying and rendering *mê* (μή) by 'no'. We take these three points in turn.

2.1. Parallel passages considered

Our *EN* passage seems unique among ancient Greek texts in having *to mê* (τὸ μή) and *to nai* (τὸ ναί) directly opposed to each other, functioning as part of an abbreviation for something (if unclear so far for what). *A fortiori*, there seem to be no parallels in which the Greek for 'to not […] to yes' has the meaning of 'to say "no" […] to say "yes" ', with a verb of saying either explicitly given or indubitably understood. Or in any event nobody has put one forward yet. The closest passages in Aristotle's oeuvre are presumably the following six:

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[12] A more literal translation of *en hois* (ἐν οἷς) would be 'in those <cases/circumstances/situations> in which'. As this point is irrelevant to my purpose, I have opted for the shorter 'where'. In principle, *en ois* could also refer to people as third person masculine plural. However, it is unclear what the relevance of acting 'among people' rather than 'in cases/circumstances/situations' could be.

- A dialectical proposition must be such that one can answer it with yes or no. (*Top.*158ᵃ15-17)
- But if the question is clear and simple, he should answer either yes or no. (*Top.*160ᵃ33-4)
- The person questioned should answer either yes or no. (*Soph.Elen.*175ᵇ9-10)
- The answerer must say either yes or no. (*Soph.Elen.*175ᵇ13-14)
- It is possible […] for it to be true to say either yes or no. (*Soph.Elen.*176ᵃ10-11)
- […] he should not say (the) yes or no in the case of homonyms. (*Soph.Elen.*176ᵃ15-16)[13]

What makes these passages at least worth contemplating is that they each have a Greek verb of saying ('to say' and 'to answer') combined with the standard Greek words for 'yes' and 'no'. However, the passages are not close enough to provide support for the reading of our Greek sentence (**C**) as (**A**). First, they are all in the context of Aristotle's *dialectic*. Saying or answering 'yes' or 'no' was part of the dialectical game or method, as is well established (Whittaker 1996: 101). There are no comparable passages in Aristotle in contexts of human agency where the agent says 'yes' or 'no' as a way of making a choice (deciding, agreeing, telling themselves) to do or not to do something.

The passages from Aristotle's dialectic fail as parallels for two further reasons. None of them has a definite article (*to*) in front of the 'yes' *and* the 'no', as (**C**) has; and all have *ou* (οὔ), the Greek word used equally for 'not' and for 'no', not *mê*. But (**C**) has *mê*. And *mê* is a word used adverbially for 'not' in certain grammatical contexts – but not for 'no'.[14] So the six passages are not parallel passages. Nor are there any other parallels in the *Corpus Aristotelicum* (or in any of the ancient Greek texts in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*) which have *to mê* and *to nai* opposed in a sentence or sequence of sentences. By contrast, there are quite a few passages that oppose *to nai* and *to ou*.

Christopher Taylor, one of the very few philosophers who attempt to explain the – presumed – 'saying' in (**A**), suggests a possible parallel in Aristotle's *Ethics*. He writes:

> It is […] possible that Aristotle is thinking of acting as itself a way of giving an affirmative answer to the question 'Should I *Φ*?' and not acting as a way of giving a negative answer to that question. Cf. <*EN*> VI.2, 1139ᵃ21-2, 'what assertion and denial are in thought, pursuit and avoidance are in desire', which seems to mean that pursuing some end is itself a way of asserting that the thing is to be pursued (or that it is good)

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[13] ἔστι γὰρ πρότασις διαλεκτικὴ πρὸς ἣν ἔστιν ἀποκρίνασθαι ναί ἢ οὔ (*Top.*158a15-17). ἐὰν δὲ καὶ σαφὲς ᾖ καὶ ἁπλοῦν τὸ ἐρωτώμενον, ἢ ναί ἢ οὔ ἀποκριτέον (*Top.*160a 33-4). τὸ ἢ ναί ἢ οὔ ἀποκρίνεσθαι τὸν ἐρωτώμενον (*Soph.Elen.*175b9-10). ἢ ναί ἢ οὔ ἀνάγκη λέγειν τὸν ἀποκρινόμενον (*Soph.Elen.*175b13-14). ἐγχωρεῖ […] ἢ ναί ἢ οὔ ἀληθὲς εἶναι λέγειν. (*Soph.Elen.*176a10-11). οὐδ' ἐπὶ τῶν ὁμωνύμων τὸ ναί ἢ οὔ λεκτέον (*Soph.Elen.*176a15-16 – several manuscripts do not have the τὸ; some have ἢ before τὸ).

[14] The grammatical contexts in which μή is used adverbially for 'not' are typically one of the following: with the imperative; with the subjunctive; with the optative; with the infinitive; and with participles when they have a conditional or general force; and in certain indirect questions.

and avoiding something a way of denying that it is to be pursued (or that it is good). (Taylor 2006: 164)

This attempt is however unsuccessful. The passage Taylor quotes does not "seem to mean" what he suggests. If *a* and *b* are in thought what *c* and *d* are in desire, it is neither implied nor indicated that *c*-ing and *d*-ing are *ways of a-ing and b-ing*. For illustration: if I say that truth is in thought what the good is in desire, it does not follow that the good is a kind of truth. Rather, the case suggests that there is something that *a* and *c*, and *b* and *d*, respectively, share.

Putting this point aside, the Aristotle passage also does not support the view that *choice* is at issue in (**A**) and (**C**). Rather, if we take Taylor at his word, what Aristotle seems to intend to say is:

> (**F**)(1) For, where to act is up to us, also to not act <is up to us>, (2) and where to not *act* <is up to us>, also to *act* <is up to us>.

In (**F**)(2) action, not choice, is the subject under discussion. We will see below that to obtain (**F**) no verb of saying needs to be invoked. The problematic translation (**A**) would thus be unnecessary.

2.2. 'Not' and 'Yes' as 'Don't' and 'Do'

Can one provide a plausible justification for the insertion of a verb of saying and the translation of *mê* as no? None of the scholars proposing (**A**) seem to have provided one. Here is one suggestion as to what they could have provided.

First, there is the fact that the ancients had no quotation marks, and that the definite article *to* was frequently used in a way similar to quotation marks in English, to indicate that an expression or sentence is mentioned, not used. This fact could be exploited to justify the translation 'the "not"' and 'the "yes"'. Second, perhaps Aristotle's use of *mê* in (**C**) is not meant to be equivalent to "*ou*", meaning "no", as used in answers to questions. Rather, *mê* may be employed by Aristotle the way it is used in independent clauses that express a negative command, as in *mê praxês,* 'don't act!': a person deliberates whether to do something; it is up to them to choose not to do it; in this case, their choosing involves their telling themselves 'don't act!'.

In support of this reading, reference could be made to Aristotle's sporadic allusions to the use of syllogisms in practical reasoning in the *Ethics*. An example would be *EN* 1147[a]34, of a universal premise, 'it says to avoid this'. Another passage one might adduce is *EN* 1143[a]8-9, 'For practical wisdom gives commands. For what one must do or not <do> is its end.' Moreover, it could be adduced that Plato takes thinking to be internal speech; and that a century after Aristotle, the Stoic Chrysippus had a theory that, in rational beings, the impulse to act takes the form of the agent's reason proscribing or commanding the agent to act (Plutarch *Stoic.Rep.*1037F). One could imagine this to take the following form: Zoe to herself 'Don't eat the baklava!'or Zoe to herself '(Do) eat the baklava!'. Thus we would get a reading of the kind:

(**G**)(1) ἐν οἷς γὰρ ἐφ' ἡμῖν τὸ πράττειν, καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν, (2) καὶ ἐν οἷς τὸ μὴ <πράξῃς> καὶ τὸ <πρᾶξον>,

in translation:

> (**H**)(1) For, where to act is up to us, also to not act <is up to us>, (2) and where the
> 'don't <act!' is up to us>, also the 'do <act!' is up to us>.

This seems to go some way toward explaining the *to mê* (as opposed to *to ou*) in conjunction with an implicit verb of saying.[15] Still, such imperative understanding of *to mê* poses its own difficulties.

- The understanding of the definite article τὸ in lieu of quotation marks obliterates the – expected – parallel between the two uses of τὸ in (1) and the two uses in (2).
- The *mê* is no longer on a par with the '*nai*'. In particular, grammatically *nai* is not part of positive commands, and cannot be short for 'do act!'.
- Moreover, with this reading one would still expect the sequence positive–negative in both (1) and (2), now taking the form 'do!' – 'don't!' in (2). Instead we have 'don't!' –'do!'.
- And last but not least, we would need some supporting evidence in Aristotle's text for the assumption that *to mê* in the middle of (**C**) can be short for our telling ourselves 'don't act!'. Some hints at practical reasoning in other books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are not sufficient;[16] nor are references to Plato's internal speech and Stoic impulses. We would need evidence that in Aristotle *to mê* can be a reference to a self-addressed imperative, evidence which I believe we do not have.

So (**G**) is not a viable option. (Nor, of course, would (**A**) be a translation of (**C**) *understood as (**G**)*.)

Thus, as far as I can see, there is no legitimate way of getting a translation like (**A**) from (**C**). One would need even better reasons to subsequently interpret (**A**), or similar, as meaning that it is up to an agent to *choose* not to act or to *choose* to act. The following two reasons would *not* be good reasons for such an interpretation. (i) Aristotle had a theory of free choice which involved some kind of internal monologue of choosing. This reason is not good, since (**C**) is used as part of the main evidence for just this claim. The reasoning would be circular. (ii): *We* would *naturally* or *intuitively* think that Aristotle wants to say what the translation provides (cf. e.g. Destrée 2011: 288). This reason is not good, since we cannot infer from what we – or some of us – naturally or intuitively think today that the ancients thought this, too. If this were a methodologically sound step, it would become

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[15] I have not found this reading of (**C**) explicitly defended anywhere, but would be surprised if I was the first to consider this option. Perhaps Taylor 2006: 164 (quoted above) had something similar in mind.

[16] Also, the above-quoted passage *EN* 1143[a]8-9 is about practical wisdom (*phronesis*). But in Aristotle's view, not everyone has practical wisdom; whereas (C), i.e. *EN* 1113b7-8, is about all adult human beings. So the relevance of *EN* 1143[a]8-9 is doubtful.

impossible to show the *absence* in antiquity of certain thoughts that are common in present thinking.

2.3. Alternative ways to translate and understand the sentence as an abbreviation

No doubt, (**C**) does involve some abbreviation, ellipsis, contraction, *and* there is no straightforward easy reading. Still disregarding its textual context, I next ask: how else could one complete the elliptical clause (**C**)(2)? First I look at *to mê*; then at *to nai*.

There is a natural and simple way of supplementing *to mê*. This is by supplementing the infinitive 'to act' (*prattein*) and reading *to mê* as short for 'to not act is up to us' (*to mê prattein eph' hêmin*).

> (**I**)(1) For, where to act is up to us, also to not act <is up to us>, (2) and where to not <act is up to us>, also […].

There are quite a few examples in Aristotle in which *mê* is short for *mê prattein* (or a similar verb of doing or happening); several are in the context of what is *eph' hêmin*. In all cases, just beforehand in the sentence we find πράττειν (or that other verb of doing or happening).[17] (**I**)(2) unquestionably provides the most natural way of supplementing *to mê* in the context of the whole sentence (**C**). So it is a good starting point. What are we then to do with *to nai*? *to nai* does not square straightforwardly with *to mê*, no matter what. *Any* interpreter is saddled with this problem. Still, if (**I**) provides the correct supplementation after *to mê*, it is clear what *to nai* is intended to convey: the alternative 'to act'. So, assuming (**I**) to be correct, we get:

> (**J**)(1) For, where to act is up to us, also to not act <is up to us>, (2) and where to not <act is up to us>, also to <act is up to us>.

In other words, 'to yes' is short for 'to act is up to us' (*to prattein eph' hêmin*), *as contrasted with* 'to not act is up to us'; i.e. with emphasis on 'act'. (**J**) is indeed the way countless translators and scholars across the ages have read (**C**). Sometimes, (**C**)(2) is simply rendered by 'and *vice versa*'. This may be to evade the awkwardness of the *to nai*; or to reflect the extreme brevity of (**C**)(2). (Henceforward, I call all translations of type (**J**) *vice-versa* translations.)[18]

Can *to nai* be read as an abbreviation of 'to act <is up to us>' – as contrasted with to not act? Grammatically, this amounts to having to show that the Greek word for 'yes' in a phrase 'to yes' can be an abbreviation for an *emphatic* 'to *Φ*', contrasted with 'to not *Φ*' (where *Φ* stands for a verb of action).

Can this be shown? Not by ancient Greek parallels. But perhaps a case can be made by comparison with other languages, together with what we know about the

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[17] E.g. *EN* 1110ª17-8; *EN* 1143ª8-9; *EE* 1223ª5-8; cf. also *Met.* 1042ᵇ7-8; *Rhet.* 1359ª36 and *Athen.Const.* 43 section 5.

[18] Vice-versa translations can be found e.g. in Gauthier/Jolif 1970 vol. I: 68 ("et réciproquement"), Wardman 1963: 359; Apostle/Gerson 1983: 459; and also in some scholarly books and articles, e.g. Hardie 1980: 178.

use of *nai*. The English 'yes' can – informally – stand in for what is expressed by the emphatic 'doch' in German. Take this dialogue: 'this is green' – '(no,) it isn't' – '(yes,) it is' – 'no' – 'yes'; or its variation: 'this is green' – '(no,) it isn't' – '(yes,) it is' – 'is not' – 'is too' (or 'is so'). Similarly, the Latin *etiam* does not only mean 'yes', but also 'also', 'again'. I wonder whether something similar may not hold of the ancient Greek *nai*.

Take the following German translation of (**C**) in the spirit of the *vice versa* translations. (Double angled brackets are used to indicate what would be understood, but need not be supplemented in the translation):

(**K**)(1) Denn wenn es bei uns liegt zu handeln, <liegt es> auch <bei uns> nicht zu handeln, (2) und wenn <<es bei uns liegt>> nicht <<zu handeln>>, dann auch doch <<zu handeln>>

In English, a crude (and not-quite-right) equivalent would be:

(**L**)(1) For, where acting is up to us, also not acting <is up to us>, (2) and where not <<acting>>, also <<acting>> too.

The German at least seems grammatically just fine. Until proven otherwise, I assume that the analogue in Greek for (**K**) (with *nai* for the German 'doch') is fine, too.[19] And, accordingly, the English *vice-versa* translation (**J**). In that case, we have a reading of (**C**) which is superior to all others in that it makes full sense of the text as it stands.[20]

Even if this reading were not fully grammatical, (**J**) would still be vastly preferable to (**A**). For none of the alternatives, including (**A**), make (**C**) fully grammatical. In addition, unlike (**A**), (**J**) (i) does not require the supplementation of a verb of saying; (ii) reads *mê* correctly as 'not'; and (iii) requires no complex not-quite-fitting interpretation.[21]

Based on reading (**J**), we can also explain what Aristotle's point of stating (**C**) is. It is to make explicit an important element of the logical structure of the notion of something's being up to someone (*epi* (ἐπὶ) + dative), an element which Aristo-

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[19] We find such use of *nai* for example several times in the work of the 9th century grammarian Georgius Choeroboscus, where he is talking about the conjugation of verbs (his views have survived in notes taken by his pupils): ἐπειδὴ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ α χαρακτηριστικὸν τῶν τρίτων προσώπων τῶν ἑνικῶν· τὸ δὲ ε ναί, οἷον ἔτυπτε (30) ἔλεγε· (Georgius Choeroboscus, *Prolegomena et scholia in Theodosii Alexandrini canones isagogicos de flexione verborum* 86.29-31; cf. *ibid*. 85.17-18; 86.34-5; 336.25-6) Here the ναί is short for ἔστι χαρακτηριστικὸν τῶν τρίτων προσώπων τῶν ἑνικῶν, which is contrasted with the previous clause, which negates the same predicate phrase; just as the ναί in (C) does in the *vice-versa* reading (J). Further parallel passages are Eustratius of Nicaea, *Orationes* (ed. Demetrakopoulos), Oration 3, 86.23-6 and Manuel II Palaeologus, *Dialogi cum mahometano* (ed. Migne), Dialogue 17, 221.29-31.

[20] The reading (J)(K)(L) differs from the don't/do reading (G)(H). In (J)(K)(L) the ναί stands in as an abbreviation for a phrase that occurred in the exact same form earlier in the same sentence (i.e. πράττειν). In the case of the don't/do reading (G)(H) this is not so.

[21] Moreover, (iv), (J) makes perfect sense of the order affirmative/negative – negative/affirmative in the sequence of the two conditionals (C)(1) and (C)(2). If instead (C)(2) also had the order affirmative/negative, this would simply be a repeat of (C)(1). It is thus ruled out. The interpretations behind (A) do not explain the inverted order. Proponents of (A) could try and plead the rhetorical device of chiasmus, though it would be a rather unusual case.

tle indicates in at least ten other places: This is its two-sidedness.[22] Aristotle never provides a philosophical account of what it is for something to be *eph' hêmin* (as he does of the voluntary, deliberation, choice, virtue, etc.). He uses *eph' hêmin* and other *epi* + dative personal pronoun constructions as expressions of ordinary language which are generally understood by speakers of the language. In reading (**J**), sentence (**C**) makes explicit something people who speak the language assume: that doing something is up to us *if and only if* not doing it is up to us, too. To express this biconditional, both (**C**)(1) and (**C**)(2) are required.

Why does Aristotle state this biconditional at the beginning of *EN* III 5, though? The reason is this: he needs to make explicit the logical structure of the notion of *eph' hêmin* at this point, since he exploits it as part of the argument *EN* 1113[b]6-14.[23] That is, the biconditional is needed for the context of (**C**).

3. The linguistic context of (C) taken into account

Hence, next I consider how readings (**A**) and (**J**) of the Greek sentence (**C**) fare, when one takes the immediate linguistic context into account.[24] First note the following three points: (i) The sentence before (**C**) is

(**M**)   Now, virtue is up to us, too, and equally also vice.[25] (*EN* 1113b6-7)

(ii) The argument ends with the conclusion (marked by the particle ἄρα)

(**N**)   so it will be up to us to be virtuous people and to be vicious people.[26] (*EN* 1113b13-14)

This final clause of the argument states almost the same thing as (**M**). (iii) Our sentence (**C**) immediately follows (**M**) and begins with 'for' (*gar*). It thus provides a reason for (**M**).

Combining (i) to (iii) with what we know about Aristotle's dialectic, we get the following set-up of an argument from (**M**) to (**N**), or from 1113b6 to b14: Aristotle provides the thesis he intends to prove in (**M**) at the beginning of his argument. This is standard in Aristotelian dialectic. He then argues for (**M**) up until and including the antecedent of the sentence 1113b11-14. The consequent of the sentence is (**N**). It provides the conclusion of his argument. Thus from (**C**) to (**N**) (i.e. from 1113b7-8 to b13-14) Aristotle provides an argument for the thesis that (not

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[22] *EE* 1123[a]6, 7-8, 1223[a]5-6, 1225[a]9-10, 1225[b]35-6, 1226[a]27-8, 1226[b]30-1; *EN* III 1, 1110[a]17-8; *EN* III 5, 1115[a]2-3, 1125[a]26; cf. Bobzien 1998: 143-5, also 139-40.

[23] At *EN* 1113[b]14, Aristotle moves on to consider a possible objection.

[24] Here I ignore the debate whether (i) the whole paragraph 1113b6-14 is meant to show that vice is up to us, with Aristotle taking it to have been shown already that virtue is up to us (the asymmetry reading); or whether (ii) the whole paragraph is meant to show that both virtue and vice (acting virtuously and acting viciously) are up to us. For the question whether *EN* 1113[b]7-8 supports undetermined choice in Aristotle, this debate is only of minor importance. (Cf. also the next footnote.)

[25] ἐφ' ἡμῖν δὴ καὶ ἡ ἀρετή, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ κακία. In all MSS that are considered in the Oxford edition the sentence does not have the particle δή ('hence', 'now'), but the particle δέ. Modern editions of the *EN* tend to print δὴ. The emendation may be unnecessary, since Aristotle uses the combination of the particle combination δέ καὶ […] δέ […] elsewhere in the *EN* in one sentence – cf. e.g *EN* 1103[a]8-10.

[26] ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἄρα τὸ ἐπιεικέσι καὶ φαύλοις εἶναι.

just actions but also) virtue and vice are up to us. This is so regardless of what exactly the thesis (**M**) and the conclusion (**N**) amount too. (**C**) is a premise in this argument.

With the sentence following (**C**), Aristotle argues towards an intermediate conclusion: it starts with *hôst'* (ὥστ'), which in grammatical contexts such as ours translates most naturally as 'hence':

> (**O**) Hence, (1) if to act, being noble, is up to us, also to not act, being shameful, will be up to us, and (2) if to not act, being noble, is up to us, also to act, being shameful, <will be> up to us. (*EN* 1113[b]8-11)

(**C**) and (**O**) are strikingly parallel. This can be made explicit by using columns. I provide first the Greek, then the translation. The first column presents *EN* 1113[b]7-8, divided into four phrases, one per line; the second does the same with *EN* 1113[b]8-11. Bold indicates complete textual agreement between the two sentences. Underlining indicates phrases that are explicit in (**O**) and for which, regarding (**C**), it is not debated that they are understood at the parallel places.

Column I (*EN* 1113[b]7-8)   Column II (*EN* 1113[b]8-11)

For, where it is **up to us to act**	Hence if **to act**, being noble, is **up to us**
also to not act < is up to us >	**also to not act**, being shameful, is up to us,
and where **to not** < is up to us >	**and** if **to not** act, being noble, is up to us
also to yes < is up to us >	**also to** act, being shameful, is up to us

ἐν οἷς γὰρ ἐφ' ἡμῖν τὸ πράττειν	ὥστ' εἰ τὸ πράττειν καλὸν ὂν ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἐστί,
καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν < ἐφ' ἡμῖν >	καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἔσται αἰσχρὸν ὄν,
καὶ ἐν οἷς τὸ μή < ἐφ' ἡμῖν >	καὶ εἰ τὸ μὴ πράττειν καλὸν ὂν ἐφ' ἡμῖν,
καὶ τὸ ναί < ἐφ' ἡμῖν >	καὶ τὸ πράττειν αἰσχρὸν ὂν ἐφ' ἡμῖν.

This striking parallel provides a *strong* reason for reading (**C**)(2) as an abbreviation along the lines which I – in agreement with numerous other scholars – have suggested; that is, as short for:

> (**C**)(2) καὶ ἐν οἷς τὸ μὴ <πράττειν ἐφ'ἡμῖν ἐστί> καὶ τὸ <πράττειν ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἐστί>

> (**J**)(2) and where to not <act is up to us>, also to <act is up to us>.

This reading provides four perfectly matching cases, in the right order. The only substantive difference is that in (**M**) each time an evaluative attribute is added.[27] The apparent lack of parallelism in (**C**), from positive/negative in (1) to negative/positive in (2) finds a full explanation in the move from noble to shameful in the two conditionals of (**J**). Aristotle's intent is to cover all four possibilities and their interrelations (noble action is paired with shameful inaction; noble inaction with shameful action), and for each interrelation he starts with the noble case.

The parallel between (**C**) and (**O**) also provides *strong* reasons for not adding a verb of saying as readings of type (**A**) do. First, with (**A**), the inferential 'hence' (*hôst'*) is very hard to explain. Second, no mention is made of saying yes or no, or the like, ever again in the argument at issue. But if (**A**) *were* correct, we would

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[27] For the *purpose* of this addition at this point in book 5 of the *EN* see Bobzien (forthcoming).

expect some such mention, given the parallel structure of (**O**) and (**C**). We can be more precise: if (**A**) were correct we would expect the second half of (**O**) to be something like (**P**)(2):

> (**P**)(2) and if saying yes, being noble, is up to us, also saying no, being shameful, is up to us.

But we do not have this. Rather, if (**A**) were correct, (**O**)(2) would just hang in the air, sotospeak. There is nothing in the previous sentence for it to latch onto. Even without the linguistic context taken into account, (**A**) turned out to be a doubtful translation of (**C**). Now, with the context considered in addition, it becomes clear that translations like (**A**) misrepresent the Aristotelian text.[28]

4. Concluding remarks

Where does all this leave us regarding the question of free choice in Aristotle? We have seen that there is a flourishing tradition among Aristotle scholars of reading sentence (**C**)(2) as an abbreviation for 'if saying No is up to us, saying Yes is also up to us' (i.e. as (**A**)(2)); and thus of reading it as containing an implicit verb of saying, and of translating the *mê* in (**C**)(2) by 'no';[29] further of understanding the sentence, thus translated, as being about *practical* assent or denial; and as expressing free choice or causally undetermined choice.

I noted that, even if the reading of (**C**) as (**A**) were correct, there would be no compelling reasons to understand the sentence as being about *practical* assent and denial, or to understand it as expressing free choice, and *a fortiori* not as expressing causally undetermined choice; moreover, that the proponents of (**A**) face the difficulty of explaining the lack of parallelism in (**A**)(1) and (**A**)(2). Next I argued that (**A**) is in fact not an acceptable translation of (**C**). To this end, I showed that there are no parallels in Aristotle, or in antiquity generally, that would support readings like (**A**); I noted moreover, that the Greek seems not to lend itself to such a translation; and finally, that there is a simple, most reasonable, alternative translation (i.e. the *vice-versa* reading (**J**)), that is not fraught with any of the difficulties (**A**) faces, and for which there are partial parallels in Aristotle and other Greek texts. Finally, I demonstrated that the linguistic context of (**C**) strongly supports reading (**J**), and by contrast does not tally with (**A**).

A question that remains to be addressed is whether *vice-versa* readings like (**J**) in any way support the proposition that Aristotle, in *EN* III 5, advocates free or indeterminist choice. Here (**J**) is again:

> (**J**)(1) For, where to act is up to us, also to not act <is up to us>, (2) and where to not <act is up to us>, also to <act is up to us>.

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[28] For a comprehensive study of the reception of (**C**) from antiquity to the present day and a historical explanation of the frequency of translations of type (**A**) cf. Bobzien 2013.

[29] In addition to the authors and passages mentioned in Section 1 above (Rackham 1926, Broadie 1991, Sparshott 1994, Destrée 2011, Rapp 1995, Stock 1897, Taylor 2006, Everson 1990, Pakaluk 2005), saying-yes-saying-no renderings are also found in the translations of Stahr 1863: 86, Williams 1869: 64, Peters 1881, Oswald 1962: 65, Crisp 2000: 45, Rowe 2002: 130, Taylor 2006: 24.

First and without doubt, (**J**)(1) and (**J**)(2) are both about acting and refraining from acting. Choice is neither expressly mentioned nor in any way implied as topic of the sentence. Second, the sentence states nothing that had not been stated earlier in *EN* III 1-4. Its purpose in *EN* III 5 is to provide a premise for an argument that concludes that being virtuous and being vicious are both up to us. Third, the fact that Aristotle states that both acting and refraining from acting are up to us does not imply that we are causally undetermined with regard to whether we act. The phrase *eph' hêmin* may simply be used to indicate that there is an absence of external force (in the form of something external either making us move or preventing us from moving); and that, given that this condition is satisfied, it depends on us, in the sense of on who we are at the point of deliberating and choosing, whether we act or refrain from acting in the particular circumstances of action at issue.[30]

From all this it follows that (**C**), i.e. *EN* 1113^b7-8, is not a text that supports an interpretation of Aristotle as a proponent of indeterminist free choice or free will. That is, the sentence that is sometimes adduced as the main piece of evidence for the claim that Aristotle was an indeterminist with respect to choosing (*prohairesis*) and acting (*praxeis, prattein*), is no evidence for this claim at all.[31]

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[30] Cf. e.g. Everson 1990: 90, Bobzien 1998: 143-4.

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