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THINKING ABOUT ENDS AND MEANS

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I do not have an automobile and I want one. The automobile I want costs more money than I have available. It is necessary for me to get the money needed to buy the car. There appear to be a number of ways in which I can get what is needed without violating the law. For example, I can save it, by not spending what money I have on something else; or I can try to earn additional money; or I can borrow it.

In this example—there might have been countless others of the same sort—getting the automobile is the end in view. Getting the money needed to buy the car is a means to that end; it is also itself an end to which there are, as we have seen, a number of means.

How do I choose among them? One may be easier than the others; going one way may get me my goal more quickly than going the other ways. Of the several means, each serving to attain the end in

view, one would normally choose the means that seems better by virtue of being easier, quicker, more likely to succeed, and so on.

When we act this way, we act purposefully. To say that we have a purpose in what we do is to say that we are acting for some goal that we have in mind.

Sometimes we act aimlessly—like a boat just drifting on the current with no one at the wheel to steer it. When we act in that way, we are also acting thoughtlessly. We have nothing in mind that guides our acting in one direction or another. To act aimlessly requires no thinking on our part.

For the most part, however, we act purposefully, and then we cannot act without thinking first. We have to think about the goal we are aiming at—the end we are trying to achieve. We have to think about the various means that we can use to achieve it. We have to think about which is the better of alternative means and why one is better than another. And if the particular means that we choose to employ is a means we cannot use without doing something else first in order to lay our hands on it, then it is itself an end, and we must think about the means to achieving it.

Thinking of the sort I have just described is practical thinking. It is thinking about ends and means—thinking about the goal you wish to reach and thinking about what must be done to get there. It is the kind of thinking that is necessary for purposeful action.

Productive thinking, as we have seen, is thinking about things to be made. Practical thinking, in contrast, is thinking about what is to be done. To think well for the sake of making something, you have to have what we called productive ideas and know-how. To think well for the sake of getting somewhere by what you do, you have to have an idea of a goal to be reached and ideas about ways of reaching it. And you also have to think about the reasons why one way of pursuing your goal is better than another.

Productive thinking, or thinking in order to produce something, does not actually produce it. Such thinking may lead to actual production, but production does not actually begin until the producer goes to work and acts on the raw materials to transform them in a way that will materialize the productive idea he had in mind.

So, too, practical thinking, or thinking in order to act purposefully or to do what is necessary to achieve some end or goal, falls short of actual doing. Doing begins when practical thinking is put into

practice. Productive thinking may continue while production is actually going on. Practical thinking may continue during the course of purposeful action. But until making and doing actually begin, productive thinking and practical thinking bear no fruit.

Aristotle tells us that, except for the exceptional instances of aimless behavior, human beings always act with some end in view. The thinking they do in order to act purposefully begins with thinking about the goal to be achieved, but when they begin to do anything to achieve that goal, they have to start with the means for achieving it. The end comes first in the thinking that individuals do in order to act purposefully, but the means come first in what they do to accomplish their purposes.

In saying that human beings always—or usually—act with some end in view, Aristotle also says that they act for some good they wish to obtain and possess. He identifies an end being aimed at with a good that is desired.

In his view, it makes no sense at all to say that we are acting for an end that we regard as bad for us. That amounts to saying that what we are aiming at is something we do not desire. It is plain common sense that what we regard as bad for us is something we desire to avoid, not something we desire to possess.

What about the means we need to achieve the end we have in mind? To aim at an end is to seek a good that we desire. Are the means we must use to achieve the end also goods that we desire? Yes and no. The means are good, but not because we desire them for their own sake, but only because we desire them for the sake of something else.

Must we always regard means as good because they provide us with a way of getting the end we want to achieve? Certainly, means are good only if they do help us succeed in reaching our goal. But if they have other consequences, too, then they may be undesirable fo11easons quite apart from achieving the end we have in mind.

Stealing would get the money that I need to buy an automobile I want, but stealing might also get me into serious trouble that I would wish to avoid. The means we use to attain the end we seek must not only be good because they get us where we want to go, but they must also not land us where we do not want to be—in jail.

To sum up: means may be an end that we have to achieve by other means, and an end may also be a means to some further end. These two observations lead to two questions that Aristotle thinks we cannot avoid. One is: Are there any means that are purely or merely means, never ends? The other is: Are there any ends that are ends and never means—what Aristotle calls ultimate or final ends because they are not means to any ends beyond themselves?

Another way of asking the first question is to ask whether there are any things that we desire only for the sake of something else, never for their own sake. And another way of asking the second question is to ask whether there are any things that we desire only for their own sake and never for the sake of something else.

Aristotle maintained that there are means that are merely or purely means, ends that are also means to goals beyond themselves, and ends that we pursue for their own sake and not for the sake of any further good to be obtained. His reasons for thinking so are as follows.

If there were nothing that we desired for its own sake and not for the sake of something else, our practical thinking could not begin. We have already seen that practical thinking must begin with thinking about an end to be sought or pursued. Now if every end we thought about were a means to some further end, and if that further end were still a means to some end beyond itself, and so on *endlessly*, practical thinking could never begin.

We have seen that when practical thinking is put into practice, we must start with some means to whatever end we have in view. If that means is itself an end that requires us to find means for achieving it, then we cannot start our doing, or purposeful action, with it. To start doing, we must start with a means that is purely a means, and not also an end that requires other means to achieve it.

So far I have told you only *why* there must be ends that are not means and why there must be means that are not ends. You11eaction to what I have told you so far would not surprise me if it consisted in wondering how you have ever done any practical thinking without knowing what your final or ultimate end is. If practical thinking cannot begin with an end that is a means to something beyond itself, and if you do not know of any end that you seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, how could you ever begin to think practically?

Since you have undoubtedly done a lot of practical thinking in the course of your life, Aristotle must be wrong when he says that practical thinking cannot begin until you have an ultimate or final end in mind.

So it would certainly seem. A distinction between two ways in which you can have an ultimate or a final end in mind will open the door to a solution of this problem. To get some understanding of the required distinction, let's start with what we learned in school about geometry—the same kind of geometry with which Aristotle was acquainted.

What are called the first principles of geometry are the starting points with which you must begin in order to demonstrate the geometrical propositions that have to be proved. In Euclid's geometry, the first principles consist of definitions, axioms, and postulates. The definitions of points, lines, straight lines, triangles, and so on are needed, and so are such axioms as "the whole is greater than any of its parts" and "things equal to the same thing are equal to each other." In addition, there are the postulates—assumptions that Euclid makes in order to prove the propositions that need proof.

The difference between the axioms and the postulates is that you cannot deny the axioms. You cannot avoid affirming them. For example, try to think that a part is greater than the whole to which it belongs. But when Euclid asks you to assume that you can draw a straight line from any point to any point, you may be willing to make that assumption, but you do not have to do so. There is nothing compelling about it as there is about the axiom concerning wholes and parts.

As axioms and postulates are different kinds of starting points in geometrical thinking, so are there different kinds of starting points in practical thinking. Just as you can assume what Euclid asks you to take for granted in order to get his geometrical proofs started, so in your own practical thinking, you can assume that a certain goal or end is ultimate, and ask no further questions about it, *even if they can be asked*.

In other words, most of us get started in our practical thinking not by having in mind that which is absolutely our final or ultimate goal, but rather by assuming that the end we have in view can be taken—for the time being at least—*as if* it were a goal about which no further questions need be asked.

In the example we have been considering, we may take being able to drive to school or to work as the end for which having an automobile, being able to buy it, getting the money needed to buy it, and so on, are the means. Of course, you realize that you could be asked why you want to drive to school or to work, and your answer to that question might lead to a further *why* until you came to an answer about which no further *why* could be asked.

That answer, if you ever reached it, would be your grasp of the ultimate or final end, for the sake of which everything else is a means. But you do not have to have such an end in view in order to begin practical thinking or purposeful doing because you can provisionally assume that some end you have in mind is, for the time being, ultimate—something you want for its own sake.

When you do what needs to be done to get it, you may ask yourself why you wanted it, but you do not have to ask that question in order to think about the means for getting it or in order to do what needs to be done to use means for that purpose. That question can be postponed—for the time being, but not forever, not, at least, if you want to lead a well-planned, purposeful life.

Living and Living Well

The younger we are, the more things we do aimlessly. If not aimlessly, then at least playfully. There is a difference between acting aimlessly and acting playfully. We act aimlessly when we have no end in view, no purpose. But when we behave playfully, we do have an aim—pleasure, the fun we get out of the game or whatever it is we are playing. The pleasure we get from the activity itself is our goal. We have no ulterior purpose; that is purpose enough.

Serious activity, as contrasted with playful activity, always has some ulterior purpose. We engage in the activity to achieve some goal, for which doing this or that is a means. Having and not having an ulterior purpose is one distinction between work and play, about which I will have more to say later. We all recognize that work is a serious activity and that it is seldom as pleasant as play.

The younger we are, the less likely it is that we will have a well-worked-out plan for living. When we are young, our goals are likely to be immediate ones—things to do, things to get, things to be enjoyed today, tomorrow, or next week at the most. Having such goals is hardly a plan for living one's life as a whole. One's life as a whole is a very difficult thing to think about when one is young.

As we get older, we become more and more purposeful. We also become more serious and less playful. That is generally true, but not true of everyone. There are exceptions. Some older persons live only for pleasure and enjoyment, and when we say that about them, we are not complimenting them. On the contrary, we are criticizing them for devoting too much of their time and energies to playing and not enough to serious activities. We are saying that the grown-up person who lives this way is not really grown-up but childish. It is all right for children to play a large part of the time, but not for mature men and women.

As we grow older and more purposeful, less playful and more serious, we try to fit all our various purposes together into a coherent scheme for living. If we don't, we should, Aristotle tells us. We should try to develop a plan for living in order to live as well as possible.

Socrates, who was Plato's teacher as Plato was Aristotle's, said that an unexamined life is not worth living. Aristotle went further and said that an unplanned life is not worth examining, for an unplanned life is one in which we do not know what we are trying to do or why, and one in which we do not know where we are trying to get or how to get there. It is a jumble, a mess. It is certainly not worth examining closely.

In addition to not being worth examining, an unplanned life is not worth living because it cannot be lived well. To plan one's life is to be thoughtful about it, and that means thinking about ends to be pursued and the means for achieving them. Living thoughtlessly is like acting aimlessly. It gets you nowhere.

But Aristotle does not think it is enough to persuade you that you must have a plan for living in order to live well. He also wishes to persuade you that you must have the right plan. One plan is not as good as another. There are lots of wrong plans, but only one right plan. If you adopt one of the wrong plans, you will end up, Aristotle thinks, not having had a good life. To end up having had a good life, you must have lived it according to the right plan.

The right plan? It may be easy for Aristotle to persuade us that we ought to have a plan for living in order to live thoughtfully and purposefully. That's just common sense. But for Aristotle to persuade us that there is only one right plan that we ought to adopt is not so easy. If he can succeed in doing that, it will be another indication of his uncommon common sense.

What can possibly make one plan for living right and all others wrong? To that question, Aristotle thinks there can be only one answer. The right plan is the one that aims at the right ultimate end—the end that all of us ought to aim at. That may be the answer to the question, but it leaves a further question unanswered. What is the right ultimate end—the end that all of us ought to aim at? You can see at once that if there were a right ultimate end, we ought to aim at it. Just as we find it impossible to think that part of a whole is greater than the whole of which it is a part, so we find it impossible to think that a wrong end is one we ought to aim at. If a goal is wrong, we ought not try to achieve it. Only if it is right, ought we to try.

Granted, you may say, but that still leaves the important question unanswered. What is the right ultimate end? What is the one goal that all of us ought to seek?

You may think that that is a hard question to answer, but Aristotle doesn't. Perhaps I should say that one of his answers to that question is very easy for him to give. But it is not the complete answer. The complete answer is much harder to state and to grasp. Let's start with the easier, though incomplete, answer.

The right end that all of us ought to pursue is a good life. Aristotle's reasoning on this point is simple and, I think, convincing. Let me summarize it.

There are certain things we do in order just to live—such things as nourishing and caring for our bodies and keeping them healthy, for the sake of which most of us have to work to earn the money we need to buy food, clothing, and shelter.

There are other things we do in order to live well. We make the effort to get an education because we think that knowing more than is necessary just to keep alive enriches our life. We do not need certain pleasures in order to keep alive, but having them certainly makes life richer and better.

Both living and living well are ends for which we have to find the means. But living, or keeping alive, is itself a means to living well. It is impossible to live well without staying alive—as long as possible or, at least, as long as it seems desirable to do so.

Living, I have just said, is a means to living well. But what is living well a means to? There can be no answer to that question, Aris-

totle tells us, because living well is an end in itself, an end we seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else or for any ulterior purpose. Anything else that we can think of, anything else that we call good or desirable, is a means either to living or to living well.

We can think of living as a means to living well, but we cannot think of living well as a means to anything else.

Aristotle thinks that that should be obvious to all of us. He also thinks that our common experience shows that all of us do, in fact, agree about it.

The word he uses for living well (or for a good life) has usually been translated into English by the word "happiness." Happiness, Aristotle says, is that which everyone seeks. No one, if asked whether he wants happiness, would say, "No, I want misery instead."

In addition, no one, if asked why he wants happiness, can give a reason for wanting it. The only reason for wanting it would have to be some more ultimate end, for the achievement of which happiness is a means. But no more ultimate end exists. There is nothing beyond happiness, or a good life, for which happiness can serve as a means.

I have used the word "happiness" as interchangeable with "living well" or "a good life." What has been said about happiness is not as plain and obvious if the word is used with any other meaning. I can avoid using the word "happiness" with any other meaning, but I cannot avoid using the word "happy" with many different meanings, meanings that are related to happiness in different ways.

We ask one another "Did you have a happy childhood?" We ask one another "Do you feel happy now?" We say to one another "Have a happy vacation" or "Have a happy New Year." When we use the word "happy" in these ways, we are talking about the pleasure or satisfaction that we experience when we get what we desire.

People who feel contented because they have what they want feel happy. A happy time is one filled with pleasures rather than pains, with satisfactions rather than dissatisfactions. That being so, we can be happy today and unhappy tomorrow. We can have a happy time on one occasion and an unhappy time on another. Different human beings want different things for themselves. Their desires

are not alike. What one person desires, another may wish to avoid. That amounts to saying that what some persons regard as good for themselves, others may regard as bad.

We differ in our desires and, therefore, we differ in what we regard as good for us. What makes one person feel happy may do just the opposite for another.

Since different persons feel happy as the result of doing different things or as the result of getting the different things they desire, how can it be said that happiness—living well or a good life—is the one right goal or ultimate end that all human beings ought to pursue?

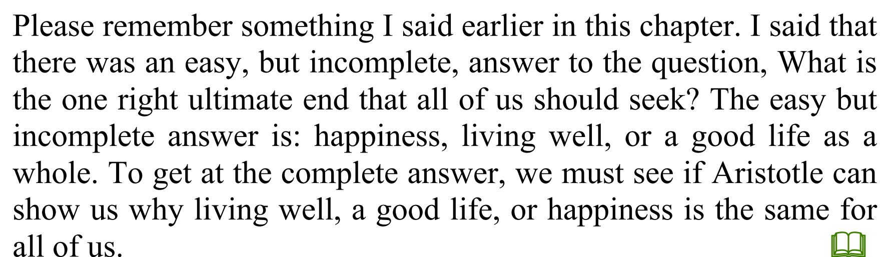
Aristotle may be able to persuade us that all of us want happiness. He may be able to persuade us that we all want happiness for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. But how can he persuade us that all of us, wanting happiness for its own sake, want exactly the same thing?

Human beings, in seeking happiness, certainly appear to be seeking different things. That is a matter of common experience, which Aristotle acknowledged without hesitation. He knew from common experience, as we do, that some individuals think that achieving happiness consists in accumulating great wealth; others, that it consists in having great power or becoming famous or having lots of fun.

If happiness, like feeling happy, results from getting what you want, and if different persons want different things for themselves, then the happiness to be achieved must be different for different persons.

If that is so, then how can there be one right plan for living well? How can there be one ultimate end that everyone ought to pursue? Happiness or living well may be the ultimate end that all of us seek, but it is not the same end for all of us.

Please remember something I said earlier in this chapter. I said that there was an easy, but incomplete, answer to the question, What is the one right ultimate end that all of us should seek? The easy but incomplete answer is: happiness, living well, or a good life as a whole. To get at the complete answer, we must see if Aristotle can show us why living well, a good life, or happiness is the same for all of us.



Excerpted from his book, *Aristotle for Everybody*, now available here, as an eBook.

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