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Richard Kraut

The University of Illinois at Chicago, rkraut1@gmail.com

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Ends and Intrinsic Goods in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

Richard Kraut, U. of Illinois at Chicago, for SAGP Central Division, 1987

This paper will consider some connections between NE I and NE X.7-8. I shall argue that the two are consistent, and that Aristotle proposes two dominant ends, one for the philosophical life, another for the political life.

A. Three kinds of ends in I.7: I argue against the ultra-inclusivist reading of Ackrill (in A. Rorty, Essays in Aristotle's Ethics). (a) He implausibly makes the more-perfect-than (teleiotes) relation ambiguous. (b) Two of the ends said in I.7 to be perfect but not most perfect (honor, virtue) were rejected in I.5 because they produce a further good. (c) Aristotle gives no examples in which x is desirable for the sake of x and y. (d) Such a for-the-sake-of relation gives no explanation of why x is desirable.

B. Aristotle's claim that contemplation is pursued solely for its own sake (X.7 1177b20): This does not mean that failing to have good results is a good-making characteristic. But this is what he would have to mean, if he were merely arguing that contemplation is the best component of happiness.

C. Self-sufficiency in I.7 and X.7: We need a reading in which one good (contemplation) can be said to be more self-sufficient than another (ethical activity). Ackrill's reading of I.7 does not allow for this. The key to a better interpretation lies in the objection made to the more-is-better principle at Topics 117a16-21.

D. The conclusion of the function argument: (a) The most perfect virtue is theoretical wisdom, but happiness does not consist exclusively in contemplation. The X.7-8 distinction between perfect happiness and a secondary happiness sets up two dominant ends: perfect happiness consists just in contemplation, secondary happiness consists just in the highest form of ethical activity, i.e. political activity. (b) The phrases "most perfect virtue" and "perfect virtue" can be understood in terms of I.7's threefold distinction among ends: the virtues that are perfect but not most perfect are the ethical virtues integrated with practical wisdom; the virtues that are not perfect are the pre-rational virtues of children. (c) The theory of two dominant ends is not intended to resolve conflicts between the good of two or more individuals. Aristotle is not an egoist; although he thinks that more contemplation is always better than less (and this is not just an "other things equal" judgment), he does not believe that one should maximize the amount of theoretical activity one engages in, regardless of the circumstances. He denies that there is any precise rule for deciding whose interest should be promoted, when interests conflict. Sometimes, for the good of others, one should choose the less desirable of two lives. (d) So read, the function argument begins the defense of both kinds of lives, philosophical and political. Aristotle thinks there is a similarity between the two lives, in that each is devoted to the excellent use of reason as an ultimate end. The similarity of political activity to contemplation underlies Aristotle's defense of the ethical virtues.

E. Aristotle's complaint about the mean in VI.1: When we see that there are two dominant ends in the NE, the rest of VI and X.6-8 can be read as a good answer to Aristotle's question. Each ultimate end tells us how much to pursue others goods, how angry to be, etc.