

Desires Exercises

Final Ends

In previous exercises, you have listed your desires and then mapped means-ends relationships between them and indicated which desires are desired for their own sake, as opposed to only to get to some further goal. Aristotle goes on to pose the question of whether there is something that is desired *only* for its own sake, and never for some further purpose. If so, he claims, this would be a “final end”, at least if all our other desires were ultimately aimed at it. In Chapter 7 of Book I, he argues that there is such a final end, and that it is *eudaimonia* (misleadingly translated as “happiness” – it is not a feeling of elation, though, but a state of thriving and flourishing).

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, Ch. 7

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

In *Gorgias*, Socrates also seems to make a claim that there is something that all our actions aim at – we do everything “for the sake of what’s good”, or in the language he uses in later dialogs simply “the Good”.

Plato, *Gorgias*, 467d- 468b

SOCRATES: Isn't it just the same in all cases, in fact? If a person does anything for the sake of something, he doesn't want this thing that he's doing, but the thing for the sake of which he's doing it?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now is there any thing that isn't either good, or bad, or, what is between these, neither good nor bad?

POLUS: There can't be, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Do you say that wisdom, health, wealth and the like are good, and their opposites bad?

POLUS: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: And by things which are neither good nor bad you mean things which sometimes partake of what's good, sometimes of what's bad, and sometimes of neither, such as sitting or walking, running or making sea voyages, or stones and sticks and the like? Aren't these the ones you mean? Or are there any others that you call things neither good nor bad?

POLUS: No, these are the ones.

SOCRATES: Now whenever people do things, do they do these intermediate things for the sake of good ones, or the good things for the sake of the intermediate ones?

POLUS: The intermediate things for the sake of the good ones, surely.

SOCRATES: So it's because we pursue what's good that we walk whenever we walk; we suppose that it's better to walk. And conversely, whenever we stand still, we stand still for the sake of the same thing, what's good. Isn't that so?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And don't we also put a person to death, if we do, or banish him and confiscate his property because we suppose that doing these things is better for us than not doing them?

POLUS: That's right.

SOCRATES: Hence, it's for the sake of what's good that those who do all these things do them.

Plato and Aristotle each seem to be claiming that there is some one end that everything we do is aimed at – for Aristotle, *eudaimonia*, for Plato, the Good. This might be taken as an empirical claim, one that we can test against people's experience.

You have just been tracing means-ends relationships between your own desires. Did your map look the way Aristotle and Plato suggest – with a single “final end” that everything else aims at? Or were there several separate ultimate ends, or even a motley of disconnected wants? If your map didn't look like that, is it because “happiness” and “the Good” were not things that

occurred to you as desires, or because they do not occupy that place in your life as ultimate goals? To put it a different way, could you realistically unite your map by putting "happiness" or "the Good" on it and linking your desires to it?