Aristotle on the Best Good:
Is Nicomachean Ethics *1094a18-22 Fallacious?**

PETER B. M. VRANAS

ABSTRACT

The first sentence of *NE* I.2 has roughly the form: "If *A* [there is a universal end] and *B* (because, if not-*B*, then *C*), then *D* [this end will be the best good]". According to some commentators, Aristotle uses *B* to infer *A*; but then the sentence is fallacious. According to other commentators, Aristotle does not use *B* (until later on); but then the sentence is bizarre. Contrary to both sets of commentators (but following Wedin 1981), I suggest that Aristotle uses *B together* with *A* to infer validly that there is a *non-instrumental* – and thus *unique* – universal end (hence *D*). On this interpretation the above two problems disappear, but a subtler problem emerges: not-*B* does not entail *C*.

1. *Introduction: A multiplicity of interpretations*

Aristotle commentators have racked their brains trying to make sense of the sentence that opens Chapter 2 in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a18-22) – hereinafter "the Sentence". In Irwin's (1999) translation (which I use throughout), the Sentence reads:

> Suppose, then, that [*A*] the things achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, and that [*B*] we do not choose everything because of something else – for if we do, [*C*] it will go on without limit, so that [*C'*] desire will prove to be empty and futile[; c]learly, [*D*] this end will be the good, that is to say, the best good.

Ackrill (1974/1999: 68; cf. 1973: 241) comments:

> It is commonly supposed that Aristotle is guilty of . . . the fallacy of arguing that since every purposive activity aims at some end desired for itself there must be some end desired for itself at which every purposive activity aims. . . . The outline structure of the sentence is "if [*A*] and [*B*], then [*D*]." Nobody will suggest

that [B] is here a condition additional to [A]. The one natural way to read the sentence as a coherent whole is to suppose that [not-B] is mentioned as the only alternative to [A]. In that case a proof of [B] would be a proof of [A]. So when Aristotle gives his admirable proof of [B] he is purporting to prove [A]; and the sentence as a whole therefore amounts to the assertion that [D].

Commentators who accuse Aristotle of the above fallacy include (besides Ackrill) Anscombe (1957: 34, 1967: 15-6), Darwall (1998: 192), and Geach (1958/1972: 2); also, more tentatively, Bostock (2000: 9-10), Broadie (1991: 12-4), and Urmson (1988: 10).[1] (Some of these commentators also argue that adding to *B* an extra premise – which is implicitly or explicitly endorsed by Aristotle – results in a valid argument for *A*.) Other commentators – including Cooper (1975: 93), Hardie (1965: 277, 1968: 16-7), Irwin (1999: 173; contrast 1977: 52), Kenny (1966: 94-5), Kraut (1989: 203-7, 217-20), Reeve (1992: 108-11), and Williams (1962: 292) – argue that Aristotle may be innocent of the above fallacy because he need not be understood as purporting to prove *A* in the Sentence: he may be understood instead as stating *A* hypothetically. But then what would be the role of *B*? As Ackrill notes: "If [B] were simply a correct remark – irrelevant to, or a mere consequence of, [A] – it would be absurdly placed and serve no purpose" (1974/1999: 68). Some commentators argue that *B* paves the way for what follows (e.g., for the function argument in I.7). Still, Ackrill's point stands that on such an interpretation the Sentence *itself* is bizarre.

In this paper I examine an interpretation on which Aristotle does *not* commit the above fallacy and the Sentence is *not* bizarre either. This interpretation was proposed by Wedin (1981), but to my knowledge it has escaped notice so far.[2] The interpretation suggests what Ackrill claims nobody will suggest, namely that *B* is "a condition additional to" *A*. I

---

[1] Anscombe 1957: 34 might be thought to refer to 1094a1-3 (rather than to the Sentence), but this is unlikely given Anscombe 1967: 15-6 (see also Kraut 1989: 217-8 n. 14). Engberg-Pedersen (1983: 29-31), Hughes (2001: 28-31), and Joachim (1951: 21) belong to a group of commentators who (implicitly or explicitly) take Aristotle to infer *A* from *B* in the Sentence but (for various reasons) do not accuse Aristotle of the above fallacy. (See also Gauthier & Jolif 1970: 7; Sparshott 1994: 15-6.) Robinson (1964: 17) accuses Aristotle of a slightly different fallacy (cf. Kirwan 1967: 110-1).

[2] A search through the Arts & Humanities Search database failed to yield any references to Wedin's paper. I found the paper mentioned only by Bostock (2000: 9 n. 7). The present paper complements Wedin's in three respects. (1) Wedin did not prove that *B* guarantees the non-instrumentality of universal ends; he proved only that *B* (given *A*) guarantees uniqueness (see §2). (2) Wedin did not distinguish the three versions of the literal interpretation I distinguish in §3; he defended only (what I call)

prove a theorem to the effect that *B*, in conjunction with *A*, entails that there is a *non-instrumental* (i.e., not pursued because of any other end) and (thus) *unique* universal end. Such an end may well deserve to be called "the best good", whereas an instrumental or a non-unique universal end need not deserve this label. So I understand the Sentence neither as "*B*; thus *A*; thus *D*" (as some of those who accuse Aristotle of the fallacy do) nor as "*B*; moreover, if *A*, then *D*" (as some of those who try to acquit Aristotle do); I understand it *literally* instead, as (to a first approximation) "if *A* and *B*, then *D*".

In §2 I elaborate on the literal interpretation. In §3 I distinguish three versions of the interpretation. In §4 I address an objection. I conclude in §5.

2. *A literal interpretation of the Sentence*

Let *Pxy* stand for "*x* is pursued (wished for, chosen) because of *y*", *x* and *y* being ends (of "the things achievable by action").[3] The claim that (*A*) "the things achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things" can be formalized as:

(*A*) $\exists x(Pxx \;\&\; \forall y(y{\neq}x \rightarrow Pyx))$.[4]

──────────

the hypothetical version. (3) Wedin did not address the objection to the literal interpretation I address in §4.

   [3] Like Williams (1962: 289) and Kirwan (1967: 97), I take Aristotle to use interchangeably in (the vicinity of) the Sentence expressions like "we wish for" and "we choose", and I use "we pursue" to cover such expressions. Like Williams (but unlike Kirwan, to whom I refer the reader for details), I do not index choices to people or times; doing so would (for my purposes unnecessarily) clutter the notation. Unlike Williams and Kirwan, I restrict the ranges of variables so that I need no one-place predicate for "is pursued" (as opposed to "is pursued because of").

   [4] Rackham (1926/1934: 5) translates the part of the Sentence that expresses *A* as ". . . we wish the others *only* for the sake of this" (emphasis added); this would result in a different formalization, but I see in the Greek text no basis for the word "only". Aquinas (c1271/1993: 7; cf. Broadie 1991: 12-3) understands *A* as ". . . we wish *other* things because of it" (emphasis added); this would result in yet another formalization, but it is clear that the Greek text says "*the* others" (emphasis added), and this is standardly understood as "*all* the others" (see also Cooper 1975: 91 n. 2). This understanding of "the others" also renders implausible another reading of *A* (which I have not seen defended in print but variants of which have been proposed in correspondence by a couple of people), namely $\forall y\exists x(Pxx \;\&\; Pyx)$. (Cf. Kirwan 1967: 97-8. This is in fact a common reading of *B* rather than *A*: see footnote 5.)

This is equivalent to $\exists x \forall y Pyx$; i.e., there is an end because of which every end is pursued. Call such an end *universal*. Now the claim that (*B*) "we do not choose everything because of something else" can be formalized as:

(*B*) $\neg \forall x \exists y (y \neq x \,\&\, Pxy)$.[5]

This is equivalent to $\exists x \forall y (y \neq x \rightarrow \neg Pxy)$; i.e., there is an end that is not pursued because of any other end. Call such an end *non-instrumental*. Note that *A* need not entail *B*: a universal end need not be non-instrumental. Indeed, if two or more universal ends exist, then each of them is pursued because of each of the others, so none of them is non-instrumental. Conversely, *B* need not entail *A*: a non-instrumental end need not be universal. Indeed, if two or more non-instrumental ends exist, then none of them is pursued because of any of the others, so none of them is universal. There is, however, a connection between *A* and *B*, and it is illuminated by the following theorem.

> Theorem 1. If (*A*) there is a universal end and (*B*) there is a non-instrumental end, then there is a *unique* non-instrumental end, which is also the *unique* universal end.
> Proof. Suppose that *A* and *B* are true, and let *a* be a universal end. Then every end *y* different from *a* is pursued because of *a*, hence because of an end different from *y*; so *y* is not non-instrumental, and the only candidate left for being a non-instrumental end is *a*. Given that there *is* a non-instrumental end, *a* is the *unique* non-instrumental end. Now if some end *b* different from *a* were also universal, then every end, hence also *a* itself, would be pursued because of *b*, so *a* would not be non-instrumental. It follows that *a* is also the *unique* universal end.

Theorem 1 suggests that, rather than being "absurdly placed" or "irrelevant" to *A*, *B* is essential to Aristotle's reasoning in the Sentence.[6] First, *B* ensures that *at most one* universal end exists. (This point – but not the

5 Taken literally, *B* is the negation of a universal claim and is thus equivalent to an existential claim. Commentators, however, typically write as if *B* were a universal claim; e.g., the claim that "every purposive activity aims at some end desired for itself" (Ackrill 1974/1999: 68). This is arguably because they think that "the reason which Aristotle gives for [*B*] . . . actually justifies something stronger than [an existential claim]" (Kirwan 1967: 107). I address Aristotle's argument for *B* in §4 (cf. footnote 13). (Cf. also Wedin 1981: 247-8.)

6 Williams (1962: 294) proves a similar theorem, but does not formulate the literal interpretation (let alone relate his theorem to it); he says rather that *B* may be proposed by Aristotle as a *consequence* of *A*, and that "[the Sentence] is in any case confusedly expressed, and it is perhaps impossible to say exactly what it means" (1962: 292).

second one below – was also made by Wedin (1981: 248-9).) This result seems essential because, if two or more universal ends existed, it would not make much sense for Aristotle to say that "*this* end will be . . . the best good" (1094a21-2; emphasis added).[7] Second, *B* ensures that any universal end is non-instrumental, not pursued because of any other end. (Actually this entails that at most one universal end exists.[8]) This result seems essential because it might be inappropriate to call "the best good" a universal end pursued because of some other end. Apparently recognizing this possible inappropriateness, some commentators argue that Aristotle should have included (or should be understood as having implicitly included) the requirement of non-instrumentality in *A* (Broadie 1991: 12; Cooper 1975: 92). On the literal interpretation there was no need for Aristotle to do so: he can derive the non-instrumentality of universal ends by using *B*.

3. *Three versions of the literal interpretation*

As I pointed out in §1, according to some commentators Aristotle purports to prove *A* in the Sentence, whereas according to other commentators Aristotle may be understood instead as stating *A* hypothetically. Although, following Wedin (1981), I formulated the literal interpretation as (to a first approximation) "if *A* and *B*, then *D*", Theorem 1 supports equally well the alternative interpretation "*A* and *B*; thus *D*". Call the two corresponding versions of the literal interpretation *hypothetical* and *non-hypothetical* respectively.[9] I do not wish to take a stand on which version of the literal interpretation is preferable. In support of the hypothetical version one might note – as Hardie (1968: 17), Irwin (1999: 180), Kraut (1989: 205, 227-8), and Williams (1962: 292) do note – that in the

---

[7] See Kirwan 1967: 108-9 for an objection, and Wedin 1981: 261 for a reply.

[8] As I said, if two or more universal ends exist, then each of them is pursued because of each of the others, so none of them is non-instrumental. Conversely, it can be shown that, if *P* is transitive (see §4), then the claim that at most one universal end exists entails the claim that any universal end is non-instrumental. Note also that, since by definition a universal end is pursued because of itself, *B* ensures that a universal end is pursued *only* because of itself and is thus – modulo temporal qualifications – what Aristotle calls "complete without qualification" (1097a33-4).

[9] One might claim that the non-hypothetical "version" is not *literal*, given that the Sentence has the form of a conditional (cf. Wedin 1981: 250). But this consideration is not decisive: in an appropriate context (e.g., right after supporting *p*), asserting "if *p* then *q*" may amount to putting forward the argument "*p*; thus *q*".

beginning of I.7 Aristotle writes as if he has not yet proven that a unique universal end exists: "if there is some end of everything achievable in action, the good achievable in action will be this end; if there are more ends than one, [the good achievable in action] will be these ends" (1097a22-4; Irwin's brackets). This passage, however, is hardly conclusive: although Aristotle does mention the possibility that more than one universal end exists, he fails to mention the possibility that no such end exists.[10] So he seems to take it for granted that *at least one* universal end exists, which is precisely what *A* says. Now in support of the non-hypothetical version one might note – as Ackrill (1974/1999: 68) does note – that right after the Sentence Aristotle writes: "Then surely knowledge of this good also carries great weight for [determining the best] way of life; if we know it, we are more likely, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark" (1094a22-4; Irwin's brackets). This passage, however, is hardly conclusive either: Aristotle may be saying here that, *on the hypothesis* that the best good exists, knowledge of this good is very important (cf. Reeve 1992: 110).

Against the non-hypothetical version one might note – as von Wright (1963: 89), Wedin (1981: 246), and Williams (1962: 292; cf. Kirwan 1967: 102) do note – that, according to Aristotle, several ends are pursued because of themselves: "Honor, pleasure, understanding, and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves" (1097b2-3). How then could Aristotle accept premises entailing (as *A* and *B* on either of the above versions of the literal interpretation do) that exactly *one* non-instrumental end exists? I reply that an end pursued because of itself may *also* be pursued because of some other end and thus fail to be non-instrumental. Reeve (1992: 108) gives the example of playing the cello both for the sake of playing the cello and for the sake of contributing to a string quartet (see also Urmson 1988: 11). Aristotle himself, after saying that honor etc. we choose because of themselves, says that "we *also* choose them for the sake of happiness" (1097b4; emphasis added). So the claim that exactly one non-instrumental end exists is compatible with the claim that

---

[10] In response one might claim that the phrase "if there are more ends than one" does not refer to a case in which more than one universal end exists, but rather refers to a case in which more than one *non*-universal but *no* universal end exists. I grant that this is a possible reading, but it is not the *only* possible reading, so my point remains that the passage in question does not provide conclusive support for the hypothetical version.

several ends pursued because of themselves exist: it is possible that all but one of the latter ends are instrumental.

One might also object to the non-hypothetical version by arguing that, because *A* is prima facie implausible, it is unconvincing to claim – as the non-hypothetical version according to the objection does – that Aristotle in (the vicinity of) the Sentence just asserts *A* without trying to support it. I reply that right before the Sentence Aristotle does provide the beginning of an argument for *A*. Aristotle starts with the claim that there are (what I call) *subordination chains* between *pursuits* (actions, crafts, sciences); e.g., bridle making is subordinate to horsemanship, which is in turn subordinate to generalship (1094a10-4). Aristotle continues with the claim that the ends of subordinate pursuits are pursued because of the ends of superordinate pursuits (1094a14-6). But then it can be proven that, if all maximal subordination chains contain some "highest ruling" pursuit which has a unique end pursued because of itself, then this end is universal.[11] And shortly after the Sentence, Aristotle tries to support the claim that there is indeed a highest ruling pursuit, namely political science (1094a27-b11). Now regardless of what one thinks of the merits of the above argument, its existence casts doubt on the claim that (according to the non-hypothetical version) Aristotle does not try to support *A* in the vicinity of the Sentence. Maybe Aristotle regarded the argument as preliminary and incomplete. If so, then maybe a third, *intermediate* version of the literal interpretation is preferable: in the Sentence Aristotle states *A* neither purely hypothetically nor with total confidence, but rather on the basis of a tentative argument. In any case, as I said, I do not wish to take a stand; my primary goal in this section was to argue – contrary to Wedin (1981) – that the hypothetical version of the literal interpretation is not the only viable version.

---

[11] More precisely, it can be proven that: if (1) for any pursuits *m* and *n*, and for any ends *x* and *y*, if *x* is an end of *m, y* is an end of *n*, and there is a subordination chain from *m* to *n*, then *x* is pursued because of *y*, (2) there is a pursuit *n* such that (a) for every pursuit *m* other than *n* there is a subordination chain from *m* to *n* and (b) *n* has a unique end, which is pursued because of itself, and (3) every end is an end of some pursuit, then (*A*) there is a universal end. (The proof is straightforward, so the fact that Aristotle does not go over it raises no significant objection to my claim that Aristotle tries to support *A* in the vicinity of the Sentence.)

4. *An objection to the literal interpretation*

So far I have not examined the parenthetical inference in the Sentence to the effect that, if [not-*B*] we do choose everything because of something else, then [*C*] "it will go on without limit".[12] By contraposition, the claim is that not-*C* entails *B*, and this looks unproblematic: if it does not "go on without limit", in other words if there is no infinite *pursuit-chain* (understood as an ordered set of ends each member of which – except for the last, if a last one exists – is pursued because of the next member), then every pursuit-chain has finitely many members, and the last member of every *maximal* pursuit-chain (understood as a pursuit-chain that is not a subset of any other pursuit-chain) is a non-instrumental end.[13] This reasoning is invalid, however: a maximal pursuit-chain with finitely many members may fail to have any non-instrumental member. This is because such a pursuit-chain may be a pursuit-*circle*; for example, *a* is pursued because of *b, b* is pursued because of *c*, and *c* is pursued because of *a* (*Pab* & *Pbc* & *Pca*).[14] So on the literal interpretation Aristotle does commit a fallacy in the Sentence after all, although a fallacy different from the one of which he is commonly accused.

Is this a significant objection to the literal interpretation? Not if the fallacy which the interpretation attributes to Aristotle is sufficiently subtle: even the father of logic is not infallible, so an interpretation on which he commits a subtle fallacy need not be flawed. There is indeed evidence that the fallacy is subtle: apparently it was missed by several commentators, arguably including Apostle (1975: 206 n. 10), Aquinas (c1271/1993: 7), Broadie (1991: 13), Burnet (1900/1973: xlvi-xlvii), Kenny (1966: 94), Kirwan (1967: 107), and Urmson (1988: 10). Other commentators, however,

---

[12] There is a further parenthetical inference in the Sentence, from *C* to [*C'*] "desire will prove to be empty and futile" (cf. Aquinas c1271/1993: 8). According to Wedin, in the Sentence Aristotle does not provide an argument for *B* but states instead *B* hypothetically, because "the premise that [not-*C'*] our desire is not empty and vain [is] a frankly implausible contention save perhaps to those already versed in the ways of virtue" (1981: 244). I am not sure I agree, but I do not address this issue in the paper.

[13] It is apparently on the basis of such a reasoning that commentators typically write as if *B* were a universal rather than an existential claim (see footnote 5).

[14] In response one might argue that (1) Aristotle assumes there are infinitely many ends (otherwise a worry about infinite pursuit-chains would not arise – or so the response goes), and (2) there cannot be an infinite pursuit-*circle*. But even if (1) and (2) are granted, there can still be an infinite *number* of *finite* pursuit-circles, like this: *Pab* & *Pbc* & *Pca, Pde* & *Pef* & *Pfd*, ... Therefore, even assuming there are infinitely many ends, the inference from not-*C* to *B* is invalid.

apparently notice the problem but try to exonerate Aristotle. One way out is proposed by Wedin, who claims that "in the idiom of *Physics* III, vi an operation is infinite which returns upon itself in a circular fashion" (1981: 249; see also Broadie & Rowe 2002: 264). If not-*C* is understood as entailing that no pursuit-chain is "infinite" in Wedin's sense, then not-*C* entails that no pursuit-circle exists: a pursuit-circle (with finitely many members) is an "infinite" pursuit-chain. There is a problem, however, with Wedin's way out. An end pursued because of itself corresponds to "an operation . . . which returns upon itself in a circular fashion" and thus to an "infinite" pursuit-chain (a pursuit-circle with a single member). So not-*C* on the above understanding entails that no end is pursued because of itself. But as we saw in §3, according to Aristotle some ends *are* pursued because of themselves. So I find Wedin's way out unattractive.[15]

Another way out is based on Williams's (1962: 290) claim that Aristotle assumes *P* (the relation "being pursued because of") to be (1) *transitive* and (2) what I call *quasi-asymmetric*:

(1) $\forall x \forall y \forall z((Pxy \ \& \ Pyz) \rightarrow Pxz)$;
(2) $\forall x \forall y((x \neq y \ \& \ Pxy) \rightarrow \neg Pyx)$.

Williams (1962: 291) derives from these two assumptions the result that no pursuit-circle having at least two members exists, and Kraut (1989: 204) uses a similar reasoning (although he does not mention that transitivity is needed) to vindicate the inference from not-*C* to *B*. Unfortunately, however, this way out for Aristotle spells trouble for the literal interpretation. This is because (1) and (2), together with *A*, suffice for the conclusion of Theorem 1: *B* is not needed. This is established by the following theorem.

---

[15] Wedin might respond by claiming that, according to Aristotle, only pursuit-circles with *at least two* members count as infinite. I would reply along the lines of what I say in footnote 18 and the corresponding text. Moreover, it seems that the reason Aristotle adduces for not-*C*, namely that if *C* is true "desire will prove to be empty and futile" (see footnote 12), may exclude pursuit-chains with infinitely many members but need not exclude pursuit-circles (with one or more members). Broadie and Rowe might object: "In the circular case, I could actually gain all the things I desire, but since I want none of them for its own sake, I gain nothing I really want" (2002: 264). I reply that this reasoning does not exclude pursuit-circles some (or all) members of which are also pursued because of themselves (e.g., *Pab* & *Pbc* & *Pca* & *Pcc*) and thus does not guarantee the existence of a non-instrumental end.

Theorem 2. If (*A*) there is a universal end, (1) *P* is transitive, and (2) *P* is quasi-asymmetric, then there is a *unique* universal end, which is also the *unique* non-instrumental end.[16]

But if *B* is redundant, then the literal interpretation founders, because then *B* is after all "absurdly placed and serve[s] no purpose" (Ackrill 1974/1999: 68). Now one thing to be said in response was said by Wedin (1981: 243 n. 1): Williams introduces "substantive additional premises which in effect give us a completely different argument".[17] This response, however, is not fully satisfactory if it turns out that Aristotle does assume (1) and (2). Kirwan (1967: 101) notes that Aristotle does not actually state (1) or (2). Williams's stated ground for claiming that Aristotle assumes (1) and (2) is "[t]he discussion of the architectonic relations in cc. 1, 2 init." (1962: 290). I do not know what exactly Williams has in mind, but maybe it is something close to what Kraut (1989: 201) proposes:

> If A is desirable for the sake of B, then B cannot also be desirable for the sake of A. For, Aristotle holds, when A is for the sake of B, B is more desirable than A (1094a14-16). And if B is more desirable than A, then A cannot also be more desirable than B.

Kraut is attributing to Aristotle the principle that, if *x* is pursued because of *y*, then *y* is *more choiceworthy* (to use Irwin's translation of *hairetōtera*) than *x*. Given, however, that no end is more choiceworthy than itself, this principle has the (unacceptable) consequence that no end is pursued because of itself. Kraut might respond by restricting the principle to cases in which *x* ≠ *y*, and by noting that the restricted principle suffices for the quasi-asymmetry of *P*. But what would be the rationale for rejecting the unrestricted while accepting the restricted principle? If one finds pursuit-circles with a single member unproblematic, why find pursuit-circles with

---

[16] <u>Proof.</u> If there were two distinct universal ends *a* and *b* (so *a*≠*b*), then every end, hence also *b*, would be pursued because of *a* (so *Pba*), and every end, hence also *a*, would be pursued because of *b* (so *Pab*); but then *P* would not be quasi-asymmetric. It follows (given *A*) that there is a *unique* universal end, say *a*. This end is also (see proof of Theorem 1) the only candidate for being a non-instrumental end. Now if *a* were instrumental, then it would be pursued because of some other end *c*. But since every end is pursued because of *a* and *P* is transitive, if *a* were pursued because of *c* then every end would be pursued because of *c*, so *c* would also be universal. It follows that *a* is the *unique* non-instrumental end.

[17] Let me clarify, however, that Williams did not formulate, and Wedin did not address, Theorem 2 or the current problem for the literal interpretation.

two members problematic?[18] Although Aristotle does say "more choice-worthy", it seems reasonable to understand him as meaning "*at least as* choiceworthy" – and on such an understanding the principle does not pre-clude any pursuit-circles. So I also find Kraut's way out unattractive. I prefer to say that Aristotle does commit a fallacy in inferring *B* from not-*C*, although the fallacy is subtle and thus excusable.[19]

5. *Conclusion: Virtues and vices of the literal interpretation*

The literal interpretation has several virtues. First, it is *literal*: it makes sense of a passage which some commentators find "confusedly expressed" (Williams 1962: 292) without doing violence to Aristotle's text. Second, it is *charitable*: it acquits Aristotle of a fallacy of which he is commonly accused. Third, it is *parsimonious*: it vindicates Aristotle's primary infer-ence in the Sentence without relying on extra assumptions like the tran-sitivity and quasi-asymmetry of *P* or the non-instrumentality of universal ends (the latter being derived rather than – as Cooper (1975: 92) claims – "take[n] for granted"). Fourth, it is *flexible*: it is neutral between a hypo-thetical, a non-hypothetical, and an intermediate version, and also – as Wedin (1981: 261-2) argues – between dominant and inclusive accounts of the best good.

The literal interpretation is not flawless, however. It is not *completely* charitable: it does attribute to Aristotle a fallacy, although a subtle one which occurs in a parenthetical inference. And it is not *completely* literal either: it understands Aristotle's "more choiceworthy" as "at least as

---

[18] As an analogy, if one accepts the possibility that a thing creates itself, then why reject the possibility that two (distinct) things create each other? It seems to me that those who find pursuit-circles with two (or more) members problematic had better replace talk of ends pursued because of themselves with talk of ends pursued because of *no* end (analogous to *un*created – as opposed to *self*-created – things); in this way they would avoid pursuit-circles altogether.

[19] According to Bostock, Aristotle's argument from not-*B* to *C* "requires the stronger [than not-*B*] premiss: if everything that we choose is chosen *only* for the sake of something further" (2000: 9). This suggests a third way out for Aristotle: under-stand not-*B* as Bostock's "stronger premiss". I see, however, no basis for the word "only" in the Greek text. Moreover, if *B* is understood as the claim that we do not choose everything *only* because of something else, i.e. $\neg\forall x(\neg Pxx \,\&\, \exists yPxy)$, then *B* is equivalent to $\exists x(Pxx \lor \forall y\neg Pxy)$ and is thus a trivial consequence of *A* (since *A* entails $\exists xPxx$).

choiceworthy". Nevertheless, despite these flaws, the literal interpretation seems to be on balance the best available interpretation of the Sentence.

Iowa State University

References

Ackrill, J. L. (1973). *Aristotle's Ethics*. New York: Humanities Press.

—— (1999). Aristotle on *eudaimonia*. In N. Sherman (Ed.), *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays* (pp. 57-77). New York: Rowman & Littlefield. (Originally published 1974.)

Anscombe, G. Elisabeth M. (1957). *Intention*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

—— (1967). *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (3rd ed.). London: Hutchinson.

Apostle, Hippocrates G. (Trans.). (1975). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Aquinas, St. Thomas (1993). *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (C. I. Litzinger, Trans.). Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books. (Originally written c1271.)

Bostock, David (2000). *Aristotle's Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Broadie, Sarah (1991). *Ethics with Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Broadie, Sarah, & Rowe, Christopher (2002). *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Burnet, John (Ed.). (1973). *The Ethics of Aristotle*. New York: Arno Press. (Originally published 1900.)

Cooper, John M. (1975). *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Darwall, Stephen L. (1998). *Philosophical Ethics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Engberg-Pedersen, Troels (1983). *Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gauthier, René A., & Jolif, Jean Y. (1970). *L'Ethique à Nicomaque: Introduction, Traduction et Commentaire* (2nd ed.). *Tome II: Commentaire. Première Partie: Livres I-V*. Louvain: Publications Universitaires & Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts.

Geach, Peter T. (1972). History of a fallacy. In P. T. Geach, *Logic Matters* (pp. 1-13). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (Originally published 1958.)

Hardie, William F. R. (1965). The final good in Aristotle's Ethics. *Philosophy, 40*, 277-295.

—— (1968). *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hughes, Gerard J. (2001). *Aristotle on Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Irwin, Terence (1977). *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

—— (Trans.). (1999). *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (2nd ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Joachim, Harold H. (1951). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (D. A. Rees, Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kenny, Anthony (1966). Happiness. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 66*, 93-102.

Kirwan, Christopher (1967). Logic and the good in Aristotle. *The Philosophical Quarterly, 17*, 97-114.

Kraut, Richard (1989). *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rackham, Harris (Trans.). (1934). *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (Loeb Classical Library, Vol. XIX, 2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Originally published 1926.)

Reeve, C. D. C. (1992). *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Robinson, Richard (1964). *An Atheist's Values*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sparshott, Francis (1994). *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the Nicomachean Ethics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Urmson, James O. (1988). *Aristotle's Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

von Wright, Georg H. (1963). *The Varieties of Goodness*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Wedin, Michael V. (1981). Aristotle on the good for man. *Mind, 90*, 243-262.

Williams, Bernard A. O. (1962). Aristotle on the good: A formal sketch. *The Philosophical Quarterly, 12*, 289-296.