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Are Ends Subject to Deliberation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*?

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A Reply to David Wiggins.

I

In his landmark essay, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," David Wiggins proposes a certain interpretation of the Aristotelian notion of deliberation in response to an earlier interpretation by D. J. Allan.¹ The latter interpretation, as characterized by Wiggins, is as follows. In Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle treats a restricted notion of deliberation which applies only to productive activities, or means-end scenarios. In such cases, only means are deliberated, never ends. In Books 6 and 7, however, Aristotle treats a wider sense of deliberation which is no longer limited to means-end cases. Consequently, the notion of deliberation in Book 3 is discontinuous with that in Books 6 and 7, so that a further distinction must be imported in order to explain the change.

Wiggins, on the other hand, proposes that the notion of deliberation in Book 3 is in fact continuous with that in Books 6-7, in that in all three books, deliberation is not in principle limited to means, but can include ends themselves. Any attempt to interpret deliberation as in principle restricted to means alone, Wiggins argues, causes internal difficulties in Book 3. The reason that deliberation *appears* to be restricted to only means in Book 3 is that Aristotle is taking advantage of the clarity of purely means-end examples of deliberation in that book in order to prepare the way for the more complex cases in Books 6-7, in which ends themselves are subject to deliberation. Thus, although in certain cases deliberation happens to entail only a calculation of the best means towards a fixed end, *never in principle* is deliberation restricted to only such cases, which becomes clear in Books 6-7. We can therefore deliberate about ends themselves.

Wiggins begins his argument with a comparison between deliberation and choice. Aristotle closely joins deliberation (*bouleusis*) with choice (*prohairesis*), defining choice as deliberative desire of what is in our power (1113a10). Regarding choice, however, Aristotle states that it is most closely "bound up with" (*oikeiotion*) virtue, and discriminates character better than action (1111b6-7). From these two considerations, Wiggins concludes that choice cannot be "concerned only with means" because if it were, then it would be neutral to discriminations between good and bad character, since one who aims at a bad end can also be skilled regarding means. So since Aristotle does maintain that choice "discriminates character," then choice (and therefore deliberation) must be "a fairly inclusive notion that relates to different specifications of man's end," not only to different specifications of the means.² For this reason, Wiggins translates *pros to telos* as *what is towards the end*, as opposed to Ross' translation of the phrase as *means towards the end*. This also is more inclusive of cases in which *what is towards the end* is not means as opposed to the end, but constituents of the end itself, as are the virtues in relation to happiness.

¹ David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 221-240.

² *Idib.*, p. 223.

Wiggins then addresses two problems which arise with his interpretation. First, Aristotle states that we do not deliberate about ends (plural). In Wiggins' account, however, since in certain cases *what is towards the end* constitutes the end itself, and there can be many such constituent ends, then in those cases we would indeed deliberate about many ends (plural). Secondly, if happiness is constituted by *what is towards the end*, then since deliberation is of *what is towards the end*, happiness would be subject to deliberation, which Aristotle explicitly prohibits. Wiggins addresses the first difficulty by interpreting the texts in which Aristotle prohibits deliberation about ends (plural) to be referring not to those cases in which there are many constituent ends, but to those cases in which there is only one fixed end. Thus, in those cases, there is no deliberation about ends. The second difficulty, Wiggins argues, is solved by the fact that although there can be no deliberation about whether or not to pursue happiness in general, the possibility remains that we can deliberate about what specifically constitutes happiness. As Wiggins puts it, "a man may seek by deliberation to make more specific and more practically determinate that generalized telos of eudaimonia."³

On this reading, Wiggins contends that the transition from Book 3 to Book 6 and 7 is now smooth. From two texts about practical wisdom in Book 6, he argues that "practical wisdom in its deliberative manifestations is," for Aristotle, "concerned both with the attainment of particular formed objectives and also with questions of general policy - what specific objectives to form."⁴ The only reason this appears to be discontinuous with Book 3 is that in that earlier book, Aristotle used examples of deliberation in which the end was fixed and clear, such as the case of analyzing a geometrical figure in order to find the means of constructing it. Such examples were used, Wiggins argues, due to their clarity, in order to prepare the way for the more complex cases in Book 6, in which the end itself is no longer fixed and must be determined. In order to explain this apparent discontinuity, D. J. Allan imports a distinction between means-end deliberations and rule-case deliberations. Wiggins criticizes this approach due to internal inconsistencies, as well as from a text which indicates that, for Aristotle, there are no such general rules.

Having argued the nature of the transition between Books 3 and 6, Wiggins then presents an outline of a neo-Aristotelian theory of practical reason, including features such as deliberations led not by a determinate end but by "situational appreciation," and a system of internally competing and incommensurable ends. He then concludes with the warning that although the notion of "situational appreciation" explains very little, nevertheless more specification is not possible in matters of action.

II

Wiggins presents a powerful argument against Allan, through both inconsistencies within Allan's theory and the resulting lack of harmony in the notion of deliberation between Books 3, 6, and 7. Wiggins' own alternative, however, contains its own difficulties, which are left unaddressed. Since his alternative consists in unifying the notion of deliberation in those books into one which is not restricted to means, then these difficulties should lead us to consider the third logical alternative - that the notion of

³ Ibid., p. 227.

⁴ Ibid., P. 228.

deliberation is unified in all three books as one which is restricted to means. In order to make this case, it will therefore be necessary to address Wiggins' contention that any interpretation which restricts deliberation to means alone produces internal problems in Book 3, as well as his contention that Books 6-7 clearly deal with a notion of deliberation which includes ends, not just means.

First, Wiggins argues that since, according to Aristotle, choice "discriminates character," then choice (and therefore deliberation) must be "a fairly inclusive notion that relates to different specifications of man's end," not only to different specifications of the means.⁵ Is it necessarily the case, however, that if choice and deliberation are, as Wiggins characterizes the opposing position, "concerned only with means" that then they cannot "relate to different specifications of man's end?" The specific manner in which choice and deliberation are "concerned" with means is as their *object* (1112b35, 1113b4). Choice and deliberation could therefore also be "concerned" with the end, not necessarily as their *object* or as *what is chosen*, but as that for the sake of which *what is chosen* is chosen. Accordingly, choice and deliberation could be "concerned only with means" (that is, as their *object*) and still "relate to different specifications of man's end" (that is, as to *that for the sake of which*). Choice would then, as Aristotle says, "discriminate character better than action," since actions would be good or bad depending on the reason they were chosen, not necessarily on the choice of that reason itself.

Wiggins, however, finds this interpretation of Aristotle to be intrinsically implausible, since it seems absurdly obvious that we can in fact deliberate about ends. He argues, for example, that although Aristotle does state that a doctor does not deliberate about whether or not to heal, this does not mean that we could not deliberate about whether to be a doctor in the first place. Wiggins puts this very strongly:

It is absurd to suppose that a man could not deliberate about whether to be a doctor or not; and very nearly as absurd to suppose that Aristotle, even momentarily while writing Book 3, supposed that nobody could deliberate this question. It is so absurd that it is worth asking whether the phrase *deliberating about the end* or *deliberating about happiness* is ambiguous.⁶

Wiggins appears to be arguing that the interpretation which restricts deliberation to means must attribute to Aristotle the position that we cannot deliberate about whether or not to be a doctor (or any other occupation), which is clearly absurd.

It is so clearly absurd, however, that it is worth asking whether or not that characterization of Aristotle does indeed follow necessarily from the position that we do not deliberate about ends. A clue may be found in Aristotle's notion of subordinate ends, according to which ends that fall under higher ends are pursued for the sake of those higher ends (1094a7-18). This distinction furnishes us with the tools we need in order to reconcile the position that we do not deliberate about ends with the obvious fact that we can deliberate about whether or not to be a doctor. Accordingly, there could be deliberation about whether or not to be a doctor, but only insofar as it is "for the sake of" some further end, not insofar as it is itself an end. Insofar as it is an end, there would be

⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

deliberation only about means towards it (i.e., the best means for producing health). Once the choice is made to be a doctor, one can of course at some point deliberate once again whether or not to be a doctor, but only insofar as its status as the best *means* towards some further end is being reconsidered. It therefore does not follow that if only means were subject to deliberation, then ordinary deliberations such as whether or not to be a doctor would be impossible.

Another difficulty arises from the reconciliation proposed by Wiggins between his interpretation of deliberation as applying to ends, and Aristotle's statement that happiness is not subject to deliberation (1111b30). According to Wiggins, although there can be no deliberation about whether or not to pursue happiness, the possibility remains of deliberating about what practically speaking happiness *is*, or what constitutes happiness. This reconciliation would be consistent with the text of Aristotle but for one item - Wiggins concedes that there also can be no deliberation about whether to pursue *health*, since Aristotle explicitly lists it together with happiness (1111b27-30). The difficulty is that Wiggins had proposed the following explanation for why there can be no deliberation about whether to pursue happiness:

...if the desirability of eudaimonia were really up for debate, then nothing suitable by way of practical or ethical concern or by way of desire would be left over (outside the ambit of eudaimonia itself) to settle the matter.⁷

Thus, we cannot deliberate about whether to pursue happiness precisely because there is no ethical concern or desire which is not subsumed under happiness, and therefore nothing outside of happiness by which it could be judged regarding its worthiness for pursuit. This explanation cannot be applied to health, however, since there are "practical and ethical concerns" and "desires" outside the ambit of health. Indeed, for Aristotle the decision to forego health is sometimes the right one. For example, there are some actions which are so heinous that one should rather die than perform them, even under duress (1110a27). Further, death in battle is, for Aristotle not only noble, but the most noble of all (1115a25-35). Consequently, if the reason there can be no deliberation about whether to pursue happiness is that there is no ethical concern outside of happiness, then according to this line of thought, *we should be able to deliberate about whether to pursue health*. Accordingly, Wiggins' explanation that health is an undeliberable end because, for Aristotle, it is "an undetachable part of the end for human beings," is insufficient.⁸ According to Wiggins' own reasoning, this "part" of the end can conflict with other "parts," such as bravery, and therefore can be deliberated against them regarding its very *pursuit*, not merely its "specification" and "practical determination." Thus, under Wiggins' reasoning, the fact that Aristotle lists health along with happiness is inexplicable.

Under the notion that deliberation is limited to means, however, the difficulty disappears, since both health and happiness would be undeliberable in the same sense - as ends. Although one (happiness) is the ultimate end, while the other is a limited end and is therefore also for the sake of a higher end (1097b1-6), nevertheless *insofar as each is an end*, each is not deliberated. All of Aristotle's examples of undeliberated ends would then

⁷ Ibid., p. 226.

⁸ Ibid., p. 227.

be undeliberable in the very same sense, including the doctor's end of making people healthy, the orator's end of persuading, and the statesman's end of enacting good laws (1112b12-15). Under this explanation, it is therefore perfectly understandable that Aristotle lists health along with happiness as an undeliberable end, since the fact that one is never deliberated while the other is sometimes deliberated is irrelevant to the fact that both are undeliberable insofar as they are ends.

Further difficulties present themselves in Wiggins' reading of two texts from Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, from which he argues that the deliberation of ends is explicitly allowed by Aristotle:

...it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general (*poia pros to eu zen holos*). (1140a24-28, Ross translation, used by Wiggins)

The man who is without qualification good at deliberating is the man who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the best for man of things attainable by action. Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only - it must also recognize particulars. (1141b8-18, Ross)

From these texts, Wiggins concludes that practical wisdom is concerned with not only "the attainment of particular formed objectives," but also "questions of general policy - what specific objectives to form."⁹

It is difficult to see the basis for this particular interpretation in the texts cited. The distinction made by Aristotle in the first text above appears to be not between the attainment of objectives and the formation of objectives, but rather between the attainment of more limited objectives, such as health and strength, and the attainment of more universal objectives, the most universal of all being the good life in general. Accordingly, Aristotle would merely be stating that a mark of one who has practical wisdom is the ability to recognize the best means towards the highest ends of human life, not merely the best means towards more limited ends, such as health and strength. Practical wisdom (and therefore deliberation) would then be specifically concerned with means as its *object*, not with "what specific objectives to form," although it must indeed be "concerned" with the highest objectives as *that for the sake of which*.

Regarding the second text cited by Wiggins above, his reading of 'universals' as "what specific objectives to form" becomes clearly questionable when we consider the immediate context, in which Aristotle cites specific examples:

...if a man knew universally that light meats are digestible and healthy but did not know what kinds of meats are light, he would not produce health, but a man who knows that chicken is light and healthy is more likely to produce health. Now prudence is concerned with actions; so we should have both kinds of knowledge, or else the latter rather than the former, which is universal. (1141b18-23, Apostle trans.)

⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

In this analogy with health, the example of a 'universal' is that light meats are digestible and healthy, and the example of a 'particular' is that chicken is light and healthy. Both of these are useful and expedient for attaining the end of health, although the particular is more useful, since it specifies an actual action which can be undertaken (i.e., eating chicken). In this text, then, the distinction between particular and universal is not between "the attainment of particular formed objectives" and "what specific objectives to form," but rather between a general knowledge of what *kind* of means should be used (light meats), and a more particular knowledge of a specific means (chicken), which can be immediately acted upon. Both are expedient means toward the end of health, not the formation of the end or objective itself.

III

Although the exposition of a neo-Aristotelian theory of practical wisdom in the third section of Wiggins' essay contains several important and questionable interpretations of happiness in general, such as the particular notion of incommensurability used by him, we have chosen to focus upon the difficulties involved in his prior interpretation of deliberation, since these form the basis for his later analyses. One important assumption in his essay, however, is worthy of note. Wiggins grounds his thesis that ends are subject to deliberation upon the view that the various virtues are *constituents* of happiness.¹⁰ As constituents of the ultimate end itself, they would not be ordered to any higher end. Consequently, the virtues would be incommensurable with one another, since conflicts between virtues would not be resolvable in terms of any common end. It is perfectly understandable that under this view the sole arbiter of such conflicts would be "situational appreciation," as Wiggins emphasizes.

Given that the proponents of this interpretation of eudaimonia are largely critical of the ancient and medieval tradition regarding the interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy, it is not surprising that we find a member of that tradition, Aquinas, presenting an alternative interpretation of the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This alternative not only renders so-called "incommensurable" conflicts much more rational, but also is much more in keeping with Aristotle's comments concerning happiness in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as Book 7 of the *Politics*. Since a complete explication of this alternative is beyond the scope of this essay, we will present it in sketch form, in order to at least indicate its status as an attractive alternative.

In Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that perfect happiness is activity in accordance with not just any virtue, but the *highest* virtue (1177a12-17). This virtue is contemplative wisdom, or contemplation of the highest objects (1177a18-21, 1141a20), since this is the activity of the highest or "divine" part of us (1177a16, 1178a23), the activity which is most self-sufficient (1177a33-1177b1), and not loved for anything else (1177b2-4). These were precisely the criteria given by Aristotle for happiness in Book 1 (1097a35-b1, 7-15). The other virtues, however, are happiness in a *secondary* way (1178a9) since they are activities of the parts in us which are not "divine"

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 224. See J. L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 15-34.

(1178a10-22), not self-sufficient (1177a30-33), and are loved also for something else (1177b17-18). Consequently, virtues other than contemplative wisdom would be desirable both in themselves and for something else, and therefore would not be perfect happiness (1097a33-35).

Accordingly, conflicts between virtues would not result in the radical incommensurability described by Wiggins (having no common end at all). Such a highest end would by no means be a "universal rule" in the sense criticized by Wiggins in his reply to Allan, since particular circumstances could, as always, affect or prevent altogether the manner and means by which the end would be actualized. The "situational appreciation" of practical wisdom would therefore still play a vital role in the practical actualization of any virtue. Since the benefits of this interpretation include the elimination of radical incommensurability without appeal to universal Kantian "rules," as well as the unification of Book 10 with Books 1, 3, 6, and 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Book 7 of the *Politics*, its status as a viable alternative is worthy of consideration.