MAKING SENSE OF THE SENTENCE:

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS I.2.1094A18–22

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Abstract: Early on in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that there must be a single end or good desired for its own sake, for the sake of which all of our other ends are desired. The argument includes the following conditional: “If we chose everything for the sake of something else so that the process went on forever, then our desire would be empty and futile.” This paper addresses that conditional. First, I explain why the conditional appears to be false. Second, I resolve some ambiguity in it. Third, I argue that the conditional enjoys a plausible and charitable reading when understood as a claim about ordinary human lives and psychology, and when read in the context of Aristotle’s conception of ethics.

Keywords: Aristotle’s ethics, The Sentence (NE 1094a18-22), the highest good, instrumentally desired ends, intrinsically desired end

I. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) begins with the claim that “every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good” (*NE* I.1.1094a1–3).

Everything we choose to do is aimed at some good (*agathos*) or end (*telos*). The end of medicine is health, the end of shipbuilding is a vessel, in strategy it is victory, in economics it is wealth, and so on for all of the things we choose to do. But in the opening paragraphs of *NE*, Aristotle argues for a more ambitious claim than the anodyne claim that everything we do is for the sake of some end. He argues that there must be one highest end of all of our choices and actions. Unlike an end such as victory, the highest end is pursued solely for its own sake. It is in virtue of that highest end that all other ends are pursued. Aristotle’s argument for that claim includes a difficult sentence that has vexed, puzzled, and divided commentators. Vranas (2005) calls it “the Sentence”:

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\text{εἰ δὴ [A] τι τέλος ἐστὶ τῶν πρακτῶν ὃ δι᾽ αὑτὸ βουλόμεθα, τὰλλα δὲ διὰ τοῦτο, καὶ [B] μὴ πάντα δι᾽ ἄλλου αἱρούμεθα ([C] πρόεισι γάρ οὕτω γ᾽ εἰς ἄπειρον, ὥστ᾽ [C′] εἶναι κενὴν καὶ ματαίων τήν ὅρεξιν), δὴλον ὡς [D] τοῦτ᾽ ἄν εἰῃ τάγαθον καὶ τὸ ἄριστον. (NE I.2.1094a18–22)}
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If, then, [A] there is some end of the things we do, which we choose for its own sake (everything else being chosen for the sake of this), and if [B] we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for [C] at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that [C'] our desire would be empty and futile), clearly [D] this must be the good and the chief good.²

There are three main ways to interpret the Sentence: (1) B, so A, so D; (2) B, and as an additional and hypothetical claim, if A then D; and (3) A and B, so D.³

Interpretation (1) makes the function of the Sentence transparent, but at the cost of rendering it guilty of the use of an obvious fallacy, namely, “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” (Ackrill 1980: 68). This would be like arguing that because all roads lead to one city or another, there is one city to which all roads lead.⁴ Interpretation (2) removes that fallacy, but at the expense of adding opacity to the function of the Sentence. That is, (2) takes Aristotle in the NE I.2.1094a18–22 to be simply averring that we do not choose everything for the sake of something else, with the addendum that if there is some end of the things we do which we desire for its own sake then this must be the chief good.⁵ Interpretation (3) is what Vranas calls “the literal interpretation.”⁶ It holds that Aristotle infers D from the conjunction A & B, and appears to remove the fallacy that plagues (1). (3) also makes it clear what the function of the Sentence is, thus avoiding the main issue with (2). It would seem, then, that a plausible case can be made for the literal interpretation of the NE I.2.1094a18–22.

However, Vranas and Wedin miss an important objection to the literal interpretation of the Sentence. It’s unclear why Aristotle assumes that the conditional $C \rightarrow C'$, i.e., “if [C] everything we choose is chosen because of something else and so on without limit so that the process is infinite, then [C'] our desire will be empty and futile” is true. As Gabriel Lear points out, there are ordinary cases in which $C \rightarrow C'$ seems to be false:

I must confess that as a point about practical desire, I do not think Aristotle’s arguments succeed. All we need for desire is an end that is desirable for its own sake, an end we need not desire for some further purpose in order to lend value to the means for and ends subordinate to it. As far as desire is concerned, I see no reason why it matters whether this end is in turn desirable for the sake of further ends. What is important is that it be genuinely desirable for its own sake. If it is, my desire and action will not be in vain. In other words, what would be objectionable about an infinite chain of middle-level ends? . . . This is one of the many places where I think Aristotle’s tendency to discuss ends in terms of desire can be misleading. (G. Lear 2004: 20)

Suppose that I desire to build a boat for the sake of going fishing. I desire to go fishing both for its own sake (it is an enjoyable activity) and for the sake of the income it produces. That I desire fishing (in part) because of the income it produces (and so on ad infinitum) does not threaten to make desire in vain, because I also value fishing for its own sake. Similar scenarios come to mind for exercising, healing as a doctor, knitting, mural painting, constructing proofs, writing, singing, and other such activities. A doctor might heal patients because she finds healing each patient a deeply fulfilling activity on its own terms, and also for the sake of eradicating
disease altogether. Such a doctor might go on desiring and choosing each middle-
level end, that is, healing each patient one after another, without any termination to
the new (generations of) patients. The middle-level ends have no termination. She
might well have a deeply fulfilling life and career without ever eradicating disease.
Her desires for middle-level ends seem neither empty nor futile. In general, then,
Aristotle seems to presuppose the truth of the conditional, “If agent S desires and
chooses end $E_1$ for the sake of $E_2$, then S can’t desire or choose $E_1$ for the sake of
$E_2$.” But there are plenty of ordinary counterexamples. On the literal interpretation
of the Sentence, the truth of $C \rightarrow C'$ is required in order for Aristotle to prove $B$, which, along with $A$, is Aristotle’s support for proving $D$. As it stands, the literal
interpretation saddles Aristotle with a fallacy: he relies on the truth of $C \rightarrow C'$
to establish that there must be a highest good or end, when in fact that conditional
appears to be quite clearly false.  

My aim is to give good reasons for thinking that read as a point about ordinary
human psychology and practical desire, the conditional $C \rightarrow C'$ is as plausible as the
argument (and the science of ethics) requires. In so doing, I will defend the literal
interpretation of NE I.2.1094a18–22 against the objection that it leaves Aristotle in-
ferring $D$ on the basis of the false conjunction $A \& B$. First, I clarify what, precisely,
$C \rightarrow C'$ means by attempting to resolve pockets of ambiguity (Section II). Next, I
apply distinctions between: (1) Aristotle’s account of (a) the precision required of
ethics and (b) the precision required of geometry; (2) (a) instrumentally desired
ends and (b) intrinsically desired ends; (3) (a) chains of desired ends in ordinary
human lives and (b) theoretically possible but highly unlikely chains of ends; and
(4) (a) a chain of desired ends with a highest end functioning as the most powerful
standing desire and (b) a chain without such an end or desire (Section III). Without
an end desired not for the sake of any further end, a powerful standing desire that
comes back into focus when those ends are painful to pursue, it is difficult to see
how an ordinary human being (most of us) will be properly motivated to pursue
instrumentally desired ends (most of our ends).  

II. DISAMBIGUATING $C \rightarrow C'$

A careful reader might think that Aristotle’s conditional $C \rightarrow C'$, when formalized,
looks neat and tidy, but that its antecedent and its consequent are in fact both full of
messy ambiguity:

$[B]$ μὴ πάντα δι᾽ ἕτερον αἱρούμεθα ([C] πρόεισι γὰρ οὕτω γ´ εἰς ἄπειρον, ὥστε
[C'] εἶναι κενὴν καὶ ματαίαν τὴν ὄρεξιν) 

$[B]$ We do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for [C] at
that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that [C'] our desire would be
empty and futile).

What does it mean to choose in this context? What counts as the thing that is cho-
sen—anything at all? Can the infinite series be circular?

What is the ‘something else’ (ἕτερον)—the thing that is chosen in the condi-
tional’s antecedent? In [C], it is counterfactually supposed that we choose everything
for the sake of something else so that the process goes on to infinity. Are there
restrictions on the things we choose in that series? Must it be an external product such as a military victory, a boat or a bridle? Or can the choice-worthy thing be a mental state such as calmness? This passage occurs very early on in *NE*. It’s part of an introduction. At this stage, Aristotle is reporting in a predominantly descriptive way the relevant appearances (τὰ φαινόμενα) and the common opinions (τὰ ἐνδοξά). This is his favorite method whether in natural philosophy (*Physics* I), the study of life (*De Anima* I), or ethics: “We must, as in all other cases, set the apparent facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible the truth of all the common opinions about these affections of the mind” (*NE* VII.1.1145b2–7). The appearances are not to be tossed away once the more sagacious philosopher has made use of them. Rather, for Aristotle, the appearances are vital. They are to be preserved as much as possible in the rest of the inquiry. The Sentence occurs before Aristotle has begun to discuss the relevant difficulties among the appearances. So, Aristotle probably takes for granted the diversity of choice-worthy ends in ordinary lives. Some choice-worthy ends are obvious, such as a boat. Other times the end might be subtler, such as peace of mind. He focuses more on obvious ends such as external products and activities in large part because they are more immediately apparent. He seems to have in mind chains of ends in which many ends are not solely psychological but, rather, external.

However, it appears that Aristotle is not engaging in merely descriptive analysis when he states the Sentence. He seems to articulate his opinion on the appearances and common intuitions, however plausible and prosaic he takes his opinion to be. So, in scrutinizing a crucial clause in the Sentence I think I am scrutinizing not merely ancient Greek common sense but, rather, inferences the validity of which Aristotle firmly endorsed. But on the other hand, I take it that the most accurate way of analyzing the validity of those inferences will treat their subject matter to be ordinary human lives.

Can the infinite or unlimited (ἄπειρον) chain of choice-worthy ends postulated in C contain iterations, such that the infinite chain might be circular? One might think the counterfactually posited infinite chain of chosen ends could be circular: agent S chooses end E₁ for the sake of E₂, E₂ for the sake of E₃, and E₃ for the sake of E₁. But Aristotle might well take issue with the assumption that any circular series of desired and chosen ends (or a circular series of anything) is infinite. He argues that rings and circles, though sometimes described as infinite, are not really so. For, “it is necessary also that the same part should never be taken twice,” whereas “in the circle, the latter condition is not satisfied: it is true only that the next part is always different” (*Phys*. III.6.207a2–7, *Phys*. VIII.8.265a20–28). Still, one might argue that those stipulations seem arbitrary. Isn’t the series 1,2,3,3,4,5,6,6,7, . . . infinite, even though it contains iteration?

Bracketing such concerns about the oddity of Aristotle’s account of the infinite, one might say that the formalization above—E₁ for E₂, E₂ for E₃, E₃ for E₁—is misleading. For in one sense, it’s clear that ends can’t really iterate. I can build the same boat twice. But I can’t build it a second time at precisely the same time at which I built it the first time. Perhaps I can have the same thought twice. But I can’t have that thought at precisely the same time at which I had it the first time.
If each end is temporally distinct then they don’t really iterate. Often this is not merely a temporal distinction. My desire for a certain income one year might be situated in a different context from my desire for that same income the next year. My children’s needs might have grown over the course of a year. Even with a loose construal of ‘iteration’ such that a temporal distinction between ends doesn’t entail that the ends can’t be the same, there are often more important differences between the contexts in which otherwise-identical ends are chosen. So, Aristotle might have justifiably not considered this a genuine ambiguity.

However, Broadie argues that there is not necessarily anything wrong, “logically or in any other way” with an infinite series of desired ends:

Suppose that the ends and activities were related in such a way that in pursuing end E₁ we were also effectively pursuing E₂, and thereby E₃, and so on. Thus in saying ‘Yes’ I express affirmation, in giving you that information I enable you to draw a certain conclusion, and so on. If we had a series of ends that were different but not strung out at spatial or temporal intervals, could not they all be accomplished in accomplishing the first, even if the series were infinite? (1991: 13)

I doubt that this would be a concern for Aristotle. Suppose I’m asked, “Can you spare some change?” I desire to express affirmation by saying “Yes.” Call that E₁. By accomplishing E₁, I enable that person to infer that I am about to give them some change. Call that E₂—and so on. Suppose that by accomplishing Eₙ, I enable that person to feel as though their day is improving. Call that Eₙ. But E₂ and Eₙ seem temporally distinct. In short, it is not clear what sorts of specific series of ends Broadie has in mind such that there would be no temporal distinction between E₂, E₃, E₄, etc. Even if these technical issues can be overcome, I suspect that for Aristotle, such spatiotemporally identical ends would not be distinct. If the same person achieves at the same time each of these ends, then they are not distinct. Choosing and desiring infinitely many ends isn’t a capacity of human psychology.¹⁰

III. WHY C → C’ HOLDS FOR THE MOST PART

Suppose that I desire to build a boat for the sake of going fishing, and I desire to go fishing both for its own sake (it is an enjoyable activity) and for the sake of the income it produces. But the fact that I desire it (in part) because of the income it produces (and so on ad infinitum) does not make my desire empty or vain. For I also value fishing for its own sake. Similarly, a mathematician might do mathematical proofs for the sake of her career and also because she delights in the process itself. A doctor might heal people in part because she enjoys doing so and also for the sake of income. In short, it might very well be the case that S desires and chooses end Eₙ for the sake of Eₙ₊₁ while also desiring and choosing Eₙ for the sake of Eₙ. The fact that S chooses and desires E₁ for the sake of Eₙ seems to show that S’s desiring and choosing Eₙ isn’t empty or futile. Why, then, does Aristotle assume that if everything we choose is chosen for the sake of something else then our desire would be empty and futile?¹¹
III.A. \(CP(C \rightarrow C')\) RATHER THAN \(C \rightarrow C'\)

To form an accurate answer to that question (why does Aristotle assume that if everything we choose is chosen for the sake of something else then our desire would be empty and futile), it’s vital to get clear on the context of the Sentence. Its context is an introduction to Aristotle’s major work in ethics. For Aristotle, all that is required of ethics is that claims hold “for the most part” rather than out of necessity. That is, “the genus with which the science of ethics is concerned [for Aristotle] collects truths which hold ‘for the most part’ rather than by an iron necessity; and in that sense ethics is less rigorous than geometry” (Barnes 2003: 21). The Pythagorean theorem is true not just for the most part. Rather, it’s true in the sense that it does not admit of counterexamples. Though ethics and politics are sciences where we can and do demand precision, it is a mistake, Aristotle argues, to expect the highest level of precision in such sciences:

> Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions. . . We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true, and with premises of the same kind, to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs. (NE I.3.1094b13–27)

Soon afterwards, Aristotle reminds us that we should “not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry” (NE I.7.1098a25–28). He reiterates: “the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter” (NE II.2.1103b35–1104a3). For, he argues, “matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health” (NE II.2.1104a4–6). In general, “discussions about feelings and actions have only as much definiteness as their subject-matter” (NE IX.2.1165a12–14, V.10.1137B13–21).

Aristotle holds that sciences such as ethics and politics admit of variance and fluctuation in ways that a science such as mathematics does not. What is good for one person in one context might not be good for that same person in a different context, or for a different person in the same context. But context-sensitivity isn’t an issue—and never was, and never will be—for the geometrical truth that the sum of the three internal angles of a triangle is 180 degrees. Aristotle’s \(C \rightarrow C'\) is a claim about ethics, not a more precise science such as geometry. So \(C \rightarrow C'\), on Aristotle’s account, might well hold for the most part rather than out of necessity. We can characterize this as a distinction between a more conservative, ceteris paribus (CP) version of \(C \rightarrow C'\) as opposed to a less conservative, unqualified version of \(C \rightarrow C'\):
If everything we choose were chosen for the sake of something else then every one of our desires would necessarily be empty and futile; and

If everything we choose were chosen for the sake of something else then for the most part our desires would be empty and futile.

If there are fatal objections to \( C \rightarrow C' \), such that \( C \rightarrow C' \) is false, that does not entail that \( CP(C \rightarrow C') \) is false.

One might raise the objection that my proposed invocation of Aristotle’s views about the imprecision of ethics in this context looks somewhat ad hoc. Why apply it here and not to other claims in the text that appear to be exceptionless and universal? It would be odd if Aristotle thought that ‘for the most part’ should be understood to precede claims such as “adultery, theft, and murder are never correct,” that generosity is a virtue, or that the vicious cannot be happy. Instead, my contention is more modest and, I think, more plausible. On the one hand, I am drawing on the fact that Aristotle frequently reminds his audience throughout NE that an accurate account of ethics must be given “in outline and not precisely.” Morality, on Aristotle’s account, requires many generalizations that hold not unqualifiedly but, rather, “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way” (NE II.6.1106b21–22).

On the other hand, I am not suggesting that Aristotle thinks all claims in ethics hold only for the most part, including each clause in the Sentence. Arguing that \( C \rightarrow C' \) in an important sense holds only for the most part does not entail that any of Aristotle’s universal claims should be read in that way. This is not to employ his ‘for the most part’ claim about ethics and politics in an ad hoc way, designed solely for one particular purpose in one specific clause without regard for context. I doubt that there is an algorithm or general principle by which we can determine precisely which of Aristotle’s ethical claims hold without exception and which do not. Rather, each claim should be evaluated on its own and in its context to find the most sensible reading. That’s what I’m trying to do here for the Sentence and, in particular, for \( C \rightarrow C' \).

But why should we think that \( CP(C \rightarrow C') \) is true? Why think that most of our desires would be empty and futile if each of our ends were desired for the sake of a further end? Recall that at this stage Aristotle’s main task is reporting the appearances (\( τὰ \ φαινόμενα \)) and the common opinions (\( τὰ \ ἔνδοξα \)) concerning the subject at hand. Given that the examples Aristotle gives leading up to the Sentence are prosaic enough (such as bridle-making and shipbuilding), and given Aristotle’s firm commitment to the preservation of commonsense intuitions, he seems to have in mind a chain of desired ends that occurs in most ordinary human lives. In most ordinary human lives, most ends are desired instrumentally, as opposed to a theoretically possible but rather unusual chain of desired ends wherein most ends are desired
intrinsically. By an intrinsically desired end I mean one desired more for its own sake than for the sake of a further end, and by an instrumentally desired end, one desired more for the sake of a further end than for its own sake. Most of us don’t—and most people in the ancient world didn’t—have the luxury of filling days and nights doing intrinsically desired activities. For example, it seems that most people enjoy sleeping. But if health and alertness weren’t compromised then we would probably spend those eight hours every night doing something more interesting.

Similarly, I don’t enjoy waking up early in the morning. But I still desire and choose that end. I do so for the sake of getting to a classroom to teach on time. It’s an instrumentally desired end. Ditto for brushing my teeth, printing handouts, making my way to campus, etc. I desire and choose to teach in part because I enjoy teaching. But removing duties and the imperative to make a living, I would rather be doing more research, spending time with friends and loved ones, going for a long walk on a beautiful day, and so on. Widen the scope of an ordinary person’s reasonable alternative possibilities—those that won’t prevent one from doing one’s duties—and it will soon become apparent that we do much of what we do more for the sake of a further end than for its own sake.

That instrumentality was true of most ancient lives too. Aristotle distinguishes between the instrumentality of human activities and the entirely end-like leisure of the gods. It would be absurd to say that the gods “make contracts and return deposits, and so on” (NE X.8.1178b11–12). For, “if we were to run through them all, the circumstances of action would be found trivial and unworthy of the gods” (NE 1178b17–19). Instead, the life of a god, “which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative” (NE 1178b21–22). For human beings, though the life “most akin to the contemplative life of the gods must be most of the nature of happiness,” it’s still the case that “the whole of life is further divided into two parts, business and leisure, war and peace, and of actions some aim at what is necessary and useful, and some at what is honorable,” and “there must be war for the sake of peace, business for the sake of leisure, things useful and necessary for the sake of things honorable” (NE X.8.1178b23–24, Pol. VII.14.1333a31–33, 35–36). That is, “peace, as has been often repeated, is the end of war, and leisure of toil” (Pol. VII.15.1334a14–15); “in a word, everything that we choose we choose for the sake of something else—except happiness, which is an end” (NE X.6.1176b30–31).

Unlike the gods, human beings “need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention” (NE X.8.1178b33–1179a1). We “take trouble and suffer hardship all our lives” for the sake of happiness (NE X.6.1176b29–30). When it comes to virtuous acts and the second-happiest kind of human life available, namely, the life in accordance with moral virtue, “the liberal man will need money for the doing of his liberal deeds, and the just man too will need it for the returning of services” (NE 1178a29–30). So, too, “the brave man will need power if he is to accomplish any of the acts that correspond to his virtue, and the temperate man will need opportunity” (NE 1178a33–34). Even relaxation is instrumental for us in an important sense: “we need relaxation because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end; for it is taken for the sake of activity” (NE X.6.1176b35–37).
The ratio of instrumentally desired ends to intrinsically desired ends will vary from one person to another, as will the degree to which instrumentally desired ends are desired. But it still seems reasonable for Aristotle to expect that on average and for ordinary people, the majority of our desired ends are desired more for the sake of further ends than for their own sake. It’s unlikely, I think, that most of us would brave horrendous traffic if we didn’t have to drive to and from work everyday. Nor would war be waged, Aristotle notes, were it not for the further end of peace. All but the most zealous ancient soldiers would presumably not have marched into battle if not for income and/or freedom.

We have seen that Aristotle is happy to accommodate the fluctuation that characterizes some of the claims in ethics and politics. He is well aware that, unlike geometry where a single counterexample is sufficient to falsify a claim, ethics and politics allow for more flexibility. $CP(C \rightarrow C')$ might fluctuate in another way and still be true. It needn’t be true for every person in the same ratio. ‘For the most part’ is itself a vague locution, even if it’s usually clear what it entails.

There is a second distinction to be made. $CP(C \rightarrow C')$ is the alternative to there being “some end of the things we do, which we choose for its own sake (everything else being chosen for the sake of this)” (NE I.2.1094a18–20). Implicit in this dichotomy is the following reasoning: Either the chain of desired ends stops, or it doesn’t. If it stops, then it must stop with an end that isn’t desired for the sake of a further end. For if it were desired for the sake of a further end, then it wouldn’t stop the chain of ends. It wouldn’t be the highest end. So, the end that stops the chain must be desired just for its own sake. If, on the other hand, the chain doesn’t stop, then it goes on forever. So every desired end, everything we do, is desired for the sake of a further end. There does not exist an end that is desired solely for its own sake (or else the chain would stop there).

On my reading, when Aristotle states that our desire would be empty and futile as a result of such an absence, he means “for the most part,” that is, he means most of our desires. He has in mind the reasonable generalization that most of the things we do ($τῶν πρακτῶν$) are done more the sake of further ends than for their own sake.

Even if Aristotle takes it for granted that most of our ordinary ends are desired instrumentally, it still might appear too strong to infer that in the absence of a highest end all or most of our instrumentally desired ends are desired in an empty and futile way. But I think that a useful way of capturing a large part of what Aristotle has in mind is to apply a distinction between standing desires and occurrent desires. By a standing desire I mean one that does not always play a direct role in one’s psyche at any given time, but is in the back of one’s mind for a long period of time and more or less continuously during that time. It often indirectly affects one’s decisions, and sometimes directly affects one’s decisions. For example, a deadline for the submission of a book manuscript two years in the future doesn’t trouble a person when she deliberates between two eggs or three for breakfast. Nor does it directly affect her when she is annoyed at being cut off by another car on the way to work. But if she experiences anything related to her project or if she draws any connection between her experiences and her project, the deadline and its duties come back into focus. Often the deadline vaguely has some effect, a constant prodding to continue reading, writing, and revising whenever possible.
It might manifest itself as a kind of guilt that is intensified whenever she is aware that sufficient progress isn’t being made and she isn’t preoccupied with something else. By an occurrent desire I mean one that plays a direct role in one’s psyche at the time, but does not play a more long-lasting or indirect role. Imagine that the manuscript submission’s deadline is the next day. Now the deadline is constantly on her mind, directly impacting her desires and choices. But the desire will be forgotten soon afterwards.

In the part of the *NE* in which the Sentence occurs, Aristotle has not yet identified what the highest good or end is. He hasn’t yet identified it as happiness. Nor has he defined human happiness. All that is salient for Aristotle at this stage is that the highest end is *unique* in being desired *only* for its own sake. By understanding the highest end as the most powerful standing desire, we can make sense of Aristotle’s inferring that our desires for instrumentally desired ends would be empty and futile in its absence. Especially when pursuing painful, instrumentally desired ends, or when pursuing a seemingly intractable series of instrumentally desired ends (or both), that standing desire becomes vital for my motivation. It seems plausible that most of us require a source of motivation that is not necessarily some general and coherent explanation that we can communicate to someone else, but simply an end desired solely for its own sake. That powerful standing desire might linger unassumingly when I eat a large, delicious meal. It’s not crucial in that case. For I get a great deal of enjoyment out of eating the delicious meal. But it comes sharply back into focus when I deny myself that delicious meal, having a more basic meal instead, for the sake of my health (e.g., so as not to aggravate one’s diabetes). When there appear to be much more enjoyable alternatives than the end I know to be the most sensible and productive one to pursue, it is strikingly helpful to have a powerful standing desire that draws me toward the seemingly less enjoyable but more productive end.

There might be plenty of powerful standing desires in an infinite chain of desired ends *without* some highest end (since the chain is infinite) functioning as the most powerful standing desire. Those standing desires might help to motivate us in some cases. But each of them is desired at least in part for the sake of something else. Not one of them is a *limit* to the series of things I desire. They cannot provide motivation entirely on their own terms. That fact has far-reaching implications for human motivation. However powerful some standing desire might be in an infinite chain of desired ends, the achievement of the end for which I have a standing desire will, in an infinite chain, simply amount to a subtraction of one end from an infinite collection of ends. No matter how many desired ends I achieve, there remain infinitely many desired yet unachieved ends.

But even if I do not realize these facts, without a highest end I cannot have in my psyche an end that pulls my desire solely in its own right. Aristotle thinks this has devastating consequences. He appears to argue that if there were an infinite series of desired ends without any possible limit, no one would bother doing anything:

The final cause is an end, and that sort of end which is not for the sake something else, but for whose sake everything else is; so that if there is to be a last term of this sort, the process will not be infinite; but if there is no such term there will be no final cause. But those who maintain the infinite series destroy
the good. . . . No one would try to do anything if he were not going to come to a limit. Nor would there be reason in the world: the reasonable man, at least, always acts for a purpose; and this is a limit, for the end is a limit [τὸ γὰρ τέλος πέρας ἐστίν]. (*Metaph. a*.2.994b9–15)

Like the case of the conditional, ‘if we choose everything for the sake of something else then desire would be empty and futile,’ Aristotle seems to infer too much. Even if I don’t have any highest end, or any kind of standing desire not desired for the sake of anything else, I might desire to go fishing because I enjoy fishing and because I have a good chance of catching a fish. That desire seems neither empty nor futile. Those cases are common: we do many things not just for the sake of something else but also because we enjoy doing them. On a more charitable reading, though, the puzzles that seem to crop up in an analysis of the passage above are similar to some of the puzzles I’ve addressed for the Sentence. As such, as I’ve argued in my reading of the Sentence, Aristotle wouldn’t take issue with the presence of intrinsically desired ends. That concession doesn’t endanger the highly plausible claim that most ordinary human lives require us to pursue many instrumentally desired ends, often a long series of such ends. Without an end desired not for the sake of any further end, one which comes back into focus when those ends are painful to pursue, it is difficult to see how an ordinary human being (most of us) will be motivated to pursue them. Aristotle’s conditional doesn’t hold out of necessity. But it doesn’t need to. It holds for the most part. That is what the science of ethics requires.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

One might worry that Aristotle wants his thesis of an infinite regress to apply to intrinsically desired ends as well. For his final view will be that all ends are rationally ordered and choice-worthy ultimately in virtue of their contribution to happiness, “since this is what we state the end of human affairs to be” (*NE X*6.1176a32). So, one might think, the requirement of practical rationality applies no less to ends desired intrinsically than to those desired instrumentally. There are, then, two main questions that seem relevant at this stage: (1) Even where we choose something for its own sake, is it necessarily chosen also for the sake of happiness? (2) How can one choose something for its own sake and also for the sake of happiness? Aristotle’s answer to (1) is ‘yes,’ but his answer to (2) is a subject of a great deal of controversy. Close scrutiny of such long-standing debates falls outside my scope here. I’ll briefly explain: why (2) is a puzzling area of Aristotle’s ethics; some of the main approaches to those puzzles; and why those puzzles are not problematic for the specific view argued for in this paper.

As to (1), Aristotle says that happiness is that for the sake of which we do all that we do: “an end for all [ἁπάντων] that we do” (*NE I*.7.1097a21–22, emphasis is mine). A final and over-arching end is required in order for all ends to have a proper place within a single life: happiness, the highest end, is “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” (*NE I*.7.1097a18–21). For Aristotle, “happiness, then, is something final
and self-sufficient, and is the end of action” (*NE* I.7.1097b20–21). It seems clear, therefore, that for Aristotle everything we choose is necessarily chosen for the sake of happiness. *A fortiori*, everything chosen for its own sake is necessarily chosen for the sake of happiness.

As to (2), it seems pre-theoretically odd for ends to be desired both for their own sake and for the sake of other ends. For, as Luthra observes, “it seems safe to assume that an action is to be chosen for its own sake only if it would be choice-worthy whether or not it served further ends” (2015: 423). Similarly, Ackrill (1980: 18) finds it perplexing that “some things may be done for their own sake and may yet be done for the sake of something else.”

Yet Aristotle does not appear to be sensitive to these difficulties when he generates them:

> 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 itself and never for the sake of something else, but honor, 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 through 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. (*NE* I.7.1097b1–7)

In connection with this passage and related passages, there are at least two different though deeply connected puzzles discussed in the literature: first, why Aristotle thinks that virtuous actions such as generous giving are choice-worthy for their own sake and also for the sake of ends such as benefitting the recipient of the giving; and, second, why Aristotle thinks that virtuous actions are choice-worthy for their own sake and also for the sake of happiness. Engberg-Pedersen helpfully comments on the latter:

> What may fairly be called the traditional answer to the question of goodness of moral action in Aristotle detects a fundamental inconsistency in his views. On the one hand he seems to insist that moral acts are intrinsically good, or good in themselves. On the other hand his doctrine of certain connected concepts is such that as a consequence moral acts must be considered good due to their being means to *eudaimonia* [= happiness]. (1983: 4)

Employing a well-known distinction first made in Greenwood (1909) between “instrumental” and “component” means (where the former are causal conditions for ends, and the latter merely parts of wholes), Irwin (1977) argues that virtuous action is choice-worthy in itself because it is a component of the final good. Kraut (1976) argues that virtuous action is choice-worthy for its own sake because it is chosen as an essential part of happiness but not as an instrumental means to happiness. Cooper (1986) and Ackrill (1980) argue for similar conclusions. Cooper argues that virtuous action is done for its own sake because, as a constituent of happiness, it contributes to the end of happiness; and Ackrill uses the part-whole relation to argue that virtuous action is done for its own sake in the sense that it is a part of happiness. In contrast, Gabriel Lear (2004) argues that for Aristotle
virtuous action is good for its own sake not because it is constitutive of happiness but, instead, because it is an *approximation* of contemplation, our final end, and happiness. Luthra (2015) argues that for Aristotle virtuous actions are choiceworthy for their own sake because they “have a dimension of goodness that goes beyond their mere usefulness as means to further ends” and, in particular, because virtuous actions are pleasant or noble (or both) (438).

For my purposes here, I see no need to argue for a particular interpretation of why, for Aristotle, there are some cases where an end is choiceworthy both for its own sake and for the sake of a further end, with all ends necessarily chosen for happiness. I’ve focused on a notably different problem: why Aristotle says near the start of the *NE* that if everything we choose were chosen for the sake of something else then our desire would be empty and futile. I’ve argued that, read as a point about ordinary human psychology and practical desire, that conditional is as plausible as is required by the argument and by Aristotle’s account of ethics. More specifically, I’ve argued that we should read the conditional more charitably as:

\[
CP(C \rightarrow C') = df \text{ If everything we choose were chosen for the sake of something else then for the most part our desires would be empty and futile.}
\]

Each of the following seems highly plausible to me: First, in ordinary human lives it just is the case that some of our ends are easier and more attractive to choose and pursue than other ends. Second, for ordinary human beings, most ends (waking up early in the morning, going on a diet, driving to work, and so on) are chosen more for the sake of a further ordinary end (getting to work on time, losing weight, and so on) than for their own sake, such that without an unconditionally desired, highest end (happiness) we would find those ends much more difficult to pursue. Third, we choose some ends and activities in large part just because we enjoy them (such as someone who enjoys helping her friends). And, fourth, some of our ends are chosen both for their own sake and for the sake of further ends (such as a doctor who loves healing and who also wants to earn a living by healing).

Those features of ordinary human lives and my reading of \( C \rightarrow C' \) seem compatible with most interpretations of Aristotle’s view that though all ends are necessarily chosen for happiness, some ends are chosen for their own sake. Those features also seem to lend support to some of the interpretations. Consider the broadly inclusivist readings in Ackrill (1980), Cooper (1986), Engberg-Pederson (1983), Kraut (1976), and Whiting (2002) on which intrinsically desired ends are in some sense parts of happiness. For example, Engberg-Pederson argues:

It is not just that things may be said to be chosen or done both for their own sake and also, more or less gratuitously, for the sake of *eudaimonia* . . . Rather, the very reason why they may be satisfactorily said to be chosen or done for their own sake is that they are referred to *eudaimonia*. (1983: 28–29)

Without any chance of being paid and with more relaxing ways to spend a Saturday, a good person might help a friend move to a new house largely because she sees it as the right thing to do. Realistically, there are reasons she sees as much less important but supporting her choice, such as the prospect of her friend returning the favor at some point. It still seems reasonable to say that she chooses this end
for its own sake. It also seems reasonable that in her ordinary life where most of her ends are pursued more for the sake of further ends than for their own sake (e.g., going to work to earn a living), the very reason why her choosing to help her friend may be satisfactorily said to be chosen for its own sake is that her choice is referred to happiness. She sees her friend’s well being and her actions contributing to his well being as part of her happiness. That does not make it less plausible that she chooses this end for its own sake; on the contrary, it explains why she spends her Saturday helping her friend without being paid to do so.

Aristotle’s NE 1.2.1094a18–22, affectionately known as “the Sentence” is a notoriously difficult passage. I have not tried to solve all of its problems. But I have tried to clarify and defend one of its conditionals, namely, ‘if we choose everything for the sake of something else then our desire would be empty and futile.’ After addressing some pockets of ambiguity in that conditional, I argued that, as a claim about ordinary human lives and ordinary human psychology the conditional is as plausible as is required by the argument and Aristotle’s conception of the science of ethics.17

ENDNOTES

1. All Greek from the Nicomachean Ethics is taken from the Oxford Classical Texts edition in Bywater 1894. All translations are from Brown 2009. Translations of passages from other sections of the corpus are from Barnes, ed., The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volumes One and Two (the revised Oxford translations).

2. The divisions of the English translation of the Sentence are taken from Vranas (2005).

3. The interpretive schemas don’t mention C or C′ because the inferential connection to B is the same in all three cases. But as I’ll explain, the literal interpretation, (3), seems to be the only one without well-known problems.

4. Other commentators who accuse Aristotle of this fallacy include Anscombe 1957: 34, 1967: 15–6; Darwall 1998: 192; and Geach 1972: 2. Broadie 1991: 13 also notes the presence of the fallacy, though she suggests that this is an uncharitable interpretation of the passage.


6. As Vranas acknowledges, Wedin (1981) was the first to argue that the Sentence should be read in a structurally literal way, as inferring D on the basis of A and B. What I am calling the antecedent in the conditional C → C′ Wedin calls “T2a,” and what I am calling C Wedin calls “T2b.” Neither Vranas nor Wedin explain why C → C′ seems to be false, nor why Aristotle saw it as so clear that C → C′ is true that any assumption to that effect requires no further explanation or justification.

7. This objection is also a worry for Interpretations (1) and (2). But given that (1) is already guilty of saddling Aristotle with a fallacy, and (2) is guilty of making the purpose of the Sentence opaque, I consider (3) the best candidate.
8. The objection says that the conjunction $A \& B$ is false because $B$ is false, and $B$ is false because $B$ is inferred on the basis of a false conditional, namely, $C \rightarrow C'$.

9. Mintoff (2009) defends Aristotle’s claim in the *Eudemian Ethics* that everyone who can live according to her own choice should adopt some goal for the good life, which she will keep in view in all her actions. The full passage is at *EE* I.2.1214b7–13. While in some ways similar to the Sentence, the *EE* passage is quite different from my focus here: (a) the Sentence does not say we *should* all adopt some goal—it isn’t normative in that sense, whereas the *EE* passage quite clearly is normative in that sense, (b) the Sentence says nothing about what our attitude *should be* toward the highest end, and (c) the *EE* passage does not have an analogous infinite regress clause.

10. There might be another wrinkle due to Aristotle’s distinction between (a) things (such as desired ends) being separable or separate (χωριστὸν) merely in account or formula (λόγῳ) such as points, lines, and surfaces, and (b) separable in magnitude (μεγέθει), that is, actually separable (see *Physics* II.2, *Metaph.* 1042a29). One might think that Broadie’s point carries more weight if Aristotle has in mind not just desired ends separated merely in account. However finely those ends are divided, it seems unlikely that infinite series would be generated, and unlikelier still that Aristotle has such series in mind.

11. I agree with Broadie’s (1991: 13) claim that to correctly answer this question, one need not appeal to “the thorny issue of his rejection of an ‘actual’ infinite.” That this is a thorny issue is clear from even a cursory glance at the dialectic in, e.g., Bowin 2007; Coope 2012; Lear 1979; Kretzmann 1982. Aristotle admits, “the problem of the infinite is difficult: many contradictions result whether we suppose it to exist or not to exist” (*Phys.* III.4.203b31 ff.).

12. Early on in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes between the kind of precision required of mathematics and the kind required of a science which studies things that have matter (*Metaph.* a.3.995a15–17).

13. This distinction has broad implications for Aristotle. His doctrine of the mean is central to his theory of virtue. It is relative to the particular individual rather than the quantity itself (*NE* II.6.1106a29–32). Gottlieb (2009: 196) argues that for Aristotle, happiness is highly relative to the individual, such that “it makes no sense to give a ranking of happy lives in the abstract.”

14. I do not use ‘intrinsic’ to refer to goods that are good absolutely, in contrast with goods that are good for someone. This is a key distinction in, for instance, Kraut 2011, who argues against the existence of absolute goodness.

15. The distinction between standing desires and occurrent desires is not originally my own. For more on this distinction and related distinctions, see Oddie 2005 and Schroeder 2004. I am not attributing this distinction to Aristotle. This is not to say that I think there is no way of finding any evidence for this distinction in Aristotle or in ancient Greek philosophy. Rather, as Chappell 2014 elegantly puts the point, “I have not tried to claim that the distinction, as I have stated it, is an ancient Greek distinction. On the contrary, I have admitted all along that it is a characteristically modern distinction. My thesis is not the historical claim that Plato and Aristotle, actually and *de (graece reddito) dicto*, thought this way. It is the philosophical claim that it is fruitful and interesting to deploy this distinction when we are trying to make sense of what and how they did think” (283).

16. Broadie 1991: 12–14 defends $C \rightarrow C'$ by arguing that an infinite series of desired ends would entail that we would not be able to give a coherent and general account of our reasons for desiring one end as opposed any other given end. But I can give a general and coherent account of why I am counting each of the positive integers one by one (I might say that
I enjoy it, and that I have the free time available to do it) even if I know that there is no greatest positive integer. Moreover, Aristotle argues that what would be rendered empty and futile by an infinite series of chosen and desired ends would be desire itself, not coherent communication about the reasons or justification for our desire.

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