

The Alleged Fallacy in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2

Scholars disagree over whether or not Aristotle fallaciously infers that there exists ‘some end desired for itself at which every purposive activity aims in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2. In this paper, I argue that here Aristotle has in mind a branching tree composed of *some* (not necessarily all) purposive activities, and thinks that the highest end because of which *the other things that belong to this branching tree* are wished for is the best good, while leaving open the possibility that there are other such trees the highest end of each of which is the best good in each case.

At the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2, Aristotle says: ‘Suppose, then, that 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 we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile. Clearly, this end will be the good, that is to say, the best good (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 (1094a18-22); Irwin’s translation). Here he seems to list three conditions that must be met by ‘the best good’ (1094a22): (C1) We wish for X because of itself (1094a19); (C2) We wish for the other things because of X (1094a19); (C3) We choose X not because of something else (cf. 1094a19-21). Aristotle holds that, if there is some end (X) which satisfies these three conditions, it is ‘the best good’ (1094a22). I argue that, here at 1094a18-22, Aristotle has in mind a branching tree composed of *some* (not necessarily all)

purposive activities, and explain how we should understand these three conditions, while showing that Aristotle enumerates these conditions, (C1), (C2), (C3), without redundancy.

It is well known that Aristotle's argument on the best good in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 has often been regarded as fallacious by some scholars. For example, Ackrill (1974/1997: 190-191) says that Aristotle has been taken to skip fallaciously from (A1) '[E]very purposive activity aims at some end desired for itself' to (A2) '[T]here [exists] some end desired for itself at which every purposive activity aims'. However, this common interpretation, I argue, does not capture precisely the actual structure of Aristotle's argument. It is also well known that Aristotle's argument here is often considered to be analogous to inferring fallaciously from 'all roads end somewhere' to 'there [exists] some one place where they all end' (Irwin 1999: 173). I argue that here Aristotle does not commit the fallacy, and suggest a more reasonable analogy with which to understand the structure of his argument.

Scholars are not always clear as to what is meant by 'only one', 'the other', 'everything else', and so on in the discussion on this topic (e.g. Vranas 2005). The problem is this: on the one hand, at the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2, Aristotle appears to be thinking of *one* highest good with *all the other* purposive activities being subordinated to it, while, on the other hand, elsewhere (e.g. 1097a22-24) he talks about the possibility that there is more than one such good. If my analysis of Aristotle's argument is right, the highest good he thinks of in the first sentence of *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 is 'unique' in the sense that a

branching tree under consideration has only one highest good at the top of it. But it is also clear from what Aristotle says elsewhere in *Nicomachean Ethics* I that he accepts the possibility that there is more than one branching tree composed of various purposive activities and that accordingly there is more than one highest good, even though each branching tree has only one highest good.

Bibliography

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