

*PART III*

MAN THE DOER

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## Thinking about Ends and Means

I do not have an automobile and I want one. The automobile I want costs more money than I have available. It is necessary for me to get the money needed to buy the car. There appear to be a number of ways in which I can get what is needed without violating the law. For example, I can save it, by not spending what money I have on something else; or I can try to earn additional money; or I can borrow it.

In this example—there might have been countless others of the same sort—getting the automobile is the end in view. Getting the money needed to buy the car is a means to that end; it is also itself an end to which there are, as we have seen, a number of means.

How do I choose among them? One may be easier than the others; going one way may get me my goal more quickly than going the other ways. Of the several means, each serving to attain the end in view, one would normally choose the means

that seems better by virtue of being easier, quicker, more likely to succeed, and so on.

When we act this way, we act purposefully. To say that we have a purpose in what we do is to say that we are acting for some goal that we have in mind.

Sometimes we act aimlessly—like a boat just drifting on the current with no one at the wheel to steer it. When we act in that way, we are also acting thoughtlessly. We have nothing in mind that guides our acting in one direction or another. To act aimlessly requires no thinking on our part.

For the most part, however, we act purposefully, and then we cannot act without thinking first. We have to think about the goal we are aiming at—the end we are trying to achieve. We have to think about the various means that we can use to achieve it. We have to think about which is the better of alternative means and why one is better than another. And if the particular means that we choose to employ is a means we cannot use without doing something else first in order to lay our hands on it, then it is itself an end, and we must think about the means to achieving it.

Thinking of the sort I have just described is practical thinking. It is thinking about ends and means—thinking about the goal you wish to reach and thinking about what must be done to get there. It is the kind of thinking that is necessary for purposeful action.

Productive thinking, as we have seen, is thinking about things to be made. Practical thinking, in contrast, is thinking about what is to be done. To think well for the sake of making something, you have to have what we called productive ideas and know-how. To think well for the sake of getting somewhere by what you do, you have to have an idea of a goal to be reached

and ideas about ways of reaching it. And you also have to think about the reasons why one way of pursuing your goal is better than another.

Productive thinking, or thinking in order to produce something, does not actually produce it. Such thinking may lead to actual production, but production does not actually begin until the producer goes to work and acts on the raw materials to transform them in a way that will materialize the productive idea he had in mind.

So, too, practical thinking, or thinking in order to act purposefully or to do what is necessary to achieve some end or goal, falls short of actual doing. Doing begins when practical thinking is put into practice. Productive thinking may continue while production is actually going on. Practical thinking may continue during the course of purposeful action. But until making and doing actually begin, productive thinking and practical thinking bear no fruit.

Aristotle tells us that, except for the exceptional instances of aimless behavior, human beings always act with some end in view. The thinking they do in order to act purposefully begins with thinking about the goal to be achieved, but when they begin to do anything to achieve that goal, they have to start with the means for achieving it. The end comes first in the thinking that individuals do in order to act purposefully, but the means come first in what they do to accomplish their purposes.

In saying that human beings always—or usually—act with some end in view, Aristotle also says that they act for some good they wish to obtain and possess. He identifies an end being aimed at with a good that is desired.

In his view, it makes no sense at all to say that we are acting for an end that we regard as bad for us. That amounts to saying

that what we are aiming at is something we do not desire. It is plain common sense that what we regard as bad for us is something we desire to avoid, not something we desire to possess.

What about the means we need to achieve the end we have in mind? To aim at an end is to seek a good that we desire. Are the means we must use to achieve the end also goods that we desire? Yes and no. The means are good, but not because we desire them for their own sake, but only because we desire them for the sake of something else.

Must we always regard means as good because they provide us with a way of getting the end we want to achieve? Certainly, means are good only if they do help us succeed in reaching our goal. But if they have other consequences, too, then they may be undesirable for reasons quite apart from achieving the end we have in mind.

Stealing would get the money that I need to buy an automobile I want, but stealing might also get me into serious trouble that I would wish to avoid. The means we use to attain the end we seek must not only be good because they get us where we want to go, but they must also not land us where we do not want to be—in jail.

To sum up: means may be an end that we have to achieve by other means, and an end may also be a means to some further end. These two observations lead to two questions that Aristotle thinks we cannot avoid. One is: Are there any means that are purely or merely means, never ends? The other is: Are there any ends that are ends and never means—what Aristotle calls ultimate or final ends because they are not means to any ends beyond themselves?

Another way of asking the first question is to ask whether there are any things that we desire only for the sake of some-

thing else, never for their own sake. And another way of asking the second question is to ask whether there are any things that we desire only for their own sake and never for the sake of something else.

Aristotle maintained that there are means that are merely or purely means, ends that are also means to goals beyond themselves, and ends that we pursue for their own sake and not for the sake of any further good to be obtained. His reasons for thinking so are as follows.

If there were nothing that we desired for its own sake and not for the sake of something else, our practical thinking could not begin. We have already seen that practical thinking must begin with thinking about an end to be sought or pursued. Now if every end we thought about were a means to some further end, and if that further end were still a means to some end beyond itself, and so on *endlessly*, practical thinking could never begin.

We have seen that when practical thinking is put into practice, we must start with some means to whatever end we have in view. If that means is itself an end that requires us to find means for achieving it, then we cannot start our doing, or purposeful action, with it. To start doing, we must start with a means that is purely a means, and not also an end that requires other means to achieve it.

So far I have told you only *why* there must be ends that are not means and why there must be means that are not ends. Your reaction to what I have told you so far would not surprise me if it consisted in wondering how you have ever done any practical thinking without knowing what your final or ultimate end is. If practical thinking cannot begin with an end that is a means to something beyond itself, and if you do not know of any end that you seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, how could you ever begin to think practically?

Since you have undoubtedly done a lot of practical thinking in the course of your life, Aristotle must be wrong when he says that practical thinking cannot begin until you have an ultimate or final end in mind.

*So it would certainly seem.* A distinction between two ways in which you can have an ultimate or a final end in mind will open the door to a solution of this problem. To get some understanding of the required distinction, let's start with what we learned in school about geometry—the same kind of geometry with which Aristotle was acquainted.

What are called the first principles of geometry are the starting points with which you must begin in order to demonstrate the geometrical propositions that have to be proved. In Euclid's geometry, the first principles consist of definitions, axioms, and postulates. The definitions of points, lines, straight lines, triangles, and so on are needed, and so are such axioms as "the whole is greater than any of its parts" and "things equal to the same thing are equal to each other." In addition, there are the postulates—assumptions that Euclid makes in order to prove the propositions that need proof.

The difference between the axioms and the postulates is that you cannot deny the axioms. You cannot avoid affirming them. For example, try to think that a part is greater than the whole to which it belongs. But when Euclid asks you to assume that you can draw a straight line from any point to any point, you may be willing to make that assumption, but you do not have to do so. There is nothing compelling about it as there is about the axiom concerning wholes and parts.

As axioms and postulates are different kinds of starting points in geometrical thinking, so are there different kinds of starting points in practical thinking. Just as you can assume what Euclid

asks you to take for granted in order to get his geometrical proofs started, 'so in your own practical thinking, you can assume that a certain goal or end is ultimate, and ask no further questions about it, *even if they can be asked.*

In other words, most of us get started in our practical thinking not by having in mind that which is absolutely our final or ultimate goal, but rather by assuming that the end we have in view can be taken—for the time being at least—*as if* it were a goal about which no further questions need be asked.

In the example we have been considering, we may take being able to drive to school or to work as the end for which having an automobile, being able to buy it, getting the money needed to buy it, and so on, are the means. Of course, you realize that you could be asked why you want to drive to school or to work, and your answer to that question might lead to a further *why* until you came to an answer about which no further *why* could be asked.

That answer, if you ever reached it, would be your grasp of the ultimate or final end, for the sake of which everything else is a means. But you do not have to have such an end in view in order to begin practical thinking or purposeful doing because you can provisionally assume that some end you have in mind is, for the time being, ultimate—something you want for its own sake.

When you do what needs to be done to get it, you may ask yourself why you wanted it, but you do not have to ask that question in order to think about the means for getting it or in order to do what needs to be done to use means for that purpose. That question can be postponed—for the time being, but not forever, not, at least, if you want to lead a well-planned, purposeful life.