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Children, Aristotle, and What Is Lovable

> For subsequent progress is the resolving of the previous puzzles, and we cannot free ourselves from bonds we do not know. (*Met.* 995a27–30, trans. Irwin (1988), p. 40)

In this paper, I use an Aristotelian method to solve an Aristotelian puzzle. The method is dialectic. The puzzle, in short, is that Aristotle's view that only virtuous people are lovable for their own sake is contrary to the common opinion that children (in the sense of *offspring*, who may or may not be young) are lovable even when they are not virtuous people. The puzzle is interesting for what it can teach us both about Aristotle's ethical views and about the way things actually are. I arrange the discussion into three sections of exponentially increasing length: the method (section 1), the puzzle (section 2), and the solution (section 3).

1   The method

Aristotle's clearest explanation of the dialectical method he uses in the *EN* and elsewhere is usually taken to be found in his discussion of incontinence at *EN* 7.1.5 (Cooper, 1975, p. 69):

> As in the other cases, we must set out the appearances, and first of all go through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common [opinions] about these ways of being affected—ideally, all the common [opinions], but if not all, most of them, and the most important. For if the objections are solved, and the common [opinions] are left, it will be an adequate proof.[1]

[1]Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) are from Irwin (1999). Irwin often inserts explanatory additions in square brackets; all such brackets in quotations translated by him are his, unless otherwise noted. The brackets in this passage happen to be mine.

The method, as described here and practiced elsewhere, can be analyzed into three steps.[2] The first step is to collect *common opinions*.[3] Common opinions, as described in the *Topics*, include "the things believed by everyone or by most people or by the wise (and among the wise by all or by most or by those most known and commonly recognized)" (1.1, trans. Irwin and Fine, 1995).

The second step is to identify *puzzles* among the common opinions. Puzzles arise when common opinions seem contrary to each other, or when they seem contrary to a view already established on the basis of other common opinions. Of course, we might sometimes be left with more puzzles than we can reasonably be expected to solve. In such a situation, Aristotle advises, "it is enough to examine those [opinions] that are most current or seem to have some argument for them" (*EN* 1.4.4).

Finally, the third step is to try to *solve* all the puzzles that have been identified, while retaining as many common opinions as possible. Puzzles may be solved either by simply denying one of the conflicting common opinions, or by modifying or reinterpreting the common opinions such that they do not conflict. The latter sort of solution is preferable when it is possible, since if we deny common opinions too frequently, we risk coming to conclusions that do not accurately describe the way things are. If we are left with opinions that unavoidably clash, but that do seem current and with some argument in their favor, how do we know which opinions to retain and which to reject? Aristotle advises that we try to retain "most of them, and the most important" (*EN* 7.1.5, quoted above).

Given this description of dialectic, my aim in this paper can be restated more clearly. First (in section 2), I aim to show that, in the case of his discussion of friendship, Aristotle has not quite completed the third step, since a puzzle still remains. And second (in section 3), I aim to finish the job by solving this puzzle.

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[2]My discussion below follows Irwin (1988, pp. 42–49; 1999, pp. 326–327).

[3]'Appearance' (*phenomenon*) is a more general term than 'common opinion' (*endoxon*), but in the context of dialectic it is specifically common opinions that matter (Irwin, 1999, p. 317).

2 The puzzle

In this section, then, I aim to show that Aristotle leaves an important puzzle unsolved. The puzzle arises because one of Aristotle's views seems contrary to a view Aristotle identifies as a common opinion. The common opinion in question is as follows:

> Children are lovable even when they are not virtuous people.

Whenever I use the phrase 'the Common Opinion', capitalized, I mean to refer to this common opinion. The view of Aristotle's that is contrary to the Common Opinion is as follows:

> Only virtuous people are lovable for their own sake.

I will refer to this view as 'the View'.

2.1 The View

That Aristotle holds the View can be shown most easily by citing several passages from the *EN*, and can be reinforced by looking at what scholars have to say. First, let us look directly at Aristotle. At *EN* 8.2.1, Aristotle sets out what sorts of things are lovable:

> For, it seems, not everything is loved, but [only] the lovable, and this is either good or pleasant or useful.

There is a crucial difference between a person's being good[4] and her being pleasant or useful, though: if a person is lovable because she is pleasant or useful, what is loved is really some third thing, namely pleasure or utility; if a person is lovable because she is good, in contrast, what is loved is the person herself. Aristotle brings out this difference in the following two passages. First, he discusses pleasure and utility:

> Those who love each other for utility love the other not in his own right, but insofar as they gain some good for themselves from him. The same is true of

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[4]Note that a virtuous human is a good human.

> those who love for pleasure; for they like a witty person not because of his character, but because he is pleasant to them. (*EN* 8.3.1)

Second, those who are good:

> For [good people similar in virtue] wish goods in the same way to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in their own right. Now these people, who wish goods to their friend for the friend's own sake, … are friends most of all; for they have this attitude because of the friend himself, not coincidentally. (*EN* 8.3.6)[5]

From all this, the View plainly follows. But does Aristotle *see* that it follows? He does:

> Now it is possible for bad people as well [as good] to be friends to each other for pleasure or utility, for decent people to be friends to base people, and for someone with neither character to be a friend to someone with any character. Clearly, however, *only good people can be friends to each other because of the other person himself*; for bad people find no enjoyment in one another if they get no benefit. (*EN* 8.4.2, my italics)

The italicized clause in this passage is almost identical to the View, except that it refers to friendship, not lovableness. (The penultimate quotation was about friendship, too.) Friendship and lovableness are closely related, however: lovableness is one of three necessary and sufficient conditions for friendship. These conditions are as follows: (a) that each friend have goodwill (that is, wish good things) toward the other, (b) that each friend be aware of the other's goodwill toward her, and (c) that each friend be lovable (or at least seem to be lovable) (*EN* 8.2). But goodwill toward a person (to say nothing about awareness of the person's goodwill) seems possible whether or not the person is good; for example, it is possible to wish toward a bad person that she become more virtuous. In that case, the italicized clause above does not follow from either condition (a) or (b); but if it does not follow from (a) or (b), the italicized clause must follow from (c). And it can only follow from (c) if (c) is taken together with the View. What is the upshot of all this?

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[5]This is my own revision of Irwin's (1999) translation; the brackets are also mine. Irwin translates the second sentence as follows: "[Hence they wish goods to each other for each other's own sake.] Now those who wish good to their friend for the friend's own sake are friends most of all," which comes to the same thing, but less clearly. On the passage's use of "friendship" instead of "lovableness", see below.

The upshot is that since Aristotle took the italicized clause to be "clearly" true, he must have also accepted the View.

Thus Aristotle, as I interpret him. But perhaps I have misinterpreted, or unjustly taken passages out of context. If I have, I am in excellent company. Burnet (pp. 355–356), Joachim (1951, pp. 247–248), Vlastos (1973, p. 5), Irwin (1988, p. 390), and others all agree that Aristotle holds the View. But not *all* scholars agree about the matter. Cooper (1980), followed by Pangle (2003, pp. 45–47) and others, argues for just the opposite position: that, in Aristotle's view, even those who are only pleasurable or useful are lovable for their own sakes. Others scholars fall somewhere in between: Kahn (1982, p. 21, n. 1) is ambivalent, while Alpern (1983) and Broadie (2002, p. 58), try to follow a middle way.

Cooper's interpretation rests primarily on the following passage:

> People say that one ought to wish to a friend what is good, for his own sake; but those who wish what is good [to someone else] in this way people call "well-disposed" (*eunous*) [and not "friends"], if the other person does not return the wish: for friendship is good will (*eunoia*) when reciprocated. (*EN* 8.2.3, Cooper's translation and insertions, p. 304)

An objection immediately arises: the first sentence of the passage, which is the one that supports Cooper's interpretation, is prefaced by a "people say"—it is a common opinion, not Aristotle's own view. Cooper has a response. According to Cooper, it must be the case that Aristotle also *endorses* the common opinion, since in 8.2.4 Aristotle draws "inferences on his own behalf partly from [the common opinion]: friends, he says, 'must wish well to (*eunoein*) and want what is good for one another . . . ' " (p. 335, n. 8, Cooper's ellipsis).

But does Aristotle really make such an inference? In my view, he does not. First, the supposed conclusion of the inference does not say anything at all about wishing a person well *for the other's own sake*; it just talks about wishing well, period. Well-wishing for the other's own sake is mentioned in 8.2.3–4 only once,—in the common opinion. And second, as we saw above, Aristotle is, as we have seen, quite clear in other passages that wishing a person well for the other's on sake is *not* necessary for friendship; since the

matter is at best muddled in 8.2.3–4, it seems prudent to rely on these clear passages.[6]

2.2   The Common Opinion

So Aristotle, in my view, holds the View. The next task is to show that Aristotle takes the Common Opinion to be a common opinion. The Common Opinion, remember, is the view that children are lovable even when they are not virtuous people.

That Aristotle views the Common Opinion as a common opinion is evident in several passages. First, at *EN* 9.4.1 Aristotle claims that it is a common opinion that mothers love their children for their own sake:

> For a friend is taken to be someone who wishes and does goods or apparent goods to his friend for the friend's own sake; or one who wishes the friend to be and to live for the friend's own sake—this is how mothers feel toward their children [*tekna*], and how friends who have been in conflict feel [toward each other].

It seems most natural to take this common opinion as including all parts of a child's life, both while she is young and while she is older. Indeed, we might even suppose that the common opinion refers *especially* to those times when a child is young: the Greek *tekna*, which Aristotle uses in the passage, has the same ambiguity as our English word *children*: sometimes it refers to youths, and sometimes to offspring (*LSJ*, s.v. "teknon").

But it is quite plain that children are not always virtuous people. To do something virtuously is simply to do it well or excellently, and to be a virtuous x is to perform the distinctive function of x excellently. A human, on Aristotle's account, is a rational animal; the distinctive function of humans is to reason. In order to be a virtuous human, therefore, a human must reason well. According to Aristotle, in order for a person to reason well, the non-rational parts of the person's soul must cooperate with the rational parts of the person's soul. Otherwise, the person will be hindered from reasoning well, and so will not fulfill her function virtuously, and so will not be virtuous (*EN* 1.13). In practical terms,

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[6]This last point is from Irwin (1988) p. 613, n. 2.

this requires that a human exhibit the specific virtues that Aristotle spends much of the *EN* describing.

This line of thought might be taken to suggest that a person can be virtuous one minute and not virtuous the next. Such a suggestion, however, would be wrong: if a person acts virtuously one minute but not the next, that person is not virtuous. In order to be virtuous, one must rather act virtuously as a habit. But developing such habits takes a great deal of time and training. And young children simply haven't lived long enough to develop such habits very thoroughly (see *EN* 3.12.5–7). The upshot is that no child, regardless of how she eventually turns out, is virtuous while young.[7] (And of course some children never become virtuous, even when they are older;—some children just turn out bad.)

If all this is true and clear, then it follows that the Common Opinion is a common opinion. But perhaps, it might be objected, Aristotle does not mean in the above quotation from 9.4.1 to claim that it is a common opinion that mothers *always* love their children for their own sakes, even when the children are not virtuous; rather, perhaps Aristotle takes the common opinion to exclude those times and cases when children are less virtuous.

In my view, the passage does not support this objection. For notice the second example Aristotle uses in the quotation: friends who have been in conflict. Friends presumably quarrel because they take themselves to be right and their friends to be wrong. But to the extent that a person takes her friend to be wrong, she presumably takes the friend to be less virtuous. So the point of the example seems to be that, according to common opinion, a person loves her friend for the friend's own sake even when she thinks that the friend has become less virtuous. And,—here we come to the point,—since the quarreling-friend example seems to be used in the same way as the mother example, it seems most reasonable *not* to suppose that Aristotle excludes from the mother example those times when her children are less virtuous.

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[7]See Kraut (2001), for the general lines of the uncontroversial interpretation in this and the preceding paragraph.

2.3   The Puzzle apparent

The puzzle (named 'the Puzzle') is now clear. If only virtuous people are lovable for their own sake, then how can children be lovable even when they are not virtuous people? It seems quite impossible.

Note that I am not alone in seeing a puzzle here, at least not in this general area. Kahn (1982, p. 22, n. 1) for example, observes as follows:

> It is noteworthy that the existence of maternal love, or of family affection generally as distinct from conjugal love, is apparently not accounted for by Aristotle's official theory that friendship is based either upon pleasure, advantage, or moral character. Birth and kinship should have been added as a fourth basis for *philia*.

Irwin (1999, p. 330) also seems to see a similar puzzle. After noting that Aristotle "sometimes ... suggests only virtuous people are capable of" friendship whose object is good (*EN* 7.3.6), Irwin asks, "How does this affect *philia* in families?" Irwin gives no answer, and the implication seems to be that it is a puzzle.

3   The Solution

How can Aristotle solve the Puzzle? One option, of course, would be to reject the Common Opinion. But, as we saw in the first section, rejecting common opinions should only be done as a last resort. Another option would be to entirely reject the View. But this seems equally worth being avoided, since entirely rejecting the View would create all sorts of new puzzles. But *something* must give way; otherwise we will be left with the Puzzle unsolved. My aim in this section is to defend a solution which solves the puzzle, but requires that neither the Common Opinion nor the View be modified dramatically.

The solution (referred to as 'the Solution') that I want to defend may be articulated as follows:

> Even if a child is not virtuous qua human and hence is not lovable for her own
> sake qua human, the child may be virtuous qua child and hence be lovable for
> her own sake qua child.

How does this solve the puzzle? It shows how both the View and the Common Opinion can be true at the same time, if they are properly interpreted. The View, originally formulated as, "Only virtuous people are lovable for their own sake," remains true, but only if it is added that people need not be virtuous qua human. The Common Opinion, originally formulated as, "Children are lovable even when they are not virtuous people," also remains true, but only if interpreted as, "Children are lovable even when they are not virtuous qua human"; the Common Opinion is false if interpreted as "Children are lovable even when they are virtuous humans qua children."

3.1 'Qua'

This is the Solution in a nutshell. But nutshells often require cracking, and this seems to be such a case. The first question that might be asked is what 'qua' means in the context of the Solution. Cohen (2003, §1) describes Aristotle's use of 'qua' (which I follow) this way:

> Aristotle's Greek word that has been Latinized as 'qua' means roughly 'in so far as' or 'under the aspect'. A study of x qua y, [for example], is a study of x that concerns itself solely with the y aspect of x.

Cohen happens to use as his example the study of x qua y. But, as the Solution illustrates, 'qua' 's use is not limited to statements about what we can study. We can also talk, for example, about the lovableness of x qua y, the virtue of x qua y, the difficulty of x qua y, and so on.

But what sorts of things can we plug into these x and y variables? A short answer, suggested by Cohen's quotation above, is that we can plug *things* into the x variable, and

aspects of things into the y variable.[8] And this is basically correct, at least if by 'things' we mean roughly what Aristotle means by 'substances', and by 'aspects of things' we mean roughly what Aristotle means by 'species' or 'genera'. Brief and oversimplified explanations of these, drawn mostly from Barnes (1982, pp. 39–46; and 1995, pp. 72–101), are in order.

In Aristotle's view, every individual thing that exists is classifiable under any number of sorts of things, because any individual thing has many different aspects. Some aspects are shared by a greater number of things than other aspects, however; so the various sorts can be arranged in a hierarchy, with more general sorts higher in the hierarchy than more specific sorts. These hierarchically arranged sorts are what Aristotle calls the "genera" and "species". More precisely: if sort x is one level above y in the hierarchy, then Aristotle calls x the *genus* of y; if x is one step lower than y, then Aristotle calls x the *species* of y. Note that it is therefore possible, and in fact common, for a sort to be at once both a genus and a species, in relation to two different sorts, one more general and one more specific. For example, 'animal' is the genus of the species 'mammal', and 'mammal' is the genus of the species 'cat'; so 'mammal' is at once both the genus of 'cat' and a species of 'animal'.

At the very top of the hierarchy of sorts,—and there must be a top, at least assuming a finite number of existent things and aspects,—there exist the most general sorts of all. These are called the *categories*. Aristotle produces lists of these categories in two passages (*Topics* 1.9 and *Metaphysics* 7.1); the two lists are not exactly the same, but both share one important category: the category 'substance'.

The difference between the category 'substance' and the other categories is that each species under the category 'substance' picks out the aspect of certain particular things that is *essential* to those things, that is, the aspect without which the things would not exist at all. Each species under other categories, in contrast, picks out a aspect of certain particular things that is only *accidental* to those things, that is, an aspect that the things do

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[8]Or more precisely, words denoting things and aspects of things.

not need to have in order to exist.

Finally,—and confusingly,—in addition to the category 'substance', Aristotle also talks about *particular substances*. (This is the sense in which the word "substance" was used in the explanation of the word "qua" a bit ago.) Barnes concisely summarizes what it is to be a particular substance:

> We can now offer the following account of what it is to be a substance: a thing is a substance if it is *both* an individual (a 'this so-and-so', something capable of being designated by a demonstrative phrase), *and also* a separable item (something non-parasitic, a thing whose existence is not a matter of some *other* thing's being modified in some way or other). (1982, p. 44)

From this, it can be seen that particular substances are identical with the "particular things" discussed previously in this section, whose various aspects are picked out by species and genera.

3.2   Human qua child

All this may raise another question about our Solution. The Solution requires that we take particular children both qua the species 'child' and qua the species 'human'. But just a minute ago I said that the x in "x qua y" must be a particular substance. How, then, can we talk about taking particular children qua *anything*? For the species 'child' does not seem to be in the category 'substance', since the species 'child' does not pick out any essential aspect of anything. Rather, the species 'child' seems to be in the category 'relation', since 'child' picks out the accidental relation between a child and her parents.[9]

The answer to the question relies on the distinction above between the category 'substance' and particular substances: the phrase "a particular child" denotes a particular substance, not a category, so it is perfectly legitimate to use it as the x in "x qua y." That "a particular child" denotes a particular substance is evident when we realize that we can use the phrases "a particular human" and "a particular child" to denote the same thing;

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[9]Or, put differently, 'child' picks out the accidental aspect 'related-to-her-parent'.

for example, we can say of George both that he is a particular human and that he is a particular child of Barbara. The only difference is that the phrase "a particular child" emphasizes an accidental aspect of a substance, namely that of being a child, and excludes any substance that does not have that accidental aspect; while the phrase "a particular human" emphasizes an essential aspect of a substance, namely that of being a human, and excludes any substance that does not have that essential aspect.

3.3   Virtuous and lovable qua child

So it is legitimate to take a human qua child. Our Solution also requires that we take humans to be *virtuous* qua child. This prompts our next question: what is required for a child to be a virtuous?

While establishing the Common Opinion in section 2.2 above, we noted that, according to Aristotle, for a thing to be virtuous is for it to perform its distinctive function excellently. But what is the distinctive function of children? The species 'child', as we observed earlier, is a member of the category 'relation', so presumably the function distinctive to children is to be related in some way or other to someone or -thing. And the obvious candidate for the relatee is each child's parent. We can conclude that the function distinctive to a child is simply to be the child of some parent.

This function, it will be noticed, is not a particularly difficult one to perform excellently. But then, neither is the payoff very large: the degree to which children are lovable when they are lovable for their own sakes qua child is smaller than the degree to which children are lovable when they are lovable for their own sakes qua human. This seems to be because the aspect of the person that is picked out by the species 'child' is less significant than the aspect that is picked out by the species 'human'. Why might one aspect be less "significant" than another? In this case, it is because the 'child' aspect is only accidental, while the 'human' aspect is essential. In other cases (one will be mentioned below, in section 3.5), it is because one aspect is more general than another.

Note also that the fact that the function distinctive to 'child' is not particularly difficult to perform excellently seems supported by Aristotle's claim, quoted above, that loving their children for their own sakes "is how mothers feel toward their children" (*EN* 9.4.1). For note that this is a general claim, one which, Aristotle seems to imply, holds in the majority of cases. But if the function were very difficult to perform excellently, most children would presumably *not* be virtuous qua children.

In any case, what is most important in order for the Solution to work is not that we be able to give a precise explanation of the distinctive function of children; rather what is important is just that there be *some* function or other that is distinctive to children, and that this function be able to be performed excellently even by someone who cannot perform the distinctive human function excellently. And this seems plainly possible.

3.4 Virtuous and lovable qua useful or pleasurable

But now, with all this established, we come to a serious objection: if we accept the Solution, then it seems that a human can be taken as virtuous, and hence lovable for her own sake, qua *any* species that picks out one of her aspects. And if so, then a human can be taken as virtuous and lovable for her own sake qua useful or pleasant. But that those who are only pleasurable or useful are lovable for their own sakes is plainly contrary to Aristotle's view (as I argued it above in section 2.1) that those who are merely pleasurable or useful, but are not virtuous qua human, are *not* lovable for their own sakes.

One way to avoid this objection, of course, would be to recant my interpretation of Aristotle on what is lovable in favor of Cooper's interpretation; for Cooper, you will remember, allows that those who are merely pleasurable or useful, but not virtuous, may be lovable for their own sakes. But then we would have to solve the textual problems with Cooper's view that I raised above; and, as I argued there, solving these problems is a non-trivial task.

A better way to avoid the objection would be to treat the species 'useful' and 'plea-

surable' as special cases, at least when it comes to love. This strategy is supported by the fact that Aristotle himself, all throughout his discussion in *EN* 8–9, treats 'useful' and 'pleasurable' as importantly different from other species. What is the difference relevant at present? The difference is that a person *cannot* be lovable for her own sake qua pleasant or useful; if a person seems lovable qua pleasant or useful, what is really lovable for its own sake is some third substance, namely the pleasure or utility that she provides.[10]

3.5   Virtuous and lovable qua being

So it is not the case that, if we accept the Solution, we must also accept that humans can be lovable for their own sakes qua useful or pleasant; and hence the previous objection fails. Yet there does seem to be *some* insight in the objection. In particular, if we make exceptions for 'useful' and 'pleasant', the objection's main premise seems true: if we accept the Solution, then a substance can be taken as virtuous, and hence lovable for its own sake, qua any species that picks out one of its aspects (other than 'useful' or 'pleasant').

This leads to an interesting consequence. Every particular substance, it will be remembered, shares at least one genus, namely the category 'substance' (since categories are the most general genera). Now, the distinctive function of 'substance' seems to be subsisting, that is, existing. But *every* substance exists. Hence, every substance performs its function excellently. And hence, every substance is virtuous and therefore lovable for its own sake qua member of the species 'substance'.

Of course, since the genus 'substance' is so general,—as general as possible, in fact,—the degree to which every substance is lovable for its own sake qua substance is not very large. But, still, the fact that everything that exists is lovable for its own sake to at least a small degree does help explain certain interesting puzzles. For example, one of the non-textual motivations of Cooper's interpretation of Aristotle as holding that even those who are merely pleasurable or useful are lovable is that it seems, from observation, that

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[10]This difference can be seen especially clearly in *NE* 8.2 and 8.3; see section 2.1 above.

people *are* lovable for their own sakes, in at least some circumstances, even when they are not virtuous qua human (314–315). Cooper's main example is of business associates that cut each other deals, buy each other lunch, or exhibit fondness for each other in similar ways,—even when there seems to be no advantage to themselves for doing so. Cooper concludes that the associates must be lovable for their own sakes qua useful; but the behavior can also be explained if the associates are taken as lovable for their own sakes, in some small way, qua substance.

4   Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us review what we have seen. In section 3, we proposed, explained, and defended our Solution to the Puzzle we found in Aristotle. The Solution proposed that we distinguish between children qua humans and children qua children, since it is possible to be virtuous qua one without being virtuous qua the other. The Puzzle prompting the solution in the first place, as we argued in section 2, arose because of an apparent incompatibility between Aristotle's View that only virtuous people are lovable for their own sake, and the Common Opinion that children are lovable even when they are not virtuous people. We were able to identify this Puzzle as such because of our discussion in section 1 of Aristotle's dialectical method. That section also showed that to be successful, a solution must solve the puzzle given, without creating any new ones. If this paper, too, has meet these conditions, then it, also, has been successful.

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