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EPISTEMIC MEANS AND ENDS: IN DEFENSE OF SOME
SARTWELLIAN INSIGHTS

ABSTRACT. The question of what means-and-ends structure our epistemic endeavors have is an important issue in recent epistemology, and is fundamental for understanding epistemic matters in principle. Crispin Sartwell has proposed arguments for the view that knowledge is our only ultimate goal, and justification is no part of it. An important argument is his instrumentality argument which is concerned with the conditions under which something could belong to our ultimate epistemic goal. Recently, this argument has been reconstructed and criticized by Pierre Le Morvan in a clear and helpful way. It will be shown, however, that Le Morvan's criticism is not adequate, since it misconstrues the real instrumentality argument that can be found in Sartwell's writings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Attempts to analyze the concept of knowledge have recently lead into a rather new field of interest: the investigation into the means and ends structure of epistemic affairs. What is actually the ultimate, or primary, end of our cognitive endeavors? Is it truth or knowledge? Or is there more than one primary end? An account of knowledge should ultimately answer questions like these.

An important view about epistemic means and ends has been presented by Crispin Sartwell in a series of papers (Sartwell 1992, 1991). Sartwell's view encompasses several theses which are logically independent from one another. Among these we can find at least the following three central claims: (1) knowledge is the ultimate goal – the *telos* – of inquiry; (2) knowledge is true belief; and (3) justification is merely a means for arriving at true belief (or, alternatively, justification is merely a criterion for true belief). Thus, Sartwell combines an instrumental-role view of justification (or a criterial-role view of justification) with the view that our ultimate goal is knowledge which he identifies with true belief. However, this can also be seen as a position that consists of answers to two largely independent questions: first, is justification merely a means or also an end in itself? Second, what is knowledge? Is it merely true belief, or does it contain anything more? To the first question, Sartwell answers that justification

plays only an instrumental role (or, alternatively, a criterial role). The second question is answered by Sartwell's identification of knowledge with true belief. However, it is important to recognize that this latter thesis, the identification of knowledge and true belief, is entirely independent of Sartwell's view about the role of justification. For we could just as well accept Sartwell's view about justification being merely a means (for arriving at our epistemic goal or goals) and reject his identification of knowledge and true belief. In the following, I will be mainly concerned with questions about the role of justification as a means or an end, and not so much with the question of what knowledge consists in. As I believe, and would like to show in the following, there is much to be recommended about what Sartwell has to say about our epistemic means and ends. Basically, I think he was right about the role of justification as a mere means.

Pierre Le Morvan has presented a clear and challenging critique of Crispin Sartwell's thesis that knowledge is simply true belief. His accomplishment is twofold: first, he has achieved a succinct formulation of the arguments that Sartwell gives for his thesis. Le Morvan distinguishes three different arguments in Sartwell's writings. This is very helpful for clarifying and sharpening the issues. Second, Le Morvan has provided interesting considerations that are meant to undermine Sartwell's arguments. If successful, they show that the view that true belief is sufficient for knowledge (the sufficiency thesis) cannot be held on Sartwell's grounds. However, I will try to show that Le Morvan's reconstruction of two of Sartwell's arguments is not adequate. Thus, it is my goal to show that Le Morvan's criticisms of two of Sartwell's arguments fail since their targets are not really Sartwell's arguments, and Sartwell's original arguments do not fall prey to his criticisms.

As I already indicated, the issue is important not just for a better understanding of knowledge and the concept of knowledge. Since the debate is, at least in part, about what our goals are in our epistemic endeavors, no less than our understanding of what is crucial and definitive of epistemic matters is at stake. *Contra* Le Morvan, I believe that Sartwell's arguments can teach us some important lessons about this.

2. SARTWELL'S ARGUMENTS AND LE MORVAN'S CRITICISM

Sartwell has tried to argue that knowledge is merely true belief.¹ An important part of his arguments, therefore, is concerned with showing that epistemic justification is not necessary for knowledge. Two of Sartwell's three arguments, as reconstrued by Le Morvan, are intended to show this. They are structurally similar, and they proceed in essentially the same way.

Crucially, they trade on a necessary condition for defining the *telos* of inquiry. The only difference is that the first argument – the instrumentality argument – is concerned with means where the second – the criterion argument – is concerned with criteria. In Le Morvan’s words they read as follows:

The Instrumentality Argument

- (1) Knowledge is (identical to) the *telos* of inquiry.
- (2) Epistemic justification is conducive (merely as a means) to knowledge.
- (3) It is not necessary (stronger version: it is incoherent) to build into the definition of the *telos* of inquiry anything that is conducive (merely as a means) to it.

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- (C) It is not necessary (stronger version: it is incoherent) to build epistemic justification into the definition of knowledge.

The Criterion Argument

- (1) Knowledge is (identical to) the *telos* of inquiry.
- (2) Having epistemic justification for beliefs is a criterion for whether they are knowledge.
- (3) It is not necessary (stronger version: it is incoherent) to build into the definition of the *telos* of inquiry any criterion of it.

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- (4) It is not necessary (stronger version: it is incoherent) to build epistemic justification into the definition of knowledge. (Le Morvan 2002, 160)

Since both the arguments and Le Morvan’s criticisms of them are analogous or structurally similar, I will restrict my discussion to the first argument. My objection to Le Morvan’s criticism can be straightforwardly extended to his criticism of the second argument. Sartwell’s third argument – the *telos* of inquiry argument – is of a different nature, and Le Morvan’s criticism is different as well. The third argument raises rather different issues, and in my view Le Morvan’s critical discussion is much ‘softer’ than in the case of the first two arguments. For these reasons, and for the sake of brevity, I will not discuss it here. (I do not believe that Le Morvan’s criticism is successful with respect to the third argument.)

So let us take a look at the instrumentality argument. Le Morvan’s criticism of the argument is based on a distinction between two kinds of conducivity, *extrinsic conducivity* and *intrinsic conducivity*. Roughly speaking, extrinsic conducivity is the conducivity of a means which is not constitutive of the goal to which it is a means, whereas the means is

constitutive of the goal in the case of intrinsic conducivity. More exactly, extrinsic and intrinsic conducivity are defined by Le Morvan as follows:

- (EC) “X is extrinsically conducive to Y if and only if X is a means to some goal or end Y but is not constitutive of Y”.
- (IC) “X is intrinsically conducive to Y if and only if X is both a means to some goal or end Y and is also constitutive of Y”. (Le Morvan 2002, 161)

As examples, Le Morvan mentions the following. The use of road maps is normally extrinsically conducive for the goal of arriving at a certain destination. In contrast, some people have held that pleasure, health, and exemption from pain are not merely means to the end of happiness but are actually also constitutive of happiness. (Two more examples are mentioned that concern the good life and a beautiful performance of *Oedipus Rex* (Le Morvan 2002, 161–162).)

Now Le Morvan poses a dilemma for the instrumentality argument. Either, he argues, ‘conducive’ in the second premise is read as meaning extrinsic conducivity, or it is read as intrinsic conducivity. But either way, the argument cannot succeed. On the first reading, the second premise becomes question begging. It now reads as follows:

- (2a) Epistemic justification is extrinsically conducive to knowledge.

Thus read, the second premise begs the question since it assumes already that justification is not constitutive of knowledge – which is what the argument is meant to establish. However, if the second premise is interpreted as meaning intrinsic conducivity, then it gets into conflict with the third premise and the conclusion. The second premise now reads:

- (2b) Epistemic justification is intrinsically conducive to knowledge.

If justification is both a means to and a constituent of knowledge, then it is of course necessary and coherent to build it into the definition of knowledge. On each reading, therefore, the argument is unsuccessful. Or so argues Le Morvan.

3. AN OBJECTION TO LE MORVAN

In my view, Le Morvan has misconstrued Sartwell’s argument. Sartwell is not committed to Le Morvan’s instrumentality argument. The point where Sartwell’s argument diverges from Le Morvan’s reconstruction is

rather subtle, but still real and important. It is the description of Sartwell's methodological maxim concerning the choice of our epistemic goal and its application to the case at hand where Le Morvan's interpretation fails. So Le Morvan's second and third premise do not represent Sartwell's maxim adequately. For, according to Sartwell, the second premise is not concerned with knowledge; it is concerned only with the relation between justification and *truth*. So it reads as follows:

- (2') Epistemic justification is extrinsically conducive to truth (and so is not constitutive of truth).

We have to distinguish here between two different goals: on the one hand, justification is a means (an extrinsic, mere, means) to the goal of truth. On the other hand, there is the overall epistemic *telos*, the goal of inquiry. Sartwell assumes that knowledge is the *telos*, and he tries to argue for this.² The question then is whether the goal of truth is our sole *telos*, and of course none of the premises should predecide this issue. What Sartwell takes as his second premise is simply the instrumental relation between justification and *truth*, and this is not question begging. The truth conducivity of justification that Sartwell has in mind here is clearly extrinsic conducivity, since justification is not constitutive of truth. This is marked by Sartwell's frequent use of the adjective 'merely' in connection with justification's role as a means to achieving truth. Now we can gather the correct third premise that embodies Sartwell's proposal about the specification of the *telos* of inquiry from the following crucial passage (which also contains evidence for what has just been claimed about the second premise):

If we describe justification as of merely instrumental value with regard to arriving at truth, as Bonjour does explicitly, we can no longer maintain both that knowledge is the *telos* of inquiry and that justification is a necessary condition of knowledge. It is incoherent to build a specification of something regarded merely as a means of achieving some goal into the description of the goal itself; in such circumstances, the goal can be described independently of the means. So, if justification is demanded because it is instrumental to true belief, it cannot also be maintained that knowledge is justified true belief. (Sartwell 1992, 174)

Here, Sartwell clearly distinguishes between 'some goal' and 'the goal itself', where 'some goal' means truth (for achieving which justification is merely a means) and 'the goal itself' is our *telos* of inquiry. Sartwell claims that it is incoherent to build a certain specification into 'the goal itself', the *telos* of inquiry. But it is not so easy to state in one sentence what exactly it is that we should not do, on pain of incoherence, when defining our *telos*. The problem is that the searched for principle is supposed to

be neutral with respect to what the *telos* is. It should ‘only’ inform us of some necessary condition that anything which might be our *telos* should satisfy. Then we should be able to look at how things are with respect to this condition, and be able to conclude that justification cannot be part of the *telos* (and thus, of knowledge). Sartwell’s formulation of the goal is actually quite succinct and correct:

It is incoherent to build a specification of something regarded merely as a means of achieving some goal into the description of the goal itself; [...] (Sartwell 1992, 174)

The only thing that is not stated explicitly here is the relation that is supposed to hold between the two goals mentioned. But it is quite clear from the context what the relation must be like. For it is clearly assumed in Sartwell’s discussion that truth is at least part of the overall *telos* of inquiry. And there is nothing objectionable or incoherent about that, since truth is accepted as (at least) being a part of knowledge, and knowledge is taken as being the *telos*. It is no issue of the debate whether truth is part of the *telos* or not; the only question of the debate is whether anything else besides truth belongs to the *telos*. If we conceive of the argumentative situation in this way, it becomes clear what exactly it is that the searched for principle prescribes: nothing which is merely a means for achieving something that is (at least) part of our *telos* should be built into the *telos*. The ‘something’ that is part of our *telos* is truth, and justification is merely a means for achieving it. Therefore, applying the principle to our case at hand yields the result that justification should not be built into the definition of the *telos*. The principle is, as it were, concerned with possible extensions of the *telos*. If we know already that X is (at least) part of the *telos*, what are we to say about a further candidate, Y? This is the situation to which the principle speaks. And the principle tells us to not take this candidate Y as a further part of the *telos* if Y is merely a means to X. So the third premise should be as follows:

- (3’) If something, X, is (at least) part of the *telos*, and something else, Y, is merely (extrinsically) a means for achieving X, then Y should not be built into the definition of the *telos*.

In order to make the above-mentioned assumption of the discussion explicit, and to complete the premises of the argument, we should add the fourth premise:

- (4) Truth is (at least) part of the *telos* of inquiry.

Thus, we arrive at the following formulation of Sartwell’s argument concerning conductivity:

(SA) *Sartwell's Conducivity Argument*

- (1) Knowledge is (identical to) the *telos* of inquiry.
- (2') Epistemic justification is extrinsically conducive to truth (and so is not constitutive of truth).
- (3') If something, X, is (at least) part of the *telos*, and something else, Y, is merely (extrinsically) a means for achieving X, then it is not necessary (stronger version: it is incoherent) to build Y into the definition of the *telos*.
- (4) Truth is (at least) part of the *telos* of inquiry.

(C) It is not necessary (stronger version: it is incoherent) to build epistemic justification into the definition of knowledge.

Now it becomes clear that Sartwell's argument is not subject to the dilemma that Le Morvan has posed for the instrumentality argument. There is no longer any ambiguity about the kind of conducivity which is at stake. The only remaining question is whether – or under what circumstances – the premise (3') is correct. This will be our next topic.

4. HOW ABOUT INTRINSICALLY CONDUCTIVE MEANS?

One might very well wonder what happened to the idea of intrinsically conducive means. Are they excluded by Sartwell's argument? Or is this possibility overlooked by the argument? I take it that Sartwell has not overlooked any relevant possibility (except for one possibility perhaps, as we will see). What he has to say – critically – about intrinsically conducive means is implicitly contained in his discussion of multiple intrinsic goals of inquiry. According to Sartwell, justification could be valuable for three different reasons: (i) justification could be merely a means for achieving the *telos* of inquiry; (ii) justification could be a means for achieving some other, nonepistemic goal (e.g., successful adaptation); and (iii) justification could itself be an intrinsic epistemic goal. (Cp. Sartwell 1992, 180.)

We can ignore the second option in the following, since it is strictly speaking irrelevant to our discussion of epistemic means and ends. So essentially two options – epistemically relevant options – remain: justification is merely instrumentally valuable, or it is valuable in itself. (The two possibilities do not exclude one another, so in principle justification could be valuable twice over, as a means to truth and as a goal in itself.) The first option we have already dealt with. If justification is merely instrumentally valuable (for truth) and is not valuable in itself, then, as Sartwell's conducivity argument (SA) tells us, justification should not be

built into the definition of the *telos*. But if justification is valuable in itself, then knowledge becomes an incoherent notion. This is so, according to Sartwell's considerations, since knowledge then gives us two goals for inquiry – justification and truth – of which it is by no means guaranteed that they can always be realized simultaneously. And there are reasons for believing that they cannot be always realized simultaneously.³ So we are confronted with what might be called the '*coordination problem*'. As long as this coordination problem remains unsolved, Knowledge breaks apart, so to speak.

[I]f justification is valued not for its truth conduciveness, but for its conduciveness to some other goal, for example, successful adaptation, or for that matter, if justification is itself proposed as an intrinsic goal (a demand of reason, for example), then knowledge is an incoherent notion. It gives us two goals for inquiry, which cannot always be realized simultaneously. (Sartwell 1992, 180)

So if we thought that justification was valuable in itself, and of course that truth is valuable in itself, then we should give up value monism and give up knowledge as our overall *telos*. There would no longer be 'the one' *telos* of inquiry, but (at least) two.⁴

But is it really true that knowledge has to break apart if justification is a value in itself? Is there really no solution to the coordination problem? – No, there is one way out that Sartwell has not discussed, as it seems. Sartwell holds that justification and truth are goals that cannot always be realized simultaneously. But if we consider *a special kind of justification*, then this need no longer be a problem. A belief is justified (if and) only if it is produced by some reliable process or method. (This much is accepted by both Sartwell and Le Morvan.) But then a belief is maximally justified, as we may say, (if and) only if it is produced by some process or method which guarantees (necessitates) its truth. Maximal justification, in this sense, is sometimes claimed to be the missing element that turns true belief into knowledge (even if it is not always called 'justification' but rather 'being based on information' or 'being based on conclusive grounds', or something like that).⁵ And, what is important for our present purposes, it is peculiar to this kind of justification that it will never be in conflict with the goal of truth. If we try to reach maximal justification, we will automatically be looking for truth, since truth is entailed by maximal justification. Maximal justification is an enrichment of truth, so to speak, and as such, there is no possibility of reaching maximal justification and missing the goal of truth. We will never have to sacrifice truth for the sake of the other goal. So if knowledge were maximally justified true belief, then knowledge would not become incoherent since the two intrinsically valuable goals of maximal justification and truth would be sufficiently har-

monized. This, it seems, is a possibility that Sartwell has not taken into account.

However, I very much doubt that this is the possibility that Le Morvan has in mind. For, nowhere does he argue against Sartwell's claim that justification and truth cannot always be realized simultaneously and that, therefore, knowledge is incoherent (in the case that justification is valuable in itself). So I will not take Le Morvan's notion of 'intrinsically conducive means' as pointing towards this possibility, and thus ignore this possibility in the following (even though I believe it is a systematically important option).⁶

Coming back to Sartwell's argument (SA), it is indeed correct to say that it does not take intrinsically conducive means into account. But there are other considerations of Sartwell's that deal with all of the remaining possibilities. It is a presupposition of Sartwell's conductivity argument (SA) that justification is not valuable in itself. That this is Sartwell's intention becomes clear from the fact that he deals with the possibility of justification being valuable in itself in separate sections (Sartwell 1992, Section IV, 'Lycan's explanationism', and Section V, 'Conclusion'). Principle (3') is correct only under this presupposition. However, if the presupposition should turn out to be false, then the other argument of Sartwell's (the argument concerning the coordination problem) applies and shows the breakdown of knowledge.

The remaining question now is what sense we should make of 'intrinsically conducive means'. In the end, it seems to, the notion is quite useless. It is either incoherent or superfluous.⁷ In support of this charge, I submit the following consideration.

'Intrinsically conducive means' will be of interest only if something is not just a means to some end, but is also intrinsically valuable. Applied to our epistemological case, this means that we have to consider the possibility that justification is valuable in itself (and not just a means to truth). So in the following discussion of the notion of 'intrinsically conducive means' we will always suppose that justification is valuable in itself.

Now suppose that X is intrinsically conducive to Y. This does not entail that X is (completely) identical to Y, but it does entail that X is partially identical to Y. (If there is doubt about this, I will provide evidence for it below.) So if X is intrinsically conducive to Y it is entailed that X is conducive to something, Y, with which X is partially identical.

Now there are two possibilities (and keep in mind that justification is assumed to be valuable in itself). First, X is conducive to itself. This leads into incoherence, since it does not make sense to say that something is conducive to itself. Nothing is ever conducive to itself, literally speak-

ing. Something can be instrumentally valuable or valuable in itself. (Here, again, the teleological conception of normativity is assumed to be correct.) To say that it is 'conducive to itself' could at best be a very misleading way of describing it as valuable in itself. Leaving this misleading way of speaking aside, it is incoherent to say that something is conducive to itself.

The second (and more promising) possibility is that X is not conducive to itself. This, however, *implies that the notion of an intrinsically conducive means becomes superfluous*. To see this, consider the following: suppose X is intrinsically conducive to Y and X is not conducive to itself. Then X must be conducive to some part of Y, Z, which is not even partially identical with X. It follows that X is merely *extrinsically* conducive to Z. And so X is only in a derived sense conducive to Y, namely, by being conducive to Z which is constitutive of Y. Then, however, intrinsic conducivity in this case becomes a matter of *derived extrinsic conducivity*, and so the notion of an intrinsically conducive means is superfluous. QED.

The second possibility just discussed can be *illustrated* by the following example: suppose drinking tea (X) is an extrinsically conducive means to becoming healthy (Z). Then we can introduce the complex *telos* ('life form') of drinking tea and being healthy (Y). But then X is conducive to Y, namely, by being extrinsically conducive to Z which is partially constitutive of the life form Y. And because X is also partially constitutive of Y, X fulfills LeMorvan's definition of being an intrinsically conducive means to the life form Y. This case, however, is merely a case of *derived extrinsic conducivity*, since X is merely in a derived sense conducive to Y (namely, *via* Z), and the notion of an intrinsically conducive means is superfluous for describing the situation (and potentially misleading).

The case of justification (X), knowledge (Y), and truth (Z) is analogous: suppose justification (X) is an extrinsically conducive means to truth (Z), as everybody agrees, and that justification is valuable in itself. Then we can introduce the complex *telos* ('knowledge') of justified true belief (Y). But then justification is conducive to knowledge, namely, by being extrinsically conducive to truth which is partially constitutive of knowledge. And because justification is also partially constitutive of knowledge, justification fulfills the definition of being an intrinsically conducive means to knowledge. This case, however, is merely a case of derived extrinsic conducivity, since justification is merely in a derived sense conducive to knowledge (namely, *via* truth), and the notion of an intrinsically conducive means is superfluous for describing the situation (and potentially misleading).

Let me finish by addressing potential doubt about the claim that X's being intrinsically conducive to Y entails that X is partially identical to Y. Please note the following: partial identity is either mereological or

non-mereological. Mereological partial identity applies to complex entities which are mereologically composed of certain entities, whereas non-mereological partial identity applies to complex entities which are non-mereologically composed of certain entities (such as, for example, Armstrong's states of affairs which are non-mereologically composed of (thin) particulars and universals, according to Armstrong 1997, Chap. 2.3). For the present argument about intrinsic conductivity, it does not matter which kind of partial identity we deal with. It is clear that in case (ii) *Y* must be complex, either mereologically or non-mereologically. And this is clear in the concrete case we are dealing with, namely, the case of the *telos* knowledge which is constituted by justified true belief. There, justification is extrinsically conducive to truth, and justification is constitutive of knowledge. So justification is partially identical with knowledge, and the argument runs just as presented above.

The result of our considering the two possibilities therefore is: intrinsic conductivity is either incoherent or reducible to derived extrinsic conductivity, *Only in a derived sense would justification be a means to knowledge, namely, insofar as it is a means to some proper part of knowledge (i.e., truth)*. We would be attributing the means relation to the whole when actually it holds only to a proper part of the whole. In Aristotelian terms, the means-end relation would be attributed in a secondary, 'accidental' way, but not in a primary, 'autonomous' way. So the notion of an intrinsically conducive means is of no value.⁸

A final word on the supposed examples of intrinsically conducive means that Le Morvan mentions. Pleasure, health, and exemption from pain are most probably to some extent (extrinsically) conducive to one another. The more health, the more pleasure; the less pain, the more health, and so on. At least, there seem to exist some real means-end relations here. But in addition, it is quite plausible to assume that each of them is also intrinsically valuable. We do not only value exemption from pain for instrumental reasons, we value it in itself, too. So the example seems to have a structure of the kind just discussed, and there will and cannot be any need for the notion of an 'intrinsically conducive means'. However, since pleasure, health, and exemption from pain are not always in perfect harmony, as we sadly know, our overarching goal (*Z*) that encompasses all intrinsically valuable goals will not be stable but will pull us into different directions on some occasions. Well, such is life, and the case of happiness is complicated anyway.⁹

NOTES

¹ This thesis is also held by von Kutschera, Skidmore, and Beckermann (for references, see Le Morvan 2002).

² Cp. Sartwell (1992, 174–175). Sartwell's arguments for the identification of knowledge and the goal of inquiry are not successful, in my view, and I would not accept the claim. Rather, I think that truth is the goal of inquiry. If so, then we can of course avoid Sartwell's 'paradoxical' identification of knowledge with truth, by rejecting the first premise that knowledge is the *telos*.

³ Cp. Sartwell (1992, 177–178, 180). It is of course assumed here that truth is intrinsically valuable.

⁴ If, in addition, justification were thought to be instrumentally valuable with respect to achieving truth, the situation would seem to be somewhat strange, but this could do nothing to prevent or undo the breakdown of knowledge.

⁵ This is essentially the correct analysis of knowledge according to Dretske (1971, 1981) and Nozick (1981), and also according to Lewis (1996), with a contextualist twist.

⁶ In addition, where Le Morvan sketches what he thinks knowledge is – 'true belief which enjoys epistemic security' – it is quite clear that he does not require maximal justification but only "some epistemic security" short of truth-guaranteeing security (Le Morvan, 164, emphasis in original).

⁷ At least, this is so if the teleological conception of normativity is correct. Sartwell has presented convincing arguments for the teleological conception. In the following, the teleological conception will be assumed.

⁸ Someone who accepted the analysis of knowledge as maximally justified true belief could also accept the analysis of the means-end relation just proposed. According to this view, maximal justification (Y) is valuable in itself and constitutive of knowledge (Z), but it is also (extrinsically) conducive to truth (X). So in this view, maximal justification would be an 'intrinsically conducive means' to knowledge, accidentally speaking.

⁹ The other two examples that Le Morvan mentions – close friendship and living virtuously vis à vis the good life, and good acting on the part of those playing the Oracle, Oedipus etc. vis à vis a beautiful performance of Oedipus Rex – can be analyzed similarly. So no clear example of an intrinsically conducive means *primarily speaking* has yet been presented.

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