

The Concept of *Ergon*: Towards an Achievement Interpretation of Aristotle’s “Function Argument”

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1. Introduction

Aristotle thinks that if you want to live well, you should organize your life by reference to the best thing that humans can achieve in action—something he calls “the human good.” In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 7, Aristotle helpfully defines the human good as “activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue and if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue and moreover in an end-like [i.e. complete] life” (1098a16-18). This definition is the conclusion of what is known as “the *ergon* argument” (a.k.a. “the function argument”). In this essay, I aim to clear the way for a new interpretation of this argument, and I do so by questioning the ubiquitous assumption that the *ergon* of something is always the proper activity of that thing. I argue that though Aristotle has a single concept of an *ergon*, he identifies the *ergon* of any *X* (that has an *ergon*) as an activity in some cases but a product in others, depending on the sort of thing the *X* is—for while the *ergon* of the eye is seeing, the *ergon* of a sculptor is not sculpting but a sculpture. This alternative interpretation of Aristotle’s concept of an *ergon* allows the key explanatory middle term of the *ergon* argument to be what, I argue, it ought to be: “the best achievement of a human.” On my interpretation of the argument, Aristotle assumes that the human good is the best achievement of a human, and he uses the concept of an *ergon* in order to gain clarity on what this achievement might be. He reasons that just as the best achievement of a sculptor will be a version of his *ergon*, which is a sculpture, so the best achievement of a human will be a version of his *ergon*, which is a certain activity of living. On the basis of this recovered bit of reasoning I close by offering, and briefly discussing, a new reconstruction of the *ergon* argument.

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2. “Ergon” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 7: Reasons for a Reassessment

In *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 1. 2, Aristotle introduces the phrase “the human good” to label what he has explained as the highest, and thus best, of all things achievable in action by humans. To be “best” (NE 1. 2, 1094a22) is to be most of all an end: an end that we desire for its own sake and not for the sake of something else, and one for the sake of which we choose everything else (1. 2, 1094a18-20). Aristotle notes that while the many and the wise agree in naming the best good “eudaimonia” (“happiness”), they disagree over what exactly this is (1. 4, 1095a17-22). After briefly considering and critiquing different accounts of what the best good is (1. 5-6), Aristotle gives his own account (1. 7) and he does so by means of an argument that pivots around the concept of an *ergon*. This is “the *ergon* argument.”

In the lines just before the argument, Aristotle says that while people agree that eudaimonia is “the best <good>,” we still need a clearer idea of what this best good is (1. 7, 1097b22-24). He then suggests that we might attain this clarity if we grasp the *ergon* of a human. In what I will call “Section A” of the *ergon* argument, he explains why (cf. γάρ at 1097b24) doing so might be helpful:

[Section A] This is because just as for a flautist, a sculptor, and every artisan, and generally, for whatever has an *ergon* and an action, the good, that is, the well [τὸ εὖ] seems to be <found> in its *ergon*, the same would seem to be so for a human, if he has an *ergon*. (NE 1. 7, 1097b25-28)¹

ὥσπερ γὰρ ἀϋλητῆι καὶ ἀγαλματοποιῶ καὶ
παντὶ τεχνίτη, καὶ ὅλωσ ὧν ἔστιν ἔργον τι καὶ πρᾶξις, ἐν
τῷ ἔργῳ δοκεῖ τὰγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ, οὕτω δόξειεν ἂν καὶ
ἀνθρώπῳ, εἴπερ ἔστι τι ἔργον αὐτοῦ.²

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own, though they do reflect my consultation of published translations, especially T. H. Irwin (trans.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, Translated with Introduction, Notes and Glossary* [Ethics], 2nd edn. (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1999), C. D. C. Reeve (trans.), *Plato: Republic* [Republic] (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 2004), and the translations found in J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle* [Complete Works], vol. 1-2 (Princeton, 1995).

² Unless otherwise noted, I use the Oxford Classical Text edition of Aristotle’s Greek.

This passage supplies us with the fundamental principle upon which the *ergon* argument rests: For anything with an *ergon* and an action, “the good, that is, the well” is found in its *ergon*. I here translate “τὸ εὖ” as “the well,” though (as I will later suggest) “τὸ εὖ” is better understood as “the excellent achievement.” But I give this provisional, literal translation because our understanding of “τὸ εὖ” turns on our understanding of “*ergon*” since, as is clear from later in the argument, Aristotle uses “τὸ εὖ” to refer to a thing’s *ergon* achieved well (1. 7, 1098a12).

“*Ergon*” in Section A has been translated as “function,”³ “characteristic activity,”⁴ “activité,”⁵ “office” (Fr.),⁶ “eigentümliche Tätigkeit,”⁷ and so on. Some scholars helpfully explain what they take an *ergon* to be. Barney, for example, says: “the function of a thing is *the activity proper to or characteristic of it*,”⁸ noting that “shoemaking,” for example, “is a function.”⁹ In some form or other, this interpretation is ubiquitous,¹⁰ stretching back into the Middle Ages.¹¹ Several factors have encouraged it. First, the only *erga* explicitly identified in *NE* 1. 7 are activities: the human *ergon* is as an “activity on

³ Irwin, *Ethics*, ad loc.; H. Rackham (trans.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), ad loc.; W. D. Ross (trans., rev. J. O. Urmsen), *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Barnes (ed.), *Complete Works*, vol. 2, 1729-1867, ad loc.; S. Broadie (comm., trans. C. Rowe), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics [Ethics]* (Oxford, 2002), ad loc.

⁴ R. Crisp (ed. and trans.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, 2000), ad loc.

⁵ P. Destrée, “Comment démontrer le propre de l’homme? Pour une lecture ‘dialectique’ de *EN* I, 6” in G. R. Dherbey and G. Aubry (eds.), *L’Excellence de la Vie* (Paris, 2002), 31-61 at 61.

⁶ R. Bodéüs (trans.), *Aristote: L’Éthique à Nicomaque* (Paris, 2004), ad loc.

⁷ O. Gigon (trans.), *Aristoteles: Die Nikomachische Ethik* (Düsseldorf and Zürich, 2001), ad loc.

⁸ R. Barney, “Aristotle’s Argument for a Human Function” [“Human Function”], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 23 (2008), 293-322 at 293.

⁹ R. Barney, “Human Function”, 303.

¹⁰ The view is truly ubiquitous, but here are a few more quotations in which the view is stated or implied. C. Korsgaard, “Aristotle on Function and Virtue” [“Function and Virtue”], *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 3 (1986), 259-279 at 259: “Aristotle reasons that if anything has a function, its good lies in performing that function well.” Irwin, *Ethics*, 183: “The examples of craftsmen <in Section A> suggest that the function of some kind F is the *goal-directed activity* that is essential to F.” Broadie, *Ethics*, 276: “[P]erhaps the examples <in 1097b28-33> are meant... to illustrate the concept of a *characteristic function* (*ergon*). That the being or essential nature of an individual is expressed through a typifying activity is the central doctrine of <Aristotle’s> metaphysics.” G. Lawrence, “Is Aristotle’s Function Argument Fallacious?” [“Fallacious?”], *Philosophical Inquiry*, 31 (2009), 191-224 at 215 summarizes Section A this way: “Where the X is something with a function, the X-an good, i.e. the good of an X, consists in its doing its function successfully or well.” C. D. C. Reeve, *Action Contemplation and Happiness: An Essay on Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), 238 explains that the *ergon* of a carpenter is “doing woodwork.”

¹¹ Aquinas, for example, rephrases the claim of Section A this way: “When a thing has a proper activity [proprium operationem], its good and its being well-off consist in its activity [in eius operatione].” See *Sententia libri Ethicorum* in R. Busa (ed.) *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia [Opera Omnia]*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt, 1980), 143-233 at lb1 lc10 n2.

the basis of reason or not without reason” (1098a7-8) and the *ergon* of a kitharist is the performance on the kithara (1098a11-12). Second, while I have said that the claim of Section A is made with reference to “anything with an *ergon* and an action” (1097b26), some scholars take the Greek to mean “anything with an *ergon*, *that is*, an action.” This would of course imply that the *ergon* of a thing is the same as its proper “action.” Third, because it is clear that “the well” (τὸ εἶναι, 1097b27) of a human being is a doing well and that this is “in” the human *ergon*, which is an activity, scholars assume that “the well” of every artisan is a doing well and that it must likewise be “in” their proper activities. We will return to these issues. But for now let us just note that on the basis of the broad scholarly agreement as well as these last considerations, one might draw the not ill-grounded conclusion that Aristotle, in the *NE ergon* argument, understands the *ergon* of a thing to be the proper activity of that thing.

Yet there is reason to be uneasy. First, even if one assumes that Aristotle uses “*ergon*” to mean “proper activity” in *NE* 1. 7, one must also note that not long before (*NE* 1. 1, 1094a5) and not long after (*NE* 2. 6, 1106b10) the *ergon* argument Aristotle uses “*ergon*” in expressions that clearly refer to products. Aristotle would then appear to be switching back and forth between different meanings of the word “*ergon*” without any indication that he is doing so. Second, when Aristotle identifies the *ergon* of a productive artisan, he identifies it as a product, not a proper activity: for example, the *ergon* of a shoemaker is a shoe and the *ergon* of a housebuilder is a house (*NE* 5 (= *EE* 4). 5, 1133a7-10; cf. *EE* 2. 1, 1219a14-21). Third and most importantly, if *ergon* means “proper activity” in *NE* 1. 7, it is unclear how the claim of Section A is supposed to help Aristotle determine the human good, which he considers to be the best thing achievable by a human. Take the example of the sculptor. Even if “the good, that is, the well” of a sculptor consists in sculpting well, that seems irrelevant to the question of what the best thing achievable by a sculptor is—since this is presumably not sculpting but a *sculpture*. These incongruities should give us pause, and because of them we should be open to reassessing the evidence for what Aristotle’s concept of an *ergon* really is.

This essay consists in such a reassessment, and as I mentioned earlier, my proposal will be that in *NE* 1. 7 (as elsewhere) Aristotle understands the *ergon* of an X to be an activity in some cases but a product in others, in accordance with the sort of thing

the X is—for though Aristotle has a single concept of an *ergon*, he nevertheless identifies the *ergon* of the eye as seeing and the *ergon* of a sculptor as a sculpture. For ease of reference, I will call this the “alternative concept of an *ergon*.” On my interpretation, the way Aristotle understands “the *ergon* of an X” is similar to the way he understands “the limit (πέρας) of an X.” For though Aristotle has a single concept of a limit, he nevertheless identifies the limit of a plane as a line and the limit of a line as a point (cf. *Topics* 4. 4, 141b19-22)—and Aristotle thinks a line (having one dimension) and a point (have zero dimensions) are radically different kinds of things. When Aristotle speaks of “the *ergon* of a human,” that expression does refer to a proper activity, but “*ergon*” does not thereby mean what “proper activity” means. “*Ergon*” and “proper activity” express different concepts. Similarly, when Aristotle speaks of “the limit [πέρας] of a plane,” that expression does refer to a line, but “limit” does not thereby mean what “line” (or “γραμμή”) means. “Limit” and “line” express different concepts.

To argue for this interpretation, I examine passages from Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *De Caelo*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Along the way we see that while Plato and Aristotle share the same basic concept of an *ergon*, they nevertheless differ in their accounts of what an *ergon* is. On Aristotle’s account (though not on Plato’s) the *ergon* of an X is the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, has being.

3. Plato’s Understanding of an *Ergon* in the *Republic*

Plato gives an *ergon* argument in *Republic* 1 that scholars rightly take to be a precursor to the *ergon* argument of *NE* 1. 7. They also assume that Plato and Aristotle share the same concept of an *ergon*,¹² and that Plato’s concept of an *ergon* is that of a proper activity.¹³ Here, for example, is how Reeve translates the account of an *ergon* that we find at the beginning of Plato’s *ergon* argument:

¹² Scholars who assume that Plato and Aristotle share their concept of an *ergon* include, for example, J. M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle [Human Good]* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1986), 145, Irwin, *Ethics*, 183 and Korsgaard, “Function and Virtue”, 260.

¹³ However, I should add that even if scholars are correct in saying that the concept of an *ergon* in Plato’s *Rep. ergon* argument is the concept of a function, that alone would not give us sufficient reason to conclude that the concept of an *ergon* in Aristotle’s *NE ergon* argument is that of a function. This is because, as we will see, there is good reason to think that neither in the *Protrepticus* (which certainly comes before the *NE*) nor in the *EE* (which very likely does as well) is Aristotle’s concept of an *ergon* the concept of a function.

[1st Account:] “And would you take the function [ἔργον] of a horse or of anything else to be that which one can do [ποιῆ] only with it or best with it?”^{14,15}

Ἄρ’ οὖν τοῦτο ἂν θείης καὶ ἵππου καὶ ἄλλου ὄτουσῶν
ἔργον, ὃ ἂν ἢ μόνῳ ἐκείνῳ ποιῆ τις ἢ ἄριστα; (*Rep.* 1, 352e2-3)¹⁶

The translation is representative.¹⁷ The same goes for the second formulation (considered by Plato to be equivalent to the first, 353a9), which Reeve renders:

[2nd Account:] “...the function [ἔργον] of each thing is what it alone can do [ἀπεργάζεται] or what it can do better than anything else.”¹⁸

[Νῦν δὴ οἶμαι ἄμεινον ἂν μάθοις ὃ ἄρτι ἠρώτων, πυνθανόμενος εἰ] οὐ τοῦτο ἐκάστου εἶη ἔργον ὃ ἂν ἢ μόνον τι ἢ κάλλιστα τῶν ἄλλων ἀπεργάζεται. (*Rep.* 1, 353a10-11)

Commentators seem to be in agreement with the translators. Irwin, for example, writes: “Socrates <in *Republic* 1> appeals to the connexion between the virtue of F and the function, or *essential activity* of F: a good knife is good at cutting, a good eye is good at seeing, and so on.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Reeve, *Republic*, ad loc.

¹⁵ These lines may startle a modern reader, for Plato appears to think that the *ergon* of a horse somehow consists in being used by man. On the basis of these lines Barney assumes that Plato’s general notion of *ergon* is one of “instrumentality” (“Human Function”, 299). I will not fully address this issue here, but we should note that Socrates considers this first account to be equivalent to his second account (353a9), in which the language of a user or instrument is absent. And so it is not obvious that Plato’s concept of an *ergon* is inextricably tied to that of a “user,” even if Plato (or Socrates) thinks that the *ergon* of a horse is essentially related to a user.

¹⁶ For citations to the *Republic* I use S. R. Slings (ed.), *Platonis Republicam* (Oxford, 2003), which is also what is translated in Reeve, *Republic*.

¹⁷ Cf. R. E. Allen (trans.), *Plato: The Republic* (New Haven and London, 2008), ad loc.; A. Bloom (trans.), *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd edn. (USA, 1991), ad loc.; G. M. A. Grube (trans., rev. C. D. C. Reeve), *Republic* in J. M. Cooper (ed., assoc. ed. D. H. Hutchinson), *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1997), ad loc.; H. D. P. Lee (trans.), *Plato: Republic* (New York, 2007), ad loc.; A. D. Lindsay (trans.), *Plato: The Republic* (New York, 1976), ad loc.; P. Shorey (trans.), *Plato: Republic, Books I-V* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), ad loc.; R. Waterfield (trans.), *Plato: Republic* (Oxford, 1993), ad loc. Shorey and Bloom both translate *ergon* as “work” throughout the *ergon* argument, but their translation of the verbs that take “*ergon*” as their direct objects shows that they consider the *ergon* to be a function: for Shorey, “do” at 352e7 and “perform” at 353a11; and for Bloom, “do” both at 352e7 and 353a11.

¹⁸ In the Greek idiom the expression translated as “better than anything else” actually contains the word “best” (κάλλιστα), and so the notion of “best” is used in both accounts.

¹⁹ T. H. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), 179, emphasis added. I here mention a few more scholars who hold that Plato’s concept of an *ergon* in the *Republic* is that of a function. G. Vlastos, “Justice and Happiness”, in id., *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1973), 111-139 at 115 writes: “the ἔργον of anything (of a tool, like a pruning-knife, or of a bodily organ, like an eye or an ear) is that activity which can be

Despite this consensus, one should note that throughout the *Republic* Plato identifies the *ergon* of a productive art (e.g. the shoemaking-art or the housebuilding-art) not as its proper activity, but as its proper product. This occurs, for example, in the following passage, which comes shortly before *Republic* 1's *ergon* argument. To distinguish the art (τέχνη) of wage-earning from other arts Socrates explains:

This very benefit, receiving wages, doesn't result from <the artisan's> own art. On the contrary, if we are to examine the matter precisely, the doctoring-art makes health [ἡ μὲν ἰατρικὴ ὑγίειαν ποιεῖ], and the wage-earning-art a wage; the housebuilding-art makes a house, and the wage-earning-art, which accompanies it, a wage, and the same [οὕτως] goes for all other arts: each achieves its *ergon* [τὸ αὐτῆς ἐκάστη ἔργον ἐργάζεται], and benefits that over which it is placed (*Rep.* 1, 346d1-6).

Socrates here remarks that the doctoring-art makes (ποιεῖ) health, the housebuilding-art a house, and the wage-earning-art a wage, and then places these examples in parallel structure with the following claim: “each <art> achieves [ἐργάζεται] its *ergon*.” This indicates that we ought to read “ποιεῖ” as parallel to “ἐργάζεται;” and “health,” “a house” and “a wage” as parallel to “*ergon*.” Consequently, Plato identifies the *ergon* of each of these particular arts not as their proper activities, but as their products. One should also note that Plato here speaks of *each* art achieving its *ergon*, and there is reason to think that not every art issues in a product. This is because later, in *Republic* X, Plato implies both that there is an art of flute-playing, and that the flute-player (in contrast to the flute-maker) does not make a product (601d1-e2). And so if the flute-player is to have an *ergon*, it will not be a product but an activity, his performance on the flute. If this is so, then when Plato speaks of each art achieving its *ergon*, he would seem to be assuming that while the *ergon* of the housebuilder is a product (a house), the *ergon* of the flute-

‘performed either exclusively by that thing or else more excellently [κάλλιστα] by it than by anything else’ (353a).” Cooper, *Human Good*, 145 notes a claim common to both the *NE* and the *Republic* 1 *ergon* arguments: “a thing’s excellence is the essential condition of its performing well its *ergon*.” J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* (Oxford, 1981), 54 writes: “*Ergon* is what a thing does *qua* a thing of that kind.” R. Barney, “Socrates’ Refutation of Thrasymachus”, in G. Santas (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic* (Malden, 2006), 44-62 at 55, commenting on what she calls “the ‘function’ argument” writes, “the function of anything is ‘that which one can do only with it or best with it’ (352e3-4, 353a9-11).”

player is an activity (his performance). Other passages from the *Republic* suggest a similar picture.²⁰

But is this the same notion of an *ergon* that occurs in *Republic* I's *ergon* argument? As far as examples of *erga* within *Rep.* I's *ergon* argument are concerned, nothing prevents it from being so. This is because even though the *erga* explicitly identified there are activities (e.g. seeing, hearing, living) these are the sorts of activities that do not issue in products. And so it is possible that Plato thinks that while the *ergon* of the eye is seeing and the *ergon* of the ear is hearing, the *ergon* of a housebuilder is still a house. As for textual indications that the same notion of an *ergon* is present in both places, here are three. First, it is only a few pages after the passage above that Plato gives his *ergon* argument, and in the meantime he gives no indication that his use of the word "*ergon*" has changed. He also explicitly notes that his two accounts of what an *ergon* is are intended to apply to anything with an *ergon* (352e3 and 353a10). Second, Plato correlates the transitive verbs ποιέω and ἐργάζομαι with the *erga* as their direct objects both in the passage above and in the two accounts of what an *ergon* is: ποιέω in the first account (352e4) and ἀπεργάζομαι in the second (353a11). And third, in the passage above Plato speaks of "the *ergon* of the art" (346d5) and in the *ergon* argument speaks of "the *ergon* of [an X]" (352d9-e3, 353a10-11) and in doing so he uses the "*ergon*"-plus-genitive construction that regularly signifies the *ergon* proper to an X.²¹

But what about Plato's two accounts of what an *ergon* is? Current translations suggest that an *ergon* of an X is always an activity: e.g. the *ergon* of each thing is "what it alone can do [ἀπεργάζηται] or what it can do better than anything else" (353a10-11; Reeve, trans.). But, as we have seen, ἀπεργάζομαι and ποιέω do not always indicate a

²⁰ Consider, for example, *Rep.* 4, 421d9-e5, which pretty clearly implies that the *erga* of potters are pots. In that passage, not only is the verb ἐργάζεται again paired with "*erga*" as its direct object at 421d12, just as it was in the *ergon* argument (I, 353c6-7; cf. 353a10-11), but Socrates also speaks of "the *erga* of the arts" using the "*ergon*"-plus-genitive construction that, as we noted above, regularly signifies the *ergon* proper to a thing. Consider also the famous discussion of art in *Rep.* X, where Socrates clearly identifies the *ergon* of a couch-maker as a couch (not couchmaking), and again pairs the same verbs (ποιέω and ἐργάζομαι) with the *erga* as their direct objects (for example, at 597a1-7 and 603a9-b3). Second, in the course of his argument in *Rep.* 10 he says that the *ergon* of the rational part of the soul is to deliberate (602d6-e2), echoing a similar claim made in the *Rep.* 1 *ergon* argument (cf. 353d3-7), and this strongly suggests that in Book 10 Plato assumes that while the *ergon* of a couchmaker is a product (a couch), the *ergon* of the rational part of the soul is an activity (to deliberate).

²¹ "ἔργον" in H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edn. with a revised supplement (Oxford, 1968), 682-83 at §VI.1.a.

“doing.” Instead, just as the expression “*ergon* of X” (without changing its meaning) indicated an activity or a product in accordance with the sort of thing the X is, so each of the verbs in question (without changing their meaning) indicated a doing or a making as the case may be. Consequently, we lose the core meaning of these verbs when we translate them as “do” or “make.” If we want to retain the core meaning, a few verbs in English may help: “accomplish,” “achieve,” “execute,” etc. We can intelligibly speak of a statue as something that a sculptor has accomplished or achieved, and we can likewise speak of a flute-player’s performance as something that the flute-player has accomplished or achieved.²² Now in certain passages it may not be that important to retain the core meaning of the verbs in question, but in other passages it is important—and Plato’s *ergon* argument is one of these passages. I recommend that we translate the two accounts this way:

[1st Account:] “And would you take the *ergon* of a horse or anything else to be that which one can achieve [ποιῆ] only with it or best with it? (352e3-e4)

[2nd Account:] “...the *ergon* of each thing is what it alone can achieve [ἀπεργάζηται] or what it can achieve better than anything else” (353a10-11)

A bit later I will make some remarks about how best to translate “*ergon*.” But for the moment, we need only to observe that Plato’s two accounts should be translated along these lines if they are to reflect what I am suggesting are the contours of the concept of an *ergon*. Plato, I believe, is trying to give a single account of “the *ergon* of an X” that can nevertheless pick out different kinds of things (activities or products) just as one might give a single account of “the limit of an X” that can nevertheless pick out different kinds of things (lines, points, etc.).

If we do understand Plato’s accounts in this new way, we are put in a position to appreciate a difficulty—one that Aristotle appears to respond to in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Notice that when Plato in each of his two accounts speaks about achieving something “best” (“κάλλιστα” or “ἄριστα”) he understands “best” by reference to a comparison

²² Though this use of “achieve” may seem awkward, note that some languages have verbs that have semantic ranges that are quite similar to those (that I have just drawn attention to) of ποιέω or ἀπεργάζομαι. Consider, for example, French “faire.” One can say, “J’ai fait un gâteau” (“I made a cake”) or “J’ai fait une promenade” (“I took a walk”).

class of things that can execute similar *erga* (353a1-8). However, as we have seen, he also thinks that, in the cases where the activity of something issues a product, the product is the *ergon* of that thing and not the activity: e.g. the *ergon* of the doctoring-art is health, not healing, and the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art is a house, not housebuilding (*Rep.* I, 346d1-8). The conjunction of these views creates the following gap when it comes to accounting for the *ergon* of any productive art. Taking the doctoring-art as an example, we are not given sufficient conditions for picking out health (as opposed to healing) as the *ergon*. For while the doctoring-art achieves health best (in comparison with the shoemaking-art or any other art), the doctoring-art also achieves *healing* best.²³

4. Aristotle's Understanding of an *Ergon* in the *Protrepticus*

Before we see how Aristotle in the *Eudemian Ethics* responds to Plato's account, we should look at a telling bit of text that forms part of what is probably Aristotle's earliest extant *ergon* argument. In fragment B65 of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, as recovered from Iamblichus,²⁴ we read:

If a human is a simple animal and his being is ordered to reason and thought, he has no other *ergon* than the most exact truth, that is, thinking truly about what is [οὐκ ἄλλο ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ ἔργον ἢ μόνη ἢ ἀκριβεστάτη ἀλήθεια καὶ τὸ περὶ τῶν ὄντων ἀληθεύειν]. But if he is naturally composed of several capacities, it is clear that when a thing can achieve several <things>, the best of these is always the *ergon* [ἀεὶ τούτων τὸ βέλτιστον <τὸ> ἔργον ἐστὶν]: for example, health <is the *ergon*> of a doctor, and safety <is the *ergon*> of a sea-captain. Now we can name no better *ergon* of thought or the thinking part of the soul than truth. Truth, therefore, is the supreme *ergon* of the thinking part of the soul.²⁵

There are complexities to this passage that I will not now address, but I think we can see here the same basic concept of an *ergon* that we detected in the *Republic*. Aristotle seems

²³ Thus, Aristotle does not agree with Plato's account of what an *ergon* is—*pace*, for example, H. H. Joachim (ed. D. A. Rees), *Aristotle: the Nicomachean Ethics: a Commentary* (Oxford, 1951), 48.

²⁴ Here it is also worth noting that new arguments for the authenticity of the *Protrepticus* fragments may be found in D. S. Hutchinson and M. R. Johnson, "Authenticating Aristotle's *Protrepticus*", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 29 (2005), 193-295.

²⁵ I rely on the text and translation of I. Düring (ed. and trans.), *Protrepticus: an attempt at reconstruction* (Göteborg, 1961), but with some alterations to the translation.

to claim that, if a thing can achieve only one thing, then that will be its *ergon*. But if a thing is naturally fit to achieve more than one thing, it is the best of these that is its *ergon*. He then identifies the *ergon* of a doctor to be health and the *ergon* of a sea-captain to be safety;²⁶ yet he also identifies the *ergon* of the thinking part of the soul as “truth,” earlier glossed by him as “thinking truly” (ἀληθεύειν).²⁷ Consequently, he understands the *ergon* of an X to be “the best” that an X, qua X, is fit to achieve, whether it be beyond its activity (as in the case of a doctor or sea-captain) or the activity itself (as in the case of the thinking-part of the soul).

In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle goes into more detail about what he takes an *ergon* to be. Nevertheless, the *Protrepticus* account already differs from that of Plato. The reason is as follows. When Plato in the *Republic* speaks of the *ergon* of X as what X can alone achieve or what it can achieve best (ἄριστα and κάλλιστα), the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of things that can achieve similar *erga*. But when Aristotle in the *Protrepticus* speaks of the *ergon* of X as what is “best” (βέλτιστον), the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of things that X, qua X, can achieve. This thought is developed in the *EE*.

5. Aristotle’s Understanding of an *Ergon* in the *Eudemian Ethics*

Scholars generally agree that the *Eudemian Ethics* was written before the *Nicomachean Ethics* but after the *Protrepticus*.²⁸ In the *EE ergon* argument, we find what

²⁶ Presumably, the many things that Aristotle thinks a doctor, for example, can achieve will be health but also healing, and all the various activities that form a part of healing (rubbing, purging, etc.).

²⁷ Since Aristotle first describes a case where something has only one capacity, the καὶ that links “most exact truth” and “thinking truly about what is” is epexegetic. This suggests that what is achieved is a certain true activity: thinking truly or judging truly. I take this interpretation to dovetail with the remarks we find in *NE* 6. 2, where we read that the *ergon* of the thinking parts of the soul is truth and that the virtues of these parts are what enable it to think most truly (μάλιστα ἀληθεύσει, 1039b13). Though I cannot here argue for this view, I think that Aristotle does not conceive of truth, in its primary sense, as something that lies outside the activity of thinking (cf. *Metaphysics* E 4, 1027b25-27). For a different view, see P. Crivelli, *Aristotle on Truth* (Cambridge, 2004) who maintains that true and false things (πράγματα) “contribute to explaining what it is to be true or false for thoughts and sentences” (7). Crivelli does not discuss *Protrep.* B65 or *NE* 6. 2. For scholars who find Crivelli’s claims about true and false πράγματα problematic, see M. Wheeler, Review of *Aristotle on Truth*, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44 (2006), 469-470 and U. Coope, Review of *Aristotle on Truth*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2005), <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24902-aristotle-on-truth/>>.

²⁸ Here I take it for granted that the *EE* precedes the *NE*. However, if we assume that the *NE* precedes the *EE*, that will only strengthen my argument. This is because the distinction made in the *EE* is also made in the *Protrepticus* (at B65), which every scholar acknowledges to have been written before the *NE*. Thus, if

is probably the clearest case of Aristotle affirming that the *ergon* of an X is an activity in some cases and a product in others in accordance with the sort of thing the X is. The crucial passage runs:

It is clear that the *ergon* is better than the state or the disposition; but *ergon* is said in two ways [λέγεται διχῶς]. In some cases, there is an *ergon* beyond the employment:²⁹ for example, a house is the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art and not the activity of housebuilding, and health is the *ergon* of the doctoring-art and not the activity of healing or doctoring. In other cases, the employment is the *ergon*: for example, seeing is the *ergon* of vision, and active understanding <of mathematical truth> is the *ergon* of mathematical knowledge. And so it follows that, when a thing's employment is its *ergon*, the employment is better than the state (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a11-18).

This passage is rarely discussed. However, Reeve briefly gives what would presumably be a preferred interpretation for those who advocate the *ergon*-as-function reading of *NE* 1. 7. Reeve suggests that Aristotle is here noting that the term “*ergon*” is “act/result ambiguous.”³⁰

This seems to me highly doubtful. For if Aristotle were noting that “*ergon*” is act/result ambiguous, he could have easily done so by saying that there is one sense in which a house is the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art and another sense in which housebuilding is. Yet he does not do this. Instead, when he mentions activities that are *erga*, he only mentions activities that do *not* issue in products: e.g. seeing is the *ergon* of vision. And when he mentions products that are *erga*, he goes out of his way to say that the activities that issue in these products are *not erga*. He states: “a house is the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art and *not* the activity of housebuilding, and health is the *ergon* of the doctoring-art and *not* the activity of healing or doctoring” (1219a14-16, emphasis added). Thus, Aristotle seems to be saying that when a thing's proper activity is for the sake of a product, the *ergon* of that thing is its product, *not* its proper activity.

we assume that the *EE* is a later work of Aristotle, there will be evidence that Aristotle subscribes to the alternative concept of an *ergon* both before and after the *NE*.

²⁹ “Employment” translates χρῆσις. The employment is of the power (vision, the doctoring-art, the housebuilding-art, etc.), and I do not think that the word need imply that there must be a user that is distinct from the power.

³⁰ C. D. C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 1992), 123. Cf. M. R. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford, 2005), 87-8: “[T]he function is in fact a product of action, like shoes, or the action itself, like shoemaking.”

Notice also how the argument begins: “It is clear that the *ergon* is better than the state or disposition” (1219a11-13). It is only *after* making this claim that Aristotle draws the distinction between two types of *erga*: *erga* that are beyond activities and *erga* that are activities. With this distinction in hand, he concludes: “So it follows that, when a thing’s employment is its *ergon*, the employment is better than the state” (1219a17-18). Aristotle’s reasoning proceeds like this: (1) The *ergon* is better than the state. (2) The *ergon* is an activity in some cases but a product in others. Therefore, (3) when the *ergon* is an activity, the activity is better than the state. The implication is that, when Aristotle made the claim about “the *ergon*” at the beginning of the passage (“the *ergon* is better than the state,” 1219a12), he intended it to cover both sorts of *erga*, and thus was taking “*ergon*” to signify a single concept.

Where is the unity to be found? Helpfully, Aristotle says precisely where. Just before the quoted passage, he makes this claim about everything with an *ergon*: “the end of each <thing> is its *ergon*” (*EE* 1219a8),³¹ explaining that “the end is best, as being an end” (*EE* 1219a10).³² Then he indicates what he takes an “end” to be: “the end is the best in the sense of the last <thing> for the sake of which every thing else <is or is done>” (1219a10-11).³³ It is this idea that unifies the two ways in which *ergon* “is said” (1219a13). In the case of the housebuilding-art, the “last <thing> for the sake of which everything else <is done>” is a house (not housebuilding). However, in the case of the eye, Aristotle thinks, the “last <thing> for the sake of which everything else <is>” is seeing—and this is the activity itself.

Now if Aristotle had distinguished two senses of the word “*ergon*” we would expect him to give two corresponding accounts of what an *ergon* is, but he does not do this. He only gives this *one* account, and on this account, certain proper activities (e.g. housebuilding and shoemaking) are not *erga*. We should also note, though we will discuss this more in the next section, that when Aristotle identifies the *ergon* of each thing as its end (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a8), he understands “end” in a certain way. The *ergon* of something is the end for the sake of which that sort of thing exists or “has being”—qua the sort of thing that it is. Thus, the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art will be a house

³¹ τέλος ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον

³² τὸ γὰρ τέλος ἄριστον ὡς τέλος

³³ τέλος τὸ βέλτιστον καὶ τὸ ἔσχατον, οὐ ἔνεκα τᾶλλα πάντα.

because a house is the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, qua housebuilding-art, exists or has being.

Now if one desired more confirmation that we have detected the contours of the concept of an *ergon* in the *EE*, one need only consider the passage that immediately follows the stretch of text we have so far considered. There Aristotle writes:

Having made these distinctions, let us say that a thing and its virtue have the same *ergon*, though in different ways. For example, a shoe is the *ergon* of the shoemaking-art and of the activity of shoemaking. So if there is some virtue that is the virtue of shoemaking and of a good shoemaker, its *ergon* is a good shoe [τὸ ἔργον ἐστὶ σπουδαῖον ὑπόδημα]. The same holds in other cases also. Now let us assume that the *ergon* of the soul is to accomplish living,³⁴ and that this is an employment and a waking state, since sleep is an idle and inactive state. So, as the *ergon* of the soul and of its virtue must be one and the same, the *ergon* of the virtue is good living [ἔργον ἂν εἴη τῆς ἀρετῆς ζωὴ σπουδαία] (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a18-27).

Notice that Aristotle in this passage does not indicate which meaning of the word “*ergon*” he is using, and that is because (as I have argued) he has not distinguished different meanings of the word. He has instead indicated the different sorts of things that an *ergon* can be. Now notice how the passage is structured. Aristotle first articulates a principle (1219a19-20): the *ergon* of something and that of its virtue are the same (presumably in γένος, cf. *NE* 1. 7, 1098a8), though different (presumably because one is achieved well, cf. *NE* 1. 7, 1098a12). He then clarifies the principle by applying it to the case of the shoemaking-art: the *ergon* of the shoemaking-art is a shoe, while the *ergon* of its virtue is a good shoe (1219a20-23). He says this holds for other cases (1219a23), and then immediately applies it in the case of the soul: the *ergon* of the soul is living, and the

³⁴ Since Aristotle identifies the *ergon* of the excellent soul as “good life” or “good living” (ζωὴ σπουδαία), we would expect him to identify the *ergon* of the soul as “life” or “living.” It may then come as a surprise to read in different translations that the *ergon* of the soul is “to make things live” (M. Woods (trans. and comm.), *Aristotle: Eudemian Ethics, Books I, II and VII*, 2nd edn. [*Eudemian Ethics*] (Oxford, 2005), ad loc.), “to cause life” (H. Rackham (trans.), *Aristotle: The Athenian Constitution, The Eudemian Ethics, On Virtue and Vices* [*Eudemian Ethics*] (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), ad loc.), “to produce living” (J. Solomon (trans.), *Eudemian Ethics* in Barnes (ed.), *Complete Works*, vol. 2, 1922-1981, ad loc.), etc. The Greek is “τὸ ζῆν ποιεῖν.” My solution is to understand “ποιεῖω” in the way that we argued Plato uses it in *Republic* I: the verb, while retaining the same meaning, can indicate a “doing” or a “making” as the case may be. Consequently, Aristotle at *EE* 2. 1, 1219a24 is not saying that the *ergon* of the soul is to make things live, but rather to “achieve” or “accomplish” living, which would be the same as “living” or “life.”

ergon of its virtue is good living (1219a23-27). The implication is that when Aristotle spoke of “the *ergon*” at the beginning of the passage (“let us say that a thing and its virtue have the same *ergon* but in different ways,” 1219a19-20), he was assuming that the *ergon* of an X was in some cases an activity (e.g. the soul’s living) but in other cases a product (e.g. the shoemaker’s shoe) in accordance with the sort of thing the X is.

Why have scholars thought that Aristotle is here distinguishing different meanings of the word “*ergon*”? According to some translations, Aristotle actually says that *ergon* “has two meanings” or “has two senses” (λέγεται διχῶς, *EE* 2. 1, 1219a13).³⁵ However, because Aristotle has no word for “reference” as opposed to “meaning” or “sense,” these translations are highly problematic. A much safer rendering of “λέγεται διχῶς” is “is said in two ways,”³⁶ for the idea need only be “there can be two different things going on when we say <some word>.” This allows for the possibility that Aristotle at *EE* 1219a13-17 is not making a distinction between two possible meanings but two possible referents—for “the *ergon* of an X” can refer to an activity *or* a product. As I have argued, the line of thought in the passage suggests that Aristotle at *EE* 2. 1, 1219a13 is using this “λέγεται διχῶς” in this latter way, and I should also add that Aristotle seems to use the phrase in this latter way just a few pages earlier at *EE* 1. 7, 1217a36, where he discusses the two ways in which πρακτόν (“achievable in action”) “is said.” Once we appreciate this, I believe we remove the last impediment that one might reasonably have to thinking that Aristotle in *EE* 2. 1 supposes the *ergon* of an X to be an activity in some cases but a product in others, depending on what the *ergon* is.

Now that we have outlined Aristotle’s account, we are in a position to see how it addresses the difficulty present in Plato’s accounts. As we saw, Plato did not obviously have the resources to pick out a house as opposed to housebuilding as the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art. This gap was due to Plato saying that the *ergon* of X was what X can achieve best, where the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of things that can achieve similar *erga* (*Rep.* 1, 353a1-8). This allowed it to be possible that a

³⁵ The first translation is that of Rackham, *Eudemian Ethics* and the second is both that of Solomon, *Eudemian Ethics* and that of B. Inwood (trans.) and R. Woolf (trans.), *Aristotle: Eudemian Ethics* (Cambridge, 2012).

³⁶ This is how the phrase is translated in Woods, *Eudemian Ethics*, A. Kenny (ed. and trans.), *Aristotle: Eudemian Ethics* (Oxford, 2012), and P. L. P. Simpson (trans.), *The Eudemian Ethics of Aristotle, translated with explanatory comments* (New Brunswick and London, 2013).

housebuilder achieved a house best but also achieved housebuilding best. Aristotle closes this gap by giving an account of what an *ergon* is that employs the notion of “best” differently. He says that, if a thing has an *ergon*, “the *ergon* of each <thing> is its end” (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a8) and he clarifies this by saying “the end is the best in the sense of <being> the last <thing> for the sake of which everything else <is or is done>” (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a10-11). Here the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of other things that an X, qua X, can achieve, and the way that one of these things is best is by being the last thing for the sake of which. This provides resources to pick out house as opposed to housebuilding as the *ergon* of the housebuilder because it is a house (and not housebuilding) that is the last thing for the sake of which a housebuilder, qua housebuilder, has being. There are also features of the text that suggest Aristotle is directly responding to Plato’s account. Just after articulating his own account, Aristotle clarifies it by giving the very examples from *Republic* 1 (346d1-8)—the examples of the housebuilding-art and the doctoring-art—that Plato’s account could not obviously accommodate and Aristotle pointedly remarks that that the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art is a house, “not housebuilding” (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a15), and that the *ergon* of the doctoring-art is health, “not healing or doctoring” (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a15-16).

6. Aristotle’s Understanding of an *Ergon* in the *De Caelo*

In the *EE* Aristotle seems to affirm that the *ergon* of something is the end for the sake of which that sort of thing exists or has being. This account also seems to be implicit in a line from Aristotle’s natural philosophy, *De Caelo* 2. 3, 286a8-9: “Everything that has an *ergon* exists [*or* has being] for the sake of its *ergon*” (“Ἐκαστόν ἐστιν, ὧν ἐστιν ἔργον, ἔνεκα τοῦ ἔργου.”) If we pair this with the following passage from the *Politics*: “The housebuilders’ art exists [*or* has being] for the sake of a house” (ἔστι τῆς οἰκίας χάριν ἢ τῶν οἰκοδόμων τέχνη; *Pol.* 7. 8 1328a33),³⁷ we get the very claim we detected in *EE* 2. 1: the housebuilding-art exists for the sake of a house, which is its *ergon*.³⁸

³⁷ Here Aristotle uses “χάριν” instead of “οὐ ἔνεκα,” but this is of little importance. The context of the passage makes it clear that he considers the two expressions to be equivalent (cf. *Pol.* 7. 8, 1328a29).

³⁸ Here I should note that Aquinas seems to arrive at an interpretation along these lines. This is despite the fact that the Latin translation he was using apparently rendered “*ergon*” in this passage as “operatio,” which

There are also reasons even within the *De Caelo* to think that Aristotle there is employing the concept of an *ergon* that we detected in the *EE*. Now it is uncontroversial that Aristotle sometimes identifies the *ergon* of an X as an activity. In fact, just after he articulates the principle mentioned above, he implicitly identifies the *ergon* of the heavenly bodies as a certain “eternal motion” (κίνησιν αἰδίου; 2. 3, 286a10).³⁹ But consider these remarks that come later in the *De Caelo*, where Aristotle criticizes certain philosophers for holding to their view even when it conflicts with the revealed phenomena: “<Some philosophers speak> as if certain <principles> did not require to be judged by their results [ἀποβαινόντων], and most of all from the end. And the end of the productive expertise is the *ergon* [Τέλος δὲ τῆς μὲν ποιητικῆς ἐπιστήμης τὸ ἔργον]” (3. 7, 306a14-16). Scholars naturally understand “the *ergon*” here to refer to the product of the productive art since this is what “results” (306a15). (Stocks, for example, translates “*ergon*” in this passage as “product” but in *De Caelo* 2. 3 as “function.”⁴⁰) But notice that Aristotle identifies the *ergon* of the productive art as that art’s *end*, and remember that he earlier identified the *ergon* of each thing as the end for the sake of which it exists (*De Caelo* 2. 3, 286a8-9). This gives us reason for taking seriously the possibility that Aristotle is using the same concept of an *ergon* in both the passage from 2. 3, where he implicitly identifies the *ergon* of the heavenly bodies as an eternal motion (286a10), and in the passage from 3. 7, where he implies that the *ergon* of a productive art is its product (306a16). Consequently, he seems to be assuming that the *ergon* of an X may be an activity in some cases but a product in others, in accordance with the sort of thing the X is.

I also think that we can detect the alternative concept of an *ergon* in the very argument of *De Caelo* 2. 3. Aristotle’s task in this chapter is to explain why there are different motions among the heavenly bodies, and he does so by employing the

Aquinas understands as “proper activity.” Aquinas notes that the line (so understood) cannot be fully correct. He then inadvertently gets at (what I take to be) the actual meaning of the Greek by qualifying the claim that “each thing is for the sake of its proper activity” by saying, “or at least <for the sake of> what issues from that proper activity, in the case of those things in which there is some work [*opus*] beyond the activity, as is said in *Ethics* I” (*In libros De Caelo et Mundo*, in Busa (ed.), *Opera Omnia*, vol. 4, 1-48 at lb2 lc4 n5).

³⁹ It is perhaps worth noting that this eternal motion (κίνησις) is a very special kind of motion (if a motion at all) because there is no internal reason for it to stop—a feature that Aristotle elsewhere seems to think holds of all motions.

⁴⁰ J. L. Stocks (trans.), *On the Heavens* in Barnes (ed.), *Complete Works*, vol. 1, 447-511, ad loc.

teleological principle “each thing with an *ergon* exists for the sake of its *ergon*” (2. 3, 286a8-9). He first shows that since the activity of what is divine is “eternal life” (ζωὴ ἄϊδιος, 286a9), the *ergon* of a divine (heavenly) body will be an eternal motion, which must be motion in a circle (286a10-12). This is the motion of the outer sphere, which carries the fixed stars. He then articulates a long chain of conditions necessary for this eternal motion, culminating in the claim that there must be an eternal process of terrestrial generation (286b1-2). In order that there should be this eternal process of generation, Aristotle thinks, there must be different, oblique motions in the heavens (286b2-4). These other motions belong to the inner spheres that contain the planets. The upshot is this. Because his explanation for the oblique motions of the inner spheres is that they exist for the sake of eternal terrestrial generation, it looks like the terrestrial generation will be the *ergon* of these motions. Consequently, it looks like the *ergon* of the outer sphere is its proper activity (namely, the eternal circular motion), while the *ergon* of the inner sphere containing planets is something *beyond* its proper activity (namely, the eternal process of terrestrial generation).⁴¹

7. Remarks on the Expressions “End of Something” and “*Ergon* of Something”

When Aristotle identifies “the end” of the doctoring-art as health (*NE* 1. 1, 1094a8; *EE* 2. 1, 1219a14), he is thinking of a certain end, namely, the end that is “the last thing for the sake of which” the doctoring-art, qua doctoring-art, exists or has being. When Aristotle identifies—in the *EE* and elsewhere⁴²—the *ergon* of an *X* as “the end of an *X*” he has this sort of end in mind. To clarify further Aristotle’s thought, we will consider three questions that one might have at this point.

⁴¹ Here the language of “product” to describe the *ergon* beyond the proper activity of something may be misleading. For, of course, in the case I have just described, the *ergon* beyond the proper activity is still an activity (the eternal process of terrestrial generation). The point, though, is just that the proper activity of the inner spheres is not the end, but rather something beyond it. The reason this process of generation can be an end (even though it is a process) is because it is eternal and so is in a way something complete (cf. *NE* X 4, 1174a19-21).

⁴² Besides the passages we have already discussed, consider: “The *ergon* is the end” (*Meta.* Θ 8, 1150a21), “That for the sake of which <a house exists> is <its> *ergon*...” (*Meta.* B 2, 996b7), and “if each body had the ability to progress but not to perceive, it would perish and would not reach its end, which is the *ergon* of its nature” (*DA* 3. 12, 434a32-b1).

First, while in the *Protrepticus* Aristotle identifies health as the *ergon* of the *doctor* (B65), in the *EE* he identifies it as the *ergon* of the *doctoring-art* (2. 1, 1219a). Is there much at stake in this difference? I do not think so. Aristotle uses both locutions because when he speaks of the *ergon* of the doctor, he is thinking of the doctor, qua doctor, and what holds of a doctor, qua doctor, holds of him in virtue of his doctoring-art. Aristotle more or less articulates this point in *Physics* 2. 3: “It is always necessary to investigate the most precise cause of each thing, just as in other cases: for example, a man builds a house because he is housebuilder, and a housebuilder builds a house on the basis of the housebuilding-art [κατὰ τὴν οἰκοδομικήν]” (195b21-24). The housebuilding-art is that in virtue of which a housebuilder builds a house. And so if we identify the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art as a house, we have thereby also identified the *ergon* of the housebuilder, qua housebuilder. “The *ergon* of the housebuilding-art” is more exact locution, and so is Aristotle’s preferred expression. Yet because such exactness is not always needed, he also speaks of “the *ergon* of the housebuilder.”

Second, because “the *ergon* of each thing is its end” (*EE* 2. 1, 1219a8) and the human good is the end of all things achievable in action (cf. *NE* 1. 2, 1094a18-22), does it follow that the human good is somehow the *ergon* of every achievable thing, including every art (the doctoring-art, the housebuilding-art, etc.)? It does not. Something can have more than one end, and the end that is the *ergon* is not the same as the end that is the human good. As we have seen, Aristotle’s examples from *EE* 2. 1 indicate that the *ergon* of something is the end for the sake of which that *kind* of thing exists. Thus, in the case of the end that is the *ergon*, Aristotle circumscribes the “for the sake of” relation to the thing in question—qua that kind of thing. For example, though the bridle-making-art exists for the sake of a bridle, and a bridle exists for the sake of the activity of horse riding, it does not follow that the *ergon* of a bridle-maker is the activity of horse riding. (Horse riding would be the *ergon* of the horse rider, who uses the bridle.) Rather, the “last <thing> for the sake of which” the bridle-maker does what he does, qua bridle-maker, is a bridle (cf. *EE* 2. 1, 1219b4). Even if the human good is the end of the various arts because it is the

end of all achievable things, it is only the end of the various arts, qua things achievable in action.⁴³

Third, what reason does Aristotle have for identifying the end of the housebuilding-art as a house and *not* housebuilding? In several places, Aristotle draws an important distinction between complete activities (e.g. seeing and living) and incomplete activities (e.g. housebuilding and shoemaking), and he claims that while the former are ends, the latter are not ends but “belong to the class of means to ends.”⁴⁴ There are a variety of ways to mark this distinction, but here is one that is derived from *Metaphysics* Θ 6. If one says, “I am building a house,” that implies that one has *not yet* built that house. But if one says, “I am living,” that does not imply that one has *not yet* done anything. Incompleteness is built into the activity housebuilding, while it is not built into the activity of living. Consequently, while there is no internal reason why an activity of living should stop, there is an internal reason why an activity of housebuilding should stop, and this is the *end* it is aimed at—a house.⁴⁵ The fact that Aristotle gives principled reasons for marking a distinction between these different kinds of proper activities shows that he also has principled reasons for thinking that housebuilding cannot be the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, qua housebuilding-art, exists. This in turn gives him reason for identifying the *ergon* of the housebuilding-art as a house and not housebuilding. For when X’s proper activity is incomplete, X’s *ergon* will be something

⁴³ To see this more clearly, it may be helpful to ask and answer a few questions. What is the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, *qua thing achievable in action*, exists? The human good. And what is the end for the sake of which the doctoring-art, *qua thing achievable in action*, exists? Also, the human good. But what is the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, *qua housebuilding-art*, exists? The *ergon* of the housebuilding-art: a house. And what is the end for the sake of which the doctoring-art, *qua doctoring-art*, exists? The *ergon* of the doctoring-art: health. The addition of such ‘qua’-locutions is helpful because, though Aristotle clearly subscribes to these distinctions, he is often content just to speak of “the end of an X” and let the context do the work of directing the reader’s attention to the one or the other of these two ends.

⁴⁴ τῶν περὶ τὸ τέλος (*Meta.* Θ 6, 1048b18). For discussions of this distinction see M. Burnyeat, “*Kinēsis* vs. *Energeia*: A Much-Read Passage in (but not of) Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 34 (2008), 219-292; S. Makin (trans. and comm.), *Aristotle: Metaphysics Book Θ* (Oxford, 2006), 141-154; and J. Beere, *Doing and Being: An Interpretation of Aristotle’s Metaphysics Theta* (Oxford, 2009), 221-230.

⁴⁵ This explains why, even though it possible to say that someone *was building* a house but did not *build* a house, it is not possible to say that someone *was living* but did not *live*. Likewise, while it is possible to say that someone was learning French, but did not learn French, it is not possible to say that someone was seeing but did not see. Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), §23.

further, typically a product, and when X's proper activity is complete, X's *ergon* will be its proper activity.

8. Aristotle's Understanding of an *Ergon* in the *NE*

We have so far seen that both Plato in the *Republic* and Aristotle in the *Protrepticus*, *Eudemian Ethics* and *De Caelo* appear to think that the *ergon* of an X is not always an activity, but instead an activity in some cases but a product in others, in accordance with the sort of thing the X is. Consequently, if in the *NE ergon* argument Aristotle were to assume that the *ergon* of an X is always a proper activity, he would be breaking with a precedent and this would call for explanation. However, as we will now see, there are good reasons for thinking that Aristotle in the *NE* still subscribes to his earlier understanding of an *ergon*.

Before we focus on the *ergon* argument itself, we should note a few considerations that suggest the alternative concept of an *ergon* is in use in the *NE*. First, whenever Aristotle in the *NE* clearly identifies the *ergon* of a productive art (the shoemaking-art, the housebuilding-art, etc.), he identifies it not as the art's proper activity (shoemaking, housebuilding, etc.), but as its product (a shoe, a house, etc.).⁴⁶ Second, in the *De Caelo* (2. 3, 286a8-9 and 3. 7, 306a14-16), the *EE* (2. 1, 1219a8) and elsewhere, Aristotle maintained that the *ergon* of X was "the end of an X," or more specifically, the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, has being. If Aristotle in the *NE* still subscribes to this account of what an *ergon* is (and I see no reason to think he does not), then *NE* 1. 1 gives us good reason to think that Aristotle is employing the alternative concept of an *ergon*. For one thing, Aristotle clearly identifies the ends of certain arts as products:

⁴⁶ One example comes from Aristotle's discussion of benefactors and beneficiaries. Having just claimed that benefactors love their beneficiaries even if those beneficiaries are of no use to them, Aristotle says: "The same is true of artisans because each is fond of his own proper *ergon* [τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον] more that it would be fond of him if it acquired a soul [ὕπὸ τοῦ ἔργου ἐμψύχου γενομένου]. This is most of all true in the case of poets for they are extremely fond of their own poems, loving them as if they were their own children" (*NE* 9. 7, 1167b34-1168a2; cf. *NE* 6. 1, 1120b13-14). This text forms part of a rich chapter, but we need only notice two things. First, Aristotle implies that the proper *ergon* of certain artisans is a product beyond their activity: in the case of the poet, his *ergon* is his poem. Second, the phrase "τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον" ("the proper *ergon*") used in the first sentence regularly signifies the *ergon* proper to something's nature. Cf. *NE* 6 (= *EE* 5). 1, 1139a16-17: "the virtue <of something> is relative to its proper *ergon* [τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον]."

“Since there are many actions, arts and sciences, there turns out to be many ends: health is the end of the doctoring-art, a boat of the boatbuilding-art, victory of generalship, and wealth of household-management” (1094a6-9).⁴⁷ But Aristotle also, just before these lines, explicitly states that the end of an X is an activity in some cases but a product in others, depending on what X is. The distinction is given pride of place: it occurs at the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Every craft and every inquiry, and likewise every action and decision are thought to aim at some good. And so the good has been aptly dubbed: that for which all things aim. Yet there seems to be a difference among ends: some are activities [ἐνέργειαι], and others are certain *erga* beyond the activities [τὰ δὲ παρ’ αὐτὰς ἔργα τινά]. Where there are certain ends beyond the actions [τέλη τινὰ παρὰ τὰς πράξεις], the *erga* in these cases are by nature better than the activities [ἐν τούτοις βελτίω πέφυκε τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τὰ ἔργα]” (1. 1, 1094a1-6).

In the first two sentences of this passage, Aristotle identifies the good of something with the end of that thing. He then draws a distinction among ends, noting that some are activities, while some are certain *erga* beyond the activities. With this distinction drawn, he notes that, in those cases where the *erga* are beyond the activities, the *erga* are better than the activities.

I should also note that, though nearly every translation renders “*erga*” at 1094a5-6 as “products” (or some equivalent), it is not obvious that the word here means this. Instead, I think Aristotle uses the phrase “certain *erga* beyond the activities” (1094a4-5) to *refer* to products. He does so by the addition of “beyond the activities,” which would be somewhat redundant if “*ergon*” meant “product” and which possibly signals that there are other *erga* that are not beyond the activities (i.e. because they are the activities). Aristotle’s use of the indefinite article τινά (“certain” or “some”) also suggests this, and I

⁴⁷ Because he identifies the end of an X with the good of an X, Aristotle also identifies the good of the doctoring-art to be health, of the housebuilding-art a house, and of generalship victory (*NE* 1. 7, 1097a15-22). Since Aristotle also writes, “Every good is the *ergon* of an art” (*NE* 7 (=EE 6). 11, 1152b19), it is reasonable to assume that the *ergon* of an X may be an activity in some cases, but a product in others. I should also note that, though this quotation occurs in an objection that is not written in Aristotle’s own voice, when he responds to the objection (*NE* 7 (=EE 6). 12, 1153a24-27) Aristotle seems to assume that this particular claim is true. (I should also add that, though I think that Aristotle employs the same concept and account of an *ergon* in both the *EE* and the *NE*, I do not make any crucial use of passages from the common books in my arguments. However, I make some use of such passages, as I do in this footnote.)

think we should be discomfited by the fact that the word is often downplayed and sometimes left untranslated. Irwin, for example, drops the *τινά*, translating the line: “others are products apart from the activities” (1094a4-5). A reason for this is not hard to find. If one translates “*erga*” as “products,” and yet also translates the *τινά*, the line seems off: “Yet there seems to be a difference among ends: some are activities, and others are certain products beyond the activities” (1094a3-5). One naturally wonders: why just *certain* products? Why not *all* products? When there is a product beyond the activity isn’t it always the end?

Of course, one might think that Aristotle is trying to allow for the possibility of by-products (like the scraps a shoemaker makes while producing a shoe). But several factors make this unlikely.⁴⁸ One might also think that *τινά* does not have much content so that it does not even warrant being translated. But this seems unlikely if for no other reason than because Aristotle explains how he understands “*παρ’ αὐτὰς ἔργα τινά*” (“certain *erga* beyond the activities,” 1094a4-5) by immediately glossing it as “*τέλη τινὰ παρὰ τὰς πράξεις*” (“certain ends beyond the actions,” 1094a5). Because the phrase *τέλη τινὰ* clearly means “certain ends” it makes sense to take *ἔργα τινά* as “certain *erga*”

Now if we suppose Aristotle to be using the alternative concept of an *ergon*, the *τινά* makes good sense: since *erga* can designate activities or products, Aristotle uses the word *τινά* to indicate only those “certain” *erga* that are beyond activities, namely products.⁴⁹ I should also add that if “*erga*” here really does mean “products” the last sentence is surprisingly wordy. Surely Aristotle would have only needed to say: “products are by nature better than the activities that produce them.” Instead, Aristotle

⁴⁸ First, it is not at all obvious that Aristotle would use the word “*ergon*” to refer to a by-product, and I know of no occasion on which he does so. Second, if this were Aristotle’s reasoning, we would expect him to add a similar qualification to *ἐνέργηται* (“activities”) at 1094a4, but he does not. The reason we should expect this is because Aristotle would similarly think that even when the end of a thing is an activity, there may still be other activities (besides the end) that the thing does, *qua* that sort of thing (like the stretching of a dancer before dancing, or the playing of scales by a musician). Third, as I note in the main text, Aristotle seems to explain what he means by “*παρ’ αὐτὰς ἔργα τινά*” (“certain *erga* beyond the activities,” 1094a4-5) by immediately glossing it as “*τέλη τινὰ παρὰ τὰς πράξεις*” (“certain ends beyond the actions,” 1094a5). The *τινά* in the latter phrase is clearly supposed to signal that there are other ends that are not beyond the actions, but rather are the actions (as Aristotle has just explained, 1094a3-5). If the two phrases are expressing the same basic idea (as they seem to), then the *τινά* in the former phrase would naturally signal that there are other *erga* that are not beyond the activities, but rather are the activities.

⁴⁹ I should perhaps add that even though I take the phrase *ἔργα τινά* at 1095a5 to refer to products, that is not a good reason to translate the phrase as “products.” This is because *ἔργα τινά* does not mean “products,” and we should be trying to translate what these words mean and not what they refer to.

seems to convey by means of the phrase “in these cases” (ἐν τούτοις) that there are *other* cases in which the *erga* are not better than the activities; again, this is because the *erga*, in those cases, *are* the activities. This is the only use of the word “*ergon*” before the *ergon* argument, and by using it here, he directs his reader to think of *erga* as ends (just as he does in the *EE*), and to think of certain (τινά) of these *erga* as products, namely those that are “beyond activities.”

But even apart from the remarks on translation that I have just made, these first lines of the *NE* (as rendered in almost any contemporary translation) give us reason to think that Aristotle in the *ergon* argument is not speaking of a function by means of the word “*ergon*.”⁵⁰ Consider Section A once again. After reminding us that people agree in calling the best good achievable in action eudaimonia, Aristotle says we still need clarity on what this best good is. He suggests that we will attain this if we grasp the *ergon* of a human, and he offers an explanation for this suggestion:

This is because just as in the case of a flautist, a sculptor, and every artisan, and generally, in the case of whatever has an *ergon* and an action, the good, that is,⁵¹ the well [τὸ εὖ] seems to be <found> in its *ergon*, the same would seem to be true for a human, if he has an *ergon*. (*NE* 1. 7, 1097b24-28)

Scholars of course assume that Aristotle is here claiming that for anything with an *ergon* and an action, “the good, that is, the well” is found in that thing’s proper activity. But there is a serious problem with this assumption. As we just noted, Aristotle offers the *ergon* argument as an attempt to determine the best good achievable in action (1097b22; cf. 1. 2, 1094a18-22 and 1. 4, 1095a16-17). And so when Aristotle says that for anything with an *ergon* and an action “the good, that is, the well” is found in its *ergon* (1097b27),

⁵⁰ That is, even if one thought that “*erga*” in the first lines of *NE* 1. 1 meant “products,” the principle expressed in these first lines gives us good reason to think it is the alternative concept (as found in *Rep.* 1, *EE* 2. 1, etc.) that must be present in *NE* 1. 7.

⁵¹ I take the καὶ in τὰγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ epexegetically, and recommend that we translate it either as “that is” or “in the sense of.” This interpretation is commonly assumed by translators and commentators alike. I should also note that at the beginning of *NE* 1. 2, Aristotle designates a sense of “the good” by using καὶ in just this way. He writes: “If there is an end of things achievable in action, which we desire on account of itself, and other things on account of this, and we do not choose all things for the sake of something else... clearly this would be the good, that is, the best <good> [τὰγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον]” (1094a18-22).

he must be assuming there is not another *sort* of thing that such an agent can achieve that is better than the *ergon*. However, the first lines of the *NE* plainly state that when the end is beyond the activity, the *ergon* is by nature better than the activity. That is, in the case of things that yield products, the products are better *sorts* of things than the activities that produce them. Thus, the best *sort* of thing that a sculptor can achieve is not sculpting, but a sculpture. And so if Aristotle is going to locate “the good, that is, the well” anywhere it will need to be in the best *sort* of thing that an X, qua X, can achieve. The thought of Section A, then, will need to be something like this: Just as the best achievement of a sculptor is found in his *ergon* (his sculpture), and that of a flute-player in his *ergon* (his performance), so the best achievement of a human will be found in his *ergon*, if he has one. Consequently, Aristotle is assuming that while the *ergon* of a flautist is an activity (his performance), the *ergon* of a sculptor is not an activity but a product (his sculpture).

In case anyone might consider this an outlandish suggestion, I now note that the alternative concept of an *ergon* seems to be presupposed in both of the two ancient commentaries on the *NE* that discuss the *ergon* argument. One of these is the earliest extant commentary on the *NE* (in fact, the earliest extant commentary on any of Aristotle’s writings), dating from the second century A.D. The commentator, very probably Aspasius, writes the following while commenting on Section A:

If, then, the *ergon* of the shoemaking-art is a shoe [ὑπόδημα], and we are searching for what the end of a human is, we will have to grasp the *ergon* of a human, qua human. (17. 22-24)⁵²

Later he identifies the human *ergon* as an activity, and in particular, a rational activity (18. 1-2). Thus, Aspasius seems to think that the *ergon* of an X may be a product in some cases (e.g. the shoe of a shoemaker) but an activity in others (e.g. the rational activity of a human) in accordance with the sort of thing the X is. The anonymous author of the ancient Greek paraphrase of the *NE* thinks the same. Here is how he rewords Section A:

For just as the good of every artisan is found in his *ergon* [ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ αὐτοῦ], the good of a flute-player in his performance [ἐν τῷ ἀλλεῖν] and the good of a sculptor in the sculpture [ἐν τῷ

⁵² *Aspasi in ethica Nicomachea quae supersunt commentaria*, in G. Heylbut (ed.), *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, 19.1 (Berlin, 1889), 1-186, ad loc.

ἀγάλατι] (and this generally holds for every *ergon* and action), so the human good is in the human *ergon*, if there is some *ergon* of a human, insofar as he is a human. (13. 22-26)⁵³

The idea seems to be that while the *ergon* of the flute-player is an activity (his performance, τὸ ἀυλεῖν), the *ergon* of a sculptor is not an activity but a product (the sculpture, τὸ ἄγαλμα). And so both Aspasius and the paraphraser—the only extant ancient commentators on the *NE ergon* argument—assume that Aristotle there employs the alternative concept of an *ergon*.

My arguments have so far primarily focused on the concept of an *ergon* used in the Section A, but I now note that whatever concept of an *ergon* is used in Section A must be used throughout the *ergon* argument. Section A makes a claim about *whatever* has an *ergon* and an action; and the whole point is that, while this claim clearly holds for every artisan (1097b26), it will also hold true for a human, if he has an *ergon*. When Aristotle goes on to identify the human *ergon* is “activity on the basis of reason or not without reason” (1098a7), the concept must stay the same. If this is so, and if I am right about what an *ergon* is, then it is an error to suppose that “*ergon*” in *NE* 1. 7 means “function” or “proper activity.” The *ergon* argument is not a “function” argument.⁵⁴

9. The Translation of “*Ergon*”

How, then, should we translate “*ergon*”? Any translation must at least be capable of applying either to an activity or to a product that issues from an activity. “Proper activity” or “characteristic activity” obviously cannot cover the latter case. If “function”

⁵³ *Heliodori in ethica Nicomachea paraphrasis*, in G. Heylbut (ed.), *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, 19.2 (Berlin, 1889), 1-233, ad loc.

⁵⁴ One might consider it a mark against my interpretation that Aristotle just seems to assume that the *ergon* of a human is an activity. For if Aristotle is employing the standard concept of an *ergon*, on which every *ergon* is an activity, such an assumption would of course make sense. But if Aristotle is employing the alternative concept of an *ergon*, shouldn't he seriously entertain the possibility that the *ergon* of a human is a product? I do not think so. Aristotle is employing a concept that he shares with Plato, who also assumes that while the *ergon* of the housebuilder is a product (346d3-4), the *ergon* of a human is an activity (353d5), and so we need not think that Aristotle would always need to determine afresh whether the *ergon* of an X is an activity or a product. Also, as we will discuss, the key reason why Aristotle needs to be employing the alternative concept is because this is the only way that Section A can be relevant to determining the best achievement of a human, and such a reason does not require that Aristotle seriously entertain the possibility that the human *ergon* is a product.

is capable of doing so, I believe that is only due to an etymological branch of the word that is in important respects unrelated to the branch according to which it means “proper activity.” With regard to the latter (“proper activity”) branch, Barney correctly employs the word when she writes: “shoemaking is a function.”⁵⁵ One translation that has the right semantic range is “work” or perhaps “proper work.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* divides the meanings of “work” into two: as a kind of doing (I. 1-8) or as something made (II. 9-21). We can speak of a “work of art” (say, a statue) but also the “proper work” of a dancer (dancing).⁵⁶ Consequently, if we wish to articulate the pre-theoretical concept of an “*ergon* of an X” that Plato and Aristotle seem to share, it may help to think of it as the “work of an X.”⁵⁷

10. Two Difficulties for Assuming that *NE* 1. 7 Employs the Alternative Concept of an *Ergon*

I will now address two reasons why someone might doubt the interpretation of the *NE ergon* argument that I have been sketching.

First, if Aristotle is using the alternative concept of an *ergon*, then when he identifies the *ergon* of the kitharist as the performance on the kithara (1. 7, 1098a10-11), he is doing so precisely because this is the end of the kitharist, qua kitharist. Aristotle must, then, think that the proper activity of the kitharist is a complete activity, issuing in no distinct product. Difficulty arises, though, when we observe certain passages in which Aristotle appears to assume that the proper activity of every art (τέχνη) is an incomplete activity, issuing in a distinct product. Notably, in *NE* 6 (=EE 5). 4 (cf. *NE* 2. 4) he says that producing (ποίησις) and action (πρᾶξις) are different (1140a2), and he seems to be assuming that action (πρᾶξις) is a kind of complete activity and producing (ποίησις) is a

⁵⁵ Barney, “Human Function,” 303.

⁵⁶ This is no accident since English “work” and Greek “*ergon*” are cognate. See, for example, “work, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014.

⁵⁷ I should here note that “*ergon*” is translated as “work” both in *NE* 1. 1 and 1. 7 in two recent translations: R. C. Bartlett (trans.) and S. Collins (trans.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, translated, with an interpretive essay, notes, and glossary* (Chicago, 2011) and J. Sachs (trans.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, translated with glossary and introductory essay* (Newburyport, 2002). However, both translations render “τὸ εἶ” at *NE* 1. 7, 1097b27 in a way that implies that the *ergon* in question is a proper activity. As for translations in French, “ouvrage” and “oeuvre” are perhaps the best options, while in German, they are probably “Werk” and “Leistung,” and in Italian they are probably “opera” and “operazione” (and to a lesser extent, “lavoro”).

kind of incomplete activity.⁵⁸ Art (τέχνη), he further asserts, is a state of true reason concerned with producing (1140a20-21), not action. Thus, he appears to assume that the proper activity of every art is an incomplete activity.⁵⁹ Given that the skill of the kitharist seems to be a relatively straightforward counterexample to this claim, there seem to be three interpretive options. First, it did not occur to Aristotle that someone might consider the skill of the kitharist (or the flute-player, etc.) to be a counterexample. Second, Aristotle thinks that the activity of the kitharist is an incomplete activity, issuing in a distinct product. Or third, Aristotle in *NE* 6. 4 is employing the term “art” (“τέχνη”) in a restricted sense such that the skill of the kitharist is not an art but an expertise concerned with action.

I will argue in favor of the third option. Against the first option, we should note that Plato in *Rep.* 10 distinguishes between a “using [χρησομένην] art” (601d1) such as the art of flute-playing, and a “producing [ποίησσαν] art” (601d2) such as the art of flute-making. Thus, there is reason to think that Aristotle is aware that someone might think that the activity of a kitharist is not an instance of production and so not an incomplete activity. Against the second option, consider this passage from *Magna Moralia* 1. 34:

When it comes to things produced and things acted, the power of producing and the power of acting are not the same. On the one hand, the expertises of producing have some other end beyond the producing [τῶν μὲν γὰρ ποιητικῶν ἐστὶ τι παρὰ τὴν ποίησιν ἄλλο τέλος]; for instance, beyond housebuilding, since that is the expertise of producing a house, there is a house as its end beyond the producing, and the same goes for carpentry and the other expertises of producing; but in the expertises of acting there is no other end beyond the acting [ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν πρακτικῶν οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο οὐθὲν τέλος παρ’ αὐτὴν τὴν πράξιν]; for instance, beyond the performance of the kitharist [κιθαρίζειν] there is no other end, but this is the end, the activity and the action. Practical wisdom, then, concerns action and things acted, but art [τέχνη] concerns production and things produced... (1197a5-10; cf. 2. 12, 1211b25-32)

⁵⁸ Aristotle here relies on his lost “popular discussions” (1140a3) and so we cannot be sure of his reasoning.

⁵⁹ Because I have made use of the *EE* and the *NE* in my overall argument, *NE* 6 (= *EE* 5). 4 is relevant to discuss no matter whether I maintain that its proper home is the *NE* or the *EE*.

Here Aristotle (or some Aristotelian⁶⁰) clearly asserts that while there is an end beyond housebuilding, there is not an end beyond the performance of the kitharist.⁶¹ And so there is reason to think that, according to Aristotle, the performance of the kitharist is not an incomplete activity and so not an instance of production. (Also, if the author of the *MM* thinks that the *ergon* of an X is the end of an X, qua X, then he would naturally employ the alterative concept of an *ergon*.) In support of the third option, we should note that the author of the *MM* passage uses the word “art” in a restricted sense such that the skill of the kitharist is not an art but an expertise concerned with action. This is clear because the author states both that the activity of the kitharist is not an instance of production but an instance of action, and that “art” is concerned with production and not action. Thus, it seems not unlikely that Aristotle is using the word “art” in a similarly restricted sense in *NE* 6. 4.⁶²

Second, Aristotle makes the claim of Section A about anything with ἔργον τι καὶ πρᾶξις (1097b26), which one could understand either as “an *ergon* and an action” or “an *ergon*, that is, an action.” Several scholars assume the latter reading, which implies Aristotle assumes that the *ergon* of something is always an activity.⁶³ Both readings of the phrase are grammatically possible. However, there are reasons to question the latter

⁶⁰ For a defense of the Aristotelian provenance of the *Magna Moralia*, see J. M. Cooper, “The *Magna Moralia* and Aristotle’s Moral Philosophy”, in id., *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton, 1999), 195-211.

⁶¹ The Stoics also acknowledged that some arts (e.g. the arts of dancing and acting) for which the proper activity is the end (cf. *De Finibus* 3. 24). See G. Striker, “Antipater, Or the Art of Living”, in M. Schofield and G. Striker (eds.), *Norms of Nature* (Cambridge, 2007), 185-204.

⁶² I believe what I have said above is enough to give us reason to think that in *NE* 1. 7 Aristotle supposes the kitharist, qua kitharist, to have no further end beyond his proper activity. Nevertheless, in *NE* 1. 7 Aristotle appears to consider the skill of the flute-player to be an art (τέχνη) (1097b25-27). How do we reconcile this with *NE* 6. 4? I think we must suppose that, while in *NE* 6. 4 Aristotle uses the word “art” in the restricted sense on which only productive expertises count as arts, in *NE* 1. 7 he uses “art” in a broader sense on which non-productive practical expertises can count as arts. Independent confirmation that Aristotle in *NE* 1. 7 uses the word in this broader way comes from combining two observations. First, the restricted sense of “art” corresponds to a restricted sense of “action” (πρᾶξις) on which an incomplete activity such as housebuilding is not an action but a producing (ποίησις). Second, *NE* 1. 7 implies that a sculptor and indeed every artisan has an action (1097b25-27). Consequently, since Aristotle in *NE* 1. 7 uses “action” not in the restricted but in the broad sense, it makes sense that we would be using “art” in the broad sense as well.

⁶³ For example, M. Nussbaum, “Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics”, in J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics* (Cambridge, 1995), 86-132 at 112 translates ἔργον τι καὶ πρᾶξις (1097b26) as “function or activity” and writes, “What would naturally be meant by the ‘function or activity’ of a certain sort of craftsman would be that craftsman’s characteristic activity *qua* that sort of craftsman—the activity or activities in virtue of which he is, and is counted as, a craftsman of that sort.”

reading,⁶⁴ and if one accepts my arguments about what an *ergon* is, one should go for the former reading instead. If after adopting the former reading one should then wonder why Aristotle speaks here (and at 1097b29) of “action,” I suggest the following explanation.⁶⁵ Aristotle makes it very clear that he is looking for the best thing *achievable by humans in action* (πρακτὸν ἀνθρώπῳ), where “action” seems to be an activity that partakes in reason to some extent. And so it is likely that Aristotle makes the claim of Section A only about those things that can achieve things in action—that is, only about those things have both an *ergon* and an action (1097b26), where “action” is not just a thing’s proper activity but the sort of proper activity that partakes in reason. The principle of Section A, then, is probably not here applied to just anything with an *ergon*, including artifacts.⁶⁶

11. Towards an “Achievement” Interpretation of the *NE* 1. 7 *Ergon* Argument

Any interpretation of the *ergon* argument largely turns on how one interprets its first section—what I have been calling “Section A”:

[Section A] ... Just as for a flautist, a sculptor, and every artisan, and generally, for whatever has an *ergon* and an action, the good, that is, the well [τὸ εὖ] seems to be <found> in its *ergon*, the same would seem to be so for a human, if he has an *ergon*. (*NE* 1. 7, 1097b25-28)

Though I cannot here fully justify my doing so, I take the claim of Section A to be this:

⁶⁴ For example, if we take καὶ epexegetically both at *NE* 1. 7, 1097b26 and 1097b29, it seems like the phrases would propose incompatible extensions for an *ergon*. The first (ἔργον τι καὶ πρᾶξις rendered as “an *ergon*, i.e. an action”) will have it that every *ergon* is an action, while the second (ἔργα τινὰ καὶ πράξεις rendered as “certain *erga*, i.e. actions”) will have it that only certain *erga* are actions (with the implication being that some *erga* are not actions). Also, neither Aspasius nor the ancient paraphraser takes the καὶ at 1097b26 this way.

⁶⁵ Besides the explanation that I offer in the main text, I should also add that the καὶ may be quasi-epexegetic such that the phrase should be understood as “including action.” (The same explanation could hold for “καὶ πράξις” at 1097b29.) The rationale for this would be that Aristotle wants to make clear that an *ergon* can be an action, and he might think such clarification helpful because he earlier (at *NE* 1.1, 1094a5) used the word “*erga*” to refer to products.

⁶⁶ *Pace*, for example, G. Lawrence, “Fallacious?,” 206: “the principle <in Section A> is being generalized over all functional items, including artifacts.” I do not mean to deny that Aristotle sometimes uses the word “πρᾶξις” to mean something like “proper activity,” but I do not think he does so in *NE* 1. 7. Instead I think that the use in *NE* 1. 7 is more similar to the one we find at *NE* 6 (= *EE* 5). 2, 1139a19-20: “it is clear that wild animals [θηρία] have perception but no share in action [πράξεως].”

[Claim of Section A] For anything with an *ergon* and an action, the good in the sense of the excellent achievement (τὰγαθὸν καὶ τὸ εὖ) is found in its *ergon*.

Like many others, I take τὸ εὖ of an X to be the *ergon* of an X achieved well (cf. *NE* 1. 7, 1098a12; 2. 6, 1106b12). But, of course, unlike many others, I do not think an *ergon* is always an activity. Consequently, I think that the alternative concept of an *ergon* should lead us to understand τὸ εὖ as meaning something like “the excellent accomplishment” or “the excellent achievement,” where this can be either an excellent activity or an excellent product.⁶⁷ I also think the excellent achievement is found *in* the *ergon* in the way that a species is found *in* a genus (cf. *Physics* 6. 3, 210a18).⁶⁸ And so one could also understand the claim of Section A to be: For anything that has an *ergon* and an action, the good in the sense of the excellent achievement is its *ergon* achieved well. Section A, then, locates the right class or genus within which to find the human good, that is, the best thing achievable by a human. Aristotle reasons that just as a sculptor’s excellent achievement will be in his *ergon* (which is a sculpture, *not* sculpting), so will his best achievement. And just as a human’s excellent achievement will be in his *ergon* (which is activity of the part of the soul having reason), so will his best achievement—that is, the human good.

This puts us in a position to reconstruct the *ergon* argument in such a way that it is both valid and plausible. Below I list the premises and conclusions of the *ergon* argument roughly in the order in which they are found or implicitly found in the text, omitting some sub-arguments (the arguments that a human has an *ergon*, and the argument that the human *ergon* is an activity of the rational part of the soul) as well as some clarifications (e.g. Aristotle’s explication of “rational part of the soul”). After each

⁶⁷ I am here offering an alternative to the common way of interpreting “τὸ εὖ” as “the doing well.” My interpretation lines up nicely with the way Aristotle uses “τὸ εὖ” and “τὸ εὖ ἔχον ἔργον” in *NE* 2. 6, 1106b8-14, a passage that recalls the *ergon* argument of *NE* 1. 7 by developing the connection between virtue and ‘the excellent *ergon*’ that was first introduced there.

⁶⁸ This interpretation of “is in” falls between the two interpretations currently available in the secondary literature. Some scholars think that when Aristotle says the well “is in” the *ergon*, he means that the well “consists in” or “is” the *ergon* (cf. R. Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, 1989), 312). Others think that he means that the well “depends on” the human *ergon* (cf. Irwin, *Ethics*, 183.) Though I cannot argue for this here, I take the latter claim to be too weak to allow Aristotle to arrive at his definition, and I take the former claim to be one that Aristotle considers false.

premise I indicate in parentheses the sections of the text to which the premise corresponds.⁶⁹

- P1:** The human good is the best achievement of a human (1097b22-23; cf. *NE* 1. 1-2).
- P2:** The best achievement of a human is the excellent achievement of a human with any better-making features that there may be. [assumption]
- C1:** The human good is the excellent achievement of a human with any better-making features that there may be. [from **P1** and **P2**]
- P3:** For anything that has an *ergon* and an action, the excellent achievement of that thing is its *ergon* excellently achieved (1097b25-28 [=claim of Section A]).
- P4:** A human being has an *ergon* and an action. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33]
- C2:** Therefore, the excellent achievement of a human being is the human *ergon* excellently achieved. [from **P3** and **P4**]
- P5:** The *ergon* of a human being is activity of the part of the human soul having reason (1098a7-8). [From sub-argument in 1097b33-1098a4]
- C3:** Therefore, the excellent achievement of a human being is activity of the part of the soul having reason, achieved excellently. [from **C2** and **P5**]
- P6:** For an *ergon* to be achieved excellently is for it to be achieved on the basis of virtue/excellence (1098a15; cf. 1098a8-11).
- C4:** Therefore, the excellent achievement of a human being is activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason (1098a16-17). [from **C3** and **P6**]
- P7:** Activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason is better if it is achieved on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue, if there are more virtues than one (cf. 1097a28-30).
- P8:** Activity on the basis of virtue of the part of the human soul having reason is better if it occurs in an end-like [i.e. complete] life (1098a18-20; cf. 1097a28-30).
- C5:** Therefore, “the human good turns out to be activity of the <rational part of the human> soul on the basis of virtue, and if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue, and moreover in an end-like [i.e. complete] life” (1098a16-18). [from **C1**, **C4**, **P7**, **P8**]

Several features of my reconstruction distinguish it from all others currently on offer.⁷⁰ I take two of these features to be of central importance, but here I will just discuss one of

⁶⁹ As I understand it, Aristotle does not explicitly state P2 because he takes it (and thus the conclusion C1) to be obvious. He does not state P7 because he has articulated his understanding of what it is to be “end-like” (*teleion*) earlier in *NE* 1. 7 at 1097a15-1097b6. He does not state P8 for similar reasons, though he does partially articulate the premise just after the conclusion of the argument at 1098a18-20.

⁷⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, there are relatively few explicit reconstructions of the *ergon* argument: P. Glassen, “A Fallacy in Aristotle’s Argument about the Good” [“Fallacy”], *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1957), 319-322 at 320; D. S. Hutchinson, *The Virtues of Aristotle* (London and New York, 1986), 55; A. Gomez-Lobo, “The Ergon Inference”, *Phronesis*, 34 (1989), 170-184 at 182; D. Achtenberg, “The Role of the

them.⁷¹ on my reconstruction, the key explanatory middle term of the argument is “the best achievement of a human.”⁷²

Recall that before the *ergon* argument Aristotle makes it abundantly clear that for something to be the human good is for it to be the best thing *achievable* by humans in action (cf. 1. 2, 1094a18-22; I 4, 1095a16-17). Aristotle characterizes the nature of the human good in no other way than this.⁷³ Consequently, because the conclusion of the *ergon* argument is a definition of the human good, the key explanatory middle term of the argument ought to be “the best achievement of a human.” However, no current interpretation supposes this to be the middle term. The reason, I believe, is as follows. Since scholars have assumed that Aristotle’s concept of an *ergon* is the concept of a proper activity, they have been unable to interpret Section A in such a way that it is relevant to determining the best achievement of a human. They have heard Aristotle as saying that for a sculptor, flautist and every artisan, “the good, that is, the well” is found

Ergon Argument in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*”, in J. P. Anton and A. Preus (eds.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy IV* (Albany, 1991), 59-72 at 62-63; M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2005), 80; C. Natali, “*Posterior Analytics* and the Definition of Happiness in *NE I*” *Phronesis*, 55 (2010), 304-324 at 317; and P. Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle’s Ethics* (Cambridge, 2009), 66-67.

⁷¹ The other feature of central importance is that on my reconstruction Aristotle distinguishes the excellent achievement of a human from the best achievement. The excellent achievement of a human is “activity of the soul on the basis of virtue,” and when Aristotle adds the two criteria “if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue” and “in a end-like [i.e. complete] life” he is listing further requirements that something must meet if it is to be the best achievement of a human, which is the human good (and not merely the excellent achievement). Current reconstructions suppose that the proper conclusion of the argument is “activity of the soul on the basis of virtue” (what I take to be the excellent achievement of a human) and that the two criteria are merely optional elucidations of that conclusion. See the reconstructions listed in the previous footnote as well as the influential (though brief) statement of this “implicit criteria view” by J. Ackrill, “Aristotle on Eudaimonia”, in A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley, 1980), 15-34 at 27. I should add that, though I do not agree with the implicit criteria view, my interpretation of Section A can be made compatible with it so long as one identifies the best accomplishment of a human with the excellent accomplishment of a human.

⁷² What is an “explanatory middle term”? In an Aristotelian syllogism there are three terms, and the middle term is the one that drops out in the conclusion. Consider: “Shelters for belongings are roofed. Barns are shelters for belongings. Therefore, barns are roofed.” (See J. Barnes (trans. and comm.), *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics* (Oxford, 1993), 231.) The middle term is “shelters for belongings.” Here the middle term is also explanatory because it is in virtue of being a “shelter for belongings” that a barn is roofed. Above I speak of the *key* explanatory middle term, and that is because, even though there are several middle terms in the argument, “the best achievement of a human” (as used in the argument from P1 and P2 to C1) is the one that provides the direct link to “the human good.”

⁷³ Indeed, even though Aristotle says, “eudaimonia most of all seems to be this sort of thing [i.e. the best and most end-like good]” (*NE* 1. 7, 1097a34), he never says that for something to be the human good is for it to be eudaimonia. Though I cannot argue for this here, I think there is good reason to believe that the human good and eudaimonia are not coextensive. God, for example, is the primary instance of eudaimonia but does not possess the human good since this is the best thing achievable *by humans* in action.

in their respective *proper activities*. Because the best achievement of a sculptor is clearly not found in his activity of sculpting but in his sculpture (or sculptures), scholars have had to come up with a different key middle term for the *ergon* argument. They have proposed “the virtue of a human,”⁷⁴ “the flourishing of a human,”⁷⁵ “the successful functioning of a human,”⁷⁶ etc. Barney, for example, supposes both that the human good is the flourishing of a human, and that the claim of Section A is: for anything with an *ergon* and an action, the flourishing of that thing is its *ergon* accomplished well.⁷⁷ Barney’s interpretation might initially seem attractive. However, when we bear in mind that, according to Aristotle, for something to be the human good is for it to be the best good *achievable* by humans in action, we see that Barney’s proposal (as well as any other that does not employ the alternative concept of an *ergon*) is unacceptable. When Aristotle arrives at his definition of the human good, he must do so not because this is the flourishing of a human or because this is the successful functioning of a human, but rather because this is the best achievement of a human.

To appreciate this point, consider the following requirement for any (charitable) interpretation of the *ergon* argument: it must ensure that if the human good is an activity, it is a complete activity. This is because an incomplete activity is essentially for the sake of something else, and the human good, in virtue of being the human good, is an end that is not such as to be chosen for the sake of something else. Thus, because the *ergon* argument is offered as the explanation for why the human good is defined as it is, the argument should ensure that if the human good is an activity, it is a complete activity. However, only my interpretation of the argument does this. I think that Aristotle employs the alternative concept of an *ergon* (on which, if the *ergon* is an activity, it must be a complete activity), and that Aristotle supposes that for any X with an *ergon* and an action, the best achievement of an X is a certain excellent version of its *ergon*. Contrast this with, for example, Barney’s interpretation. She thinks that Aristotle employs the standard concept of an *ergon* and that Aristotle supposes that for any X with an *ergon* and

⁷⁴ Cf. Glassen, “Fallacy”. Glassen has in mind human virtue when he speaks of the “goodness of a human.”

⁷⁵ Cf. Barney, “Human Function”.

⁷⁶ Cf. Lawrence, “Fallacious?”. Lawrence also sometimes speaks of “the success of a human” but assumes that this is equivalent to the “functioning successfully of a human.”

⁷⁷ Barney, “Human Function”, 312 gives this interpretation of Section A: “If an *x qua x* has as its function to Φ , then the good of an *x qua x*—its flourishing as an *x*—consists in Φ -ing well.” She assumes that the good of a human, *qua human*, is “the human good.”

an action, the flourishing of an X is its functioning well. Thus it could turn out that the flourishing of an X is an incomplete activity: e.g. the flourishing of a sculptor is sculpting well. Though the “flourishing of a human” turns out to be a complete activity, that is just a coincidence. On Barney’s interpretation, nothing about Aristotle’s reasoning requires it to be a complete activity. Consequently, I contend that we need to assume that Aristotle is employing the alternative concept of an *ergon* if he is to be plausibly interpreted as giving the right *sort* of explanation for defining the human good as he does.

Why is grasping the correct explanation so important? Aristotle quite generally maintains that one understands (ἐπίστασθαι) *that* something is the case only when one grasps the explanation for *why* it is the case.⁷⁸ He would, then, appear to maintain that one understands his definition of the human good only when one grasps the explanation for why the human good is defined as it is. I have argued that we can grasp this explanation—that is, the *ergon* argument—only if we suppose Aristotle to be employing the alternative concept of an *ergon*.

12. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to clear the way for a new interpretation of Aristotle’s famous *ergon* argument of *NE* 1. 7. In doing so I have argued for several theses: (1) the *ergon* of an X is an activity in some cases but a product in others, in accordance with the sort of thing the X is, (2) Plato and Aristotle share this basic concept of an *ergon*, but differ in their accounts of what an *ergon* is, (3) Aristotle’s account of an *ergon* is “the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists,” and (4) the alternative concept of an *ergon* allows the key explanatory middle term of the argument to be what it in fact ought to be: “the best achievement of a human.” A full explication and evaluation

⁷⁸ See *Apo* 1. 2, 71b30-31 (cf. *Meta.* A 1, 981b8-9 and *Ph.* 1. 1, 184a1-16). In *NE* 6. 3 Aristotle says that one can have *epistēmē* (“expert knowledge” or “understanding”), strictly speaking, only about things that do not admit of change—that is, only in theoretical matters. However, in the same passage Aristotle implicitly acknowledges that there are states that resemble knowledge in the strict sense (*NE* 6. 3, 1139b18-19), and Aristotle applies the word *epistēmē* both to practical and productive expertises at various places in the *NE* (e.g. 1. 2, 1094b2-7; 7. 3, 1147b13-17) and in the *Metaphysics* (e.g. A 1, 981b8-9; E 2, 1026b4-5). Thus, it is defensible to suppose that, according to Aristotle, one can have understanding (or something like understanding) of ethical truths and that such understanding would require grasping the explanation for why that truth held.

of this “achievement” reading still await us, but I believe I have here given reasons to take the reading seriously.

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