Defining the Human Good: Aristotle’s Ergon Argument

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Abstract

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by emphasizing that the virtuous person should understand the nature of the best good achievable by humans in action, something Aristotle calls the “human good.” In *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, he defines the human good as “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 and moreover in an end-like [i.e. complete] life.” The argument by which he arrives at this definition is known as the ergon argument. This dissertation aims to improve our understanding of the definition by analyzing how it follows from this argument.

My interpretation is novel, as I reject the ubiquitous assumption that the ergon of an X is always the proper activity of that X. I argue instead that the ergon of an X is an activity in some cases but a product in others, depending on what the X is. Thus, while the ergon of the flautist is his performance (an activity), the ergon of the sculptor is a sculpture (a product). This enables us to see that the fundamental rationale of the ergon is that just as the best achievement of a sculptor is a certain version of his ergon, which is a sculpture, so the best achievement of a human will be a certain version of his ergon, which is an activity of the rational part of the human soul.

When Aristotle adds the further features “on the basis of virtue,” “on the basis of the best virtue,” and “in a complete life” he does so in order to mark off the best achievement of a human from the mere proper achievement of a human. Observing this enables us to see how a monistic reading of the definition—on which the “best virtue” is theoretical wisdom—could in fact follow from the premises of the ergon argument. It also enables us to understand the proper explanation
for why “in a complete life” is added, namely, because continuity and perpetuity make the best activity even better.
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1 Introduction

1.1 The Role of the Ergon Argument

Aristotle thinks that if you want to live well, you need to organize your life by reference to the best good achievable by human beings in action. He calls this “the human good” and it is “best” precisely because it is most of all an end. Among things achievable in action, the human good is that which we desire for its own sake and not for the sake of something else, and it is also that for the sake of which we desire everything else (Nicomachean Ethics [NE] I 2, 1094a18-20). By reference to this best good, the virtuous individual organizes his life and the virtuous politician organizes his city.

After laying out these formal features of the best good, Aristotle in NE I 4 notes that everyone agrees in calling it “eudaimonia” (“happiness”), and he then considers differing views on what eudaimonia is—both those of the many (I 5) and those of the wise, i.e. Plato and his followers (I 6). Aristotle then gives his own account of what the best good is (I 7), and this falls into three parts. He first lays down two properties that hold of the best good (1097a15-21), he gives a definition of the best good by means of the ergon argument (1097a22-1098a20), and then he says that this definition is only a “sketch”—one that needs to be “filled in” (1098a20-b8). I take the remainder of the Nicomachean Ethics, especially I 8-13 and X 6-8, to be an attempt at filling in this sketch.
The *NE I 7* ergon argument consists of a definition of the human good as well as premises from which that definition is supposed to follow (cf. *NE I 8, 1098b9-11*). Though the interpretation of nearly every aspect of the ergon argument has been debated and though there is no consensus whatsoever about how the argument as a whole is supposed to work, there is some consensus about two of its key claims: first, that the ergon (“proper work”) of a human is “activity of the soul on the basis of reason or not without reason” (*NE I 7, 1098a7-8*), and second, that a human accomplishes his ergon well by doing so on the basis of virtue. Aristotle clearly thinks that these and other premises together allow him to conclude that the human good is:

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. (*NE I 7, 1098a16-18*)

These lines do not of course aim to define the phrase “human good,” but rather the nature of the human good itself—the best thing achievable by humans in action.\(^1\) Because we need to grasp the nature of the human good in order to live well, understanding this definition is of paramount importance. Unfortunately, though, despite the large amount of scholarly attention that has been paid to Aristotle’s definition of the human good, no consensus has arisen about how the definition is to be understood. In this dissertation I aim to make progress in understanding the definition by carefully analyzing how it is supposed to follow from the premises of the ergon argument.

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\(^1\) Whether this is a definition in the technical sense introduced in the *Posterior Analytics [APo]* is another question, on which see the beginning of Chapter 6.
Why is the ergon argument of such importance in understanding Aristotle’s definition? I offer two reasons. First, if we recognize, as we ought to, that the definition of the human good is the conclusion of the ergon argument, then a correct reconstruction of the ergon argument will put constraints on defensible interpretations of the definition. Second, because Aristotle quite generally maintains that one understands that something is the case only when one understands the explanation for why it is the case, and because he offers in the ergon argument his explanation for why the human good is defined as he defines it, we have good reason to think that, according to Aristotle, one will not understand the definition of the human good until one understands it as the conclusion of the ergon argument. If we accept both of these reasons, then an investigation into the ergon argument will be valuable not simply because it will give us reason to interpret the conclusion in one way rather than another, but also because a correct grasp of the ergon argument—which involves a grasp of the premises as well as how the final conclusion follows from these premises—will actually constitute our understanding of the definition of the human good.

2 The first of these reasons has been appreciated by a number of scholars (cf. Ackrill [1980(1974)], Keyt [1983], Roche [1988], Cooper [{1987} 1999], and Purinton [1998]), while the second has yet to be properly appreciated.

3 Because this second sort of reason is a novel way of thinking of the ergon argument’s importance, some brief remarks are in order. When it comes to theoretical matters, Aristotle makes it clear that one “knows in an expert way” or “understands” (episthaisthai) that something is the case only if one grasps the explanation for why it is the case (APo I 2, 71b30-31). For example, in order to understand the Pythagorean theorem, one must grasp the explanation for why the theorem holds, and this requires you to grasp how the Pythagorean theorem derives from more fundamental principles of geometry. Now in NE VI 3 Aristotle says that one can only have epistēmē (“expert knowledge”), strictly speaking, about things that do not admit of change—that is, only in theoretical matters. However, in the very same passage Aristotle implicitly acknowledges that there are states that resemble knowledge in the strict sense (NE VI 3, 1139b19), and Aristotle applies the word epistēmē (“expert knowledge”) both to practical and productive expertises at various places in the NE (e.g. I 2, 1094b2-7; VII 3, 1147b13–17; on the latter see Lorenz [forthcoming]) and in the Metaphysics (e.g. Meta. A 1, 981b8-9; E 2, 1026b4-5). And Aristotle makes it clear then when we ascribe epistēmē to someone it is because we think that they possess an explanation for why something is the case (cf. Meta. A 1, 981b8-9).
1.2 My Interpretation of the Ergon Argument

This dissertation offers a careful and novel interpretation of the ergon argument. Though I do not address every section of the argument, I develop an interpretation of the argument as whole as well as of those individual sections that I consider to be most important. My interpretation is novel in a number of respects but the most important of these is that I reject the assumption—ubiquitously held since the Middle Ages—that the ergon of an X is always the proper activity of that X. I argue instead that, for Aristotle, 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. Thus, while the ergon of the eye is seeing and the ergon of human is a certain activity of living, the ergon of a sculptor is not sculpting but a sculpture.

If we adopt this recovered concept of an ergon, it becomes clear that Aristotle does not arrive at his definition of the human good by drawing a connection between the human ergon and the “flourishing”⁴ or the “successful functioning”⁵ of a human, but rather between the human ergon and the best achievement of a human. Aristotle reasons that just as the best achievement of a sculptor will be a certain excellent sculpture, and the best achievement of a flautist will be a certain excellent performance on the flute, so the best achievement of a human will be a certain excellent activity of living. Only if we adopt the recovered concept of an ergon, I argue, can we interpret the ergon argument so that it is the sort of argument that Aristotle offers it as—namely, one that determines the best thing achievable by humans in action.

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⁵ Cf. Lawrence (2009).
1.3 A Translation of the Ergon Argument

Before I summarize what I intend to accomplish in this dissertation, it will help to give a translation of the ergon argument. Earlier in NE I 7 Aristotle has reminded his reader that the good being sought is the end of things achievable in action (1097a22-23). He clarifies what he has in mind by saying that this best good is not only end-like (teleion) but the most end-like (teleion) end: something that is always such as to be chosen on account of itself and never on account of anything else (1097a33-34). He notes that eudaimonia “seems to be this most of all” and then explains that the best good, in virtue of being most end-like, is also self-sufficient (1097b6-20). He then gives the ergon argument, which I divide into Sections A through F along with a Prefatory Section.

[Pref. Section] But presumably it is something generally agreed upon that the best good is happiness, and what we need to do is to say more clearly what <the best good> is. Perhaps this will come about if we grasp the ergon of a human. (1097b22-25)

Ἀλλ’ ἱσως τὴν μὲν εὐδαιμονίαν τὸ ἄριστον λέγειν ὁμο-λογοῦμενόν τι φαίνεται, ποθεῖται δ’ ἑναργήστερον τι ἐστιν ἔτι λεχθῆναι. τάχα δὴ γένοιτ’ ἃν τούτ’, εἰ ληφθείη τὸ ἐργον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.⁶

[Section A] For, 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, the well [τὸ ἔδ] seems to be <found> in its ergon, the same would seem to be true for a human, if he has an ergon. (1097b25-28)

ὡσπερ γὰρ αὐλητῇ καὶ ἀγαλματοποιῷ καὶ [25] παντὶ τεχνίτῃ, καὶ ὀλως ὃν ἐστιν ἔργον τι καὶ πρᾶξις, ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ δοκεῖ τάγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἔδ, οὖτω δοξεῖν ἃν καὶ ἀνθρώπῳ, εἴπερ ἐστι τὸ ἔργον αὐτοῦ.

⁶ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. However, I have consulted, and often been strongly influenced by, the translations found in Barnes ([1984] 1995), Irwin (1999), Reeve (2004), and Cooper (1997). When my translations amount to alterations of a published translation, I have tried to indicate this.

⁷ All Greek quotations of the NE are from Bywater (1894). All other Greek quotations are from the volumes in the Oxford Classical Texts series.
[Section B] And so, do a carpenter and a shoemaker have erga and actions, but a human being has none, but is by nature idle, without an ergon [ἀργὸν]? Or just as there seems to be some ergon of the eye, hand, foot, and generally each of the <bodily> parts, may one posit that a human similarly has an ergon beyond all of these? (1092b28-33)

πότερον οὖν τέκτονος μὲν καὶ σκυτέως ἔστιν ἔργα τινὰ καὶ πράξεις, ἀνθρώπου δ’ οὐδὲν ἐστιν, ἀλλ’ ἄργον πέφυκεν; ἢ καθάπερ ὀφθαλμοῦ καὶ [30] χειρὸς καὶ ποδὸς καὶ ὅλως ἐκάστου τῶν μορίων φαίνεται τι ἔργον, οὔτω καὶ ἀνθρώπου παρά πάντα ταῦτα δείη τις ἄν ἔργον τι;

[Section C] Whatever might this be? For living seems to be something that is common even to plants, but what we are seeking is that which is his own. One must rule out, then, the life of nutrition and growth. Next in order would be some sort of perceptive life; but this too would seem to be common to the horse and ox and every animal. What is left is some active life of that which has reason. Of this, one part has reason in virtue of obeying reason, and another part actually has reason and thinks. And since living is said in two ways [as capacity and as activity] we should be assuming life as activity since this seems to be called life in a primary way. (1097b33-1098a7)

τί οὖν δὴ τοῦτ’ ἂν εἴη ποτὲ; τὸ μὲν γὰρ ζῆν κοινὸν εἶναι φαίνεται καὶ τοῖς φυτοῖς, ζητεῖται δὲ τὸ ἱδίον. ἀφορίστεόν ἄρα τὴν τε θρεπτικὴν καὶ τὴν αὐξητικὴν ζωήν. ἑπομένη [1098a] δὲ αἰσθητικὴ τις ἂν εἴη, φαίνεται δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ κοινὴ καὶ ἵππῳ καὶ βοῒ καὶ παντὶ ζῴῳ. λείπεται δὴ πρακτικὴ τοῦ λόγου ἔχοντος· τοῦτο δὲ τὸ ὡς ἐπιπειθὲς λόγῳ, τὸ δ’ ὡς ἔχον καὶ διανοοῦμενον. διττῶς δὲ καὶ ταῦτης λεγομένης [5] τὴν κατ’ ἐνέργειαν θετεόν· κυριώτερον γὰρ αὕτη δοκεῖ λέγεσθαι.

[Section D] If the ergon of a human is activity of the soul on the basis of reason or not without reason, and we say that the ergon of an X, e.g. a kitharist, and that of an excellent X, e.g. an excellent kitharist, are the same in kind [τῷ γένει] and that this holds unqualifiedly in every case, the superiority ‘on the basis of virtue’ being added to the ergon, for the ergon of a kitharist is the performance [κιθαρίζειν] but that of an excellent kitharist is the excellent performance [τὸ εὖ], (1098a7-12)

ei δ’ ἐστιν ἔργον ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου, τὸ δ’ αὐτὸ φαμέν ἔργον εἶναι τὸ γένει τοῦτο καὶ τοῦτο σπουδαῖον, ὡσπερ κιθαριστοῦ καὶ σπουδαίου κιθαριστοῦ, καὶ ἀπλῶς δὴ τοῦτ’ ἐπὶ πάντων, προστιθεμένης [10] τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἀμφότερον ἐπερχόμενης πρὸς τὸ ἔργον· κιθαριστοῦ μὲν γὰρ κιθαρίζειν, σπουδαῖον δὲ τὸ εὖ·

[Section E] and if <all this> is so, and we grant that the ergon of a human is a certain life and this is activity and actions of the soul involving reason, and we grant that the ergon of a good man is to accomplish these things well and finely, and each thing is completed well on the basis of its proper virtue, (1098a12-15)
and if <all this> is so, then the human good turns out to be an 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 a end-like [i.e. complete] life (for one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and in the same way neither does one day or a short time make one blessed and happy). (1098a16-20)

Though this translation is intended to be as interpretatively neutral as possible, I will now give a brief non-neutral interpretative sketch. In the Prefatory Section, Aristotle reminds the reader that the human good is the best thing achievable by humans in action. In Section A, he explains that the excellent achievement (“the well”) of anything with an ergon and an action will be that ergon achieved well. In Section B, he argues that a human has an ergon and an action. In Section C, he argues that the human ergon is activity of the rational part of the soul. In Section D, he argues that the human ergon accomplished well, which is the excellent achievement of a human, is the human ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue. In Section E, he repeats some key premises. Finally, in Section F, he arrives at his full definition of the human good, and he does so by adding two criteria that mark off the best achievement of a human, which is the human good, from the merely excellent achievement of a human.

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8 I have made two alterations to the editing of Bywater’s (1894) text. First, I have taken out the brackets before ἀνθρώπου in line 1098a12 and after “εἴ δ’ οὕτω” in line 1098a16. Second, I have replaced his period after τελειοτάτην in line 1098a18 with a comma.
This dissertation divides into two parts. In Part 1 (Chapters 2-3), I explain what Aristotle thinks an ergon is and why he thinks this. In Part 2 (Chapters 4-6), I use this recovered concept of an ergon to argue for a novel interpretation of the ergon argument.

In Chapter 2 (“The Concept and Definition of Ergon”), I argue on the basis of a variety of texts in Plato and Aristotle that the ergon of an X, according to Aristotle, is an activity in some cases but a product in others, depending on what the X is. On my proposal, Aristotle understands “the ergon of an X” similarly to how he understands “the limit of an X.” For though Aristotle has a single concept of a limit, he identifies the limit of a plane as a line and the limit of a line as a point. And though he has a single concept of an ergon, he identifies the ergon of the eye as seeing and the ergon of a sculptor as a sculpture. The recovered concept of an ergon also dovetails with what I argue is Aristotle’s real definition of “the ergon of an X”: “the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists.”

In Chapter 3 (“Two Kinds of Proper Activities”), I explain that this recovered concept of an ergon tracks an important distinction between complete and incomplete activities. A complete activity (like living or seeing) has no internal reason why it should stop, while an incomplete activity (like sculpting) has an internal reason why it should stop. Generally speaking, when an activity is complete, the ergon is the activity, and when the activity is incomplete, the ergon is a product beyond the activity. If we adopt the recovered concept of an ergon, then when Aristotle identifies the human ergon as an activity he thereby identifies it as a complete activity.

In Chapter 4 (“The Rationale of the Ergon Argument”), I tackle Section A. This contains the fundamental rationale of the ergon argument, which, neutrally stated, is: For anything with an
ergon and an action, the good, that is, the well, is found in its ergon. I propose that we should understand “the well” to mean something like “the excellent achievement” and understand this to be “in” the ergon as a species is “in” a genus. Aristotle reasons that just as the best achievement of a sculptor will be an excellent version of his ergon (which is a sculpture) so the best achievement of a human will be a certain excellent version of his ergon, if he has one. In Sections B and C, which I do not directly address, Aristotle argues that a human has an ergon and that it is activity of the part of the soul having reason. And so he would assume that the best achievement of a human is an excellent version of this activity.

In Chapter 5 (“Virtue and Ergon”) I discuss Section D, which explains that to achieve an ergon well is to achieve it “on the basis of virtue.” I argue that when Aristotle attaches the addition “on the basis of virtue” to the human ergon, he does so not in order to clarify what the human ergon is but to narrow in on what the human good is. Thus, the human ergon is not equated with the human ergon achieved well. Nevertheless, I also argue that this does not mean that the human ergon is normatively neutral because Aristotle thinks both that the human ergon is itself a good sort of thing and that the nature of the ergon is quite generally revealed in the virtuous instances of the ergon and not in the vicious instances.

In Chapter 6 (“The Full Definition of the Human Good”), I examine Section F, which contains the final conclusion of the ergon argument. Here Aristotle augments his preliminary definition of the human good (“an activity of <the rational part of> the soul on the basis of virtue”) with two further additions: (1) “if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue” and (2) “moreover in an end-like [i.e. complete] life.” I explain that there are two different ways that one could suppose that these additions follow from the premises of the argument. On one view, the additions are implicit in, and optional elucidations
of, the preliminary definition. On the other view, the additions are not implicit in the preliminary definition but instead further criteria that serve to narrow in on what the human good is. Though most, if not all, scholars subscribe (whether explicitly or not) to a version of the first view, I myself argue for a version of the second. I can do so because on my reconstruction, I include the premise: “the human good is the best thing achievable by humans in action.” The two additions, on my reading, serve to mark off the best accomplishment of a human from the merely excellent accomplishment.

As is perhaps already clear, my whole interpretation of the ergon argument hinges on understanding the concept of an ergon in a novel way. So we should begin by analyzing that concept at once.
2 The Concept and Definition of Ergon

2.1 “Ergon” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7: Reasons for a reassessment

At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle sets out to grasp what is the best thing accomplishable by humans in action, which he dubs “the human good,” and in *NE* I 7, he gives a definition of the human good by means of the ergon argument. Just before that argument, Aristotle says that while people seem to agree that eudaimonia is “the best <good>,” we still need a clearer idea of what this best good is (I 7, 1097b22-24). We need more clarity not only because people disagree over what eudaimonia is, but also because we need guidance in how to proceed in our discussion of the best good. Aristotle then suggests that we might attain this clarity if we grasp the ergon of a human. In Section A of the ergon argument, he explains why (cf. γὰρ at 1097b24) grasping the ergon of a human might be helpful:

[Section A] For, 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, the well [τὸ ἔδ] seems to be <found> in its ergon, the same would seem to be true for a human, if he has an ergon. (*NE* I 7, 1097b24-28)

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 ἐὖ” as “the well,” though (as I will later suggest) “τὸ ἐὖ” is better understood as “the excellent accomplishment.” But I give this provisional, literal translation because our understanding of “τὸ ἐὖ” turns on our understanding of “ergon” since, as is clear from later in the argument, Aristotle uses “τὸ ἐὖ” to refer to a thing’s ergon accomplished well (I 7, 1098a12). Thus, τὸ ἐὖ of an X seems to be “in” X’s ergon in the way that a species can be in a genus (cf. Physics IV 3, 210a18).

In NE I 7 the word “ergon” is most often translated as “function,” but also as “characteristic activity,” “l’office,” “eigentümliche Tätigkeit,” and so on. Some scholars helpfully explain what they take an ergon to be. Barney, for example, writes: “the function of a thing is the activity proper to or characteristic of it,” saying that “shoemaking,” for example, “is a function.” In some form or other, the interpretation is ubiquitous, stretching back into the Middle Ages, where we find Aquinas summarizing Section A as: “When a thing has a proper activity, its good and its being well-off consist in its activity. Thus the good of a flute-player consists in his activity, and similarly <the good> of the sculptor and of every artisan <in his respective activity>.”

Several factors have encouraged this interpretation, of which here are three. First, the only erga (plural of ergon) that Aristotle mentions in NE I 7 are activities: the human ergon is identified as an “activity of reason or not without reason” (1098a7-8) and the ergon of a kitharist

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2 Crisp (2000).
5 Barney (2008, 293).
6 Barney (2008, 303).
7 See Korsgaard (1986, 259); Whiting (1988, 33); Kraut (1989, 312); Irwin (1999, 183); McDowell (2002, 12); Broadie (2002, 276); Lawrence (2009, 215); etc.
as an activity of performing on the kithara (1098a11-12). Second, while I have said that Aristotle makes the claim of section A with reference to “anything with an ergon and an action” (1097b27), some scholars seem to understand this phrase differently so that it could be translated “anything with an ergon, that is, an action.” This is a linguistically possible translation, and it would of course imply that the ergon of a thing is the same as its proper “action.” And third, scholars widely and rightly assume that Plato’s ergon argument in Republic I is a precursor to Aristotle’s own argument, but they also think that “ergon” there means “proper activity.” We will return to these issues in due course. But for now let us just note that, having surveyed the similar translations, 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.

And yet there is reason to be cautious. First, if one assumes that Aristotle uses “ergon” to mean “proper activity” in NE I 7, one must also think that elsewhere in the NE Aristotle often uses “ergon” quite differently, to mean “product.” For example, not long before (NE I 1, 1094a5) and not long after (NE II 6, 1106b10) the ergon argument Aristotle uses “ergon” in expressions that clearly do refer to products. And so Aristotle would be switching back and forth between different meanings of the word “ergon” without any indication that he is doing so.\(^9\) Second and relatedly, though Barney and other scholars understand the ergon of the shoemaker to be shoemaking, Aristotle never clearly says that it is. Instead, when he does identify the ergon of the shoemaker, he identifies it not as shoemaking but as a shoe (NE V 5, 1133a7-10; cf. EE II 1, 1219a20-21). Similarly, when he identifies the ergon of a housebuilder, he identifies it not as housebuilding but as a house (NE V 5, 1133a7-10; cf. EE II 1, 1219a14-15). These peculiarities

\(^9\) Here it is worth noting that “ergon” is a key term in the NE, and Aristotle often comments on the different uses of key terms in the NE (e.g. “τὰ γαθῆ” in I 6, “ἡ δικαιοσύνη” and “ἡ ἀδικία” in V 1, and “τὸ ἐπίστοσθαι” in VII 3).
should, I think, 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 chapter consists in such a reassessment, and my proposal will eventually be that in *NE* I 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 shoemaker as a shoe. On this reading, 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 (having zero dimensions) are radically different kinds of things.

To argue for this interpretation, I will examine passages from Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *De Caelo*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Along the way we will see that while Plato and Aristotle share the same basic concept of an ergon, assigning it the same rough extension, they nevertheless give different accounts of what an ergon is. Aristotle, unlike Plato, offers an account on which the ergon of an X is “the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists.” At the end of the chapter we will see that the concept of an ergon that I aim to recover directly changes how we should understand a key premise that allows Aristotle to draw the conclusion that is his definition of the human good. In short, the recovered concept of an ergon makes an immediate difference to how we should understand the ergon argument.
2.2 Plato’s Understanding of an Ergon in the *Republic*

As I earlier mentioned, Plato gives an ergon argument in *Republic* I that scholars rightly take to be a precursor to the ergon argument of *NE* I 7. Consequently, scholars naturally assume that Plato and Aristotle share the same concept of an ergon, and that Plato’s concept of an ergon is that of a proper activity. While I agree with scholars that Plato and Aristotle seem to share the same concept of an ergon, I disagree with them over what that shared concept is. I do not think it is the concept of a proper activity or function.

Nevertheless, a casual reader of Plato’s *Republic* can find ready reasons to think that this is Plato’s concept. Here, for example, is how Reeve translates the account of an ergon that we find at the beginning of Plato’s ergon argument:

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

\[\text{[	extit{Rep}. I, 352e3-e4]}\]

The translation is representative: Allen, Bloom, Grube, Lee, Lindsay, Shorey, and Waterfield all suggest that they consider Plato to be here speaking of a function or proper

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11 But even if scholars were correct in saying that Plato’s concept of an ergon (in his ergon argument) is the concept of a function, that alone would not give us sufficient reason to conclude that Aristotle’s concept of an ergon (in his *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.

12 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. Barney takes these lines as solid evidence that Plato’s general notion of ergon is one of “instrumentality” (2008, 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 (352e6), 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 does relate it to a user.
activity by means of the word “ergon.” The same goes for the second formulation (considered by Plato to be equivalent to the first, 352e6), which Reeve renders:

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


Between these two accounts, Socrates also illustrates his notion with certain examples—e.g. the ergon of the eye is seeing and that of the ear is hearing (352e6-9)—and these may seem to support the reading of ergon as function. Such an understanding is also presupposed in the translation of various verbs throughout the argument—for example, where Socrates asks “whether anything that has a function performs [ἐργάσεται] it well by means of its own peculiar virtue” (353c6-7).

Commentators seem to be in general agreement with the translators. Of the Republic’s ergon argument, Irwin writes: “Socrates 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.” Santas likewise understands an ergon as a “function,” something “performed.”

17 Lindsay (1976).
18 Shorey (1937).
20 Shorey and Bloom both commendably translate ergon as “work” throughout the ergon argument. However, 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.
21 The Greek is literally “best than anything else” (κάλλιστα τῶν ἄλλων) and so the notion of “best” is used in both accounts.
22 I use Grube’s translation of this passage instead of that of Reeve because I consider Reeve to have mistranslated the passage in other respects that are irrelevant to my present purposes.
23 Irwin (1995, 179).
He also argues that the concept of an ergon figures prominently in Socrates’ construction of the ideal city, and that Plato employs a “functional method” of reasoning about justice.\textsuperscript{25} Such remarks,\textsuperscript{26} along with the consistent translations that we have noted, would naturally lead one to think that in his ergon argument Plato employs the concept of a function by means of the word ergon.

And yet this is doubtful. Consider first that throughout the \textit{Republic} Plato consistently 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 not long before \textit{Republic} I’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 \textit{<the artisan’s>} own art. On the contrary, if we are to examine the matter precisely, the doctoring-art makes [ποιεῖ] health, 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 [οὗτος] goes for all other arts: each accomplishes [ἐργάζεται] its ergon, and benefits that to which it is ordered (\textit{Rep.} I, 346d1-6).\textsuperscript{27}

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 \textit{<art>} accomplishes [ἐργάζεται] its ergon.” This indicates that we ought to read “ποιεῖ” parallel to “ἐργάζεται;” and “health,” “a house” and “a wage” parallel to “ergon.”

\textsuperscript{25} Santas (2006, 132-141).
\textsuperscript{26} I here mention a few more scholars who hold that Plato’s concept of an ergon in the \textit{Republic} is that of a function. Vlastos (1973, 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 “performed either exclusively by that thing or else more excellently [κάλλιστα] by it than by anything else” (353a).” Cooper ([1975] 1987, 145) notes a claim common to both the \textit{NE} and the \textit{Republic} ergon arguments: “a thing’s excellence is the essential condition of its performing well its ergon.” Annas (1981, 54) writes: “Ergon is what a thing does \textit{qua} a thing of that kind.” Barney (2006, 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).” Commenting on Plato’s ergon argument, Korsgaard (2008, 129) writes, “everything that has a function has a virtue, which enables it to perform its function well (R. 352b-c).”
\textsuperscript{27} Οὗκ ἀρα ἀπὸ τῆς αὐτοῦ τέχνης ἐκάστῳ αὐτῇ ἢ ὀφελεία ἐστίν, ἢ τοῦ μεσθοῦ λήμνη, ἄλλ', ἢ δὲ ἀκριβῶς σκοπεῖται, ἢ μὲν ἱστορικὴ ὑγίεια ποιεῖ, ἢ δὲ μεθανηματικὴ μισθῶν, καὶ ἢ μὲν οἰκοδομικὴ ὁίκια, ἢ δὲ μεθανηματικὴ αὐτῆ ἐπομένη μισθῶν, καὶ αἱ ἄλλαι πᾶσαι οὗτος τοῦ αὐτῆς ἐκάστη ἔργον ἐργάζεται καὶ ὀφελεῖ ἐκτίνο ἐρ′ ὁ τέτακται.
Consequently, Plato identifies the ergon of each of these particular arts not as their proper activities, but as their products.

However, we should also note that Plato here speaks of *each* art accomplishing its ergon, and there is reason to think that not every art issues in a product. This is because later in the *Republic* 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. 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.\(^{28}\) If this is so, then when Plato speaks of each art accomplishing 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-player is an activity (his performance).

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 in the *Republic* Socrates 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 (352e2 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

\(^{28}\) At *Republic* 601d1-e1 Plato explicates his notion of a ‘using’ art (601d1) by giving the example of the flute player, who uses the flute that the flute-maker makes. Thus, he assumes that there is an art of flute-playing. He thereby also assumes that the flute-player, unlike the flute-maker, does not make anything.
first account (352e4) and ἀπεργάζομαι in the second (353a11).\(^{29}\) And third, in the passage above
Plato speaks of “the ergon of the arts” (346d5) and in the ergon argument speaks of “the ergon of an X” (352e1-2, 353a10-11) and in doing so he uses the “ergon”-plus-genitive construction
that regularly signifies the ergon proper to an X.\(^{30}\)

Other passages from the Republic suggest a similar picture. In Book 4, for example,
Socrates argues that both wealth and poverty will make an artisan worse at his art, and in the
course of that argument we read:

SOCRATES: And surely if poverty prevents <the potter> from providing himself with tools, or any of the
other things he needs for his art, he will make worse erga [τά τε ἔργα πονηρότερα ἐργάζεται] himself and
worse artisans of his sons or anyone else he teaches.
ADEIMANTUS: Of course.
SOCRATES: So wealth and poverty make both the erga of the arts and the artisans worse. (421d9-e5;
Reeve [2004] with alterations)\(^ {31}\)

Here Socrates notes both that if the potter is impoverished, he will accomplish (ἔργαζεται)
poorer erga (421d12), and more generally that poverty will render the erga of the arts worse
(421e4-5). Reeve translates both instances of “erga” as “products,” and the flow of the argument
does suggest that Socrates supposes the “erga” of the potter to be pots. But when Socrates says
“the erga of the arts”—including, it seems, all the arts—we should again suppose that while the
ergon of the potter is a pot, the ergon of a flute-player is an activity, his performance. This gives
us reason to think that a single concept of an ergon is here present. And there are also textual

\(^{29}\) ἀπεργάζομαι is but ἔργαζομαι with the addition of the prefix ἀπό-, which does not seem to alter the meaning of
the word in the Republic. In any case, Plato uses the words interchangeably both in the ergon argument, where Plato
uses ἔργαζομαι with ergon as its direct object (Rep. I, 353c6-7), pretty clearly intending it to be understood in the
same way as ἀπεργάζομαι with ergon as its direct object (Rep. I, 352e6-535a11). He also sometimes uses
ἀπεργάζομαι with ergon as its direct object, where that ergon is clearly a product (cf. Rep. X, 603a9-b1).

\(^{30}\) Cf. § VI.1.a in the LSJ’s entry on “ἔργον”: “c. gen. pers., it is his business, his proper work, ἀνδρόν τόδ’ ἐστὶν ἐ.
A.Ch.673; ἀπερ ἐστίν ἐ. ἀγαθὸν πολίτου Pl.Grg.517c… function, ἀπερ νεῶν ἀμαν νλευσόν ἔργα ἐστίν Th.2.89;
οὐ θερμότητος ἔργον νῦνει R.I.335d; τοῦτο ἐκάστου ἐ. ὑ ἄν ἡ μόνον ἡ ἰ κάλλιστα τῶν ἄλλων ἀπεργάζεται ib. 353a…”

\(^{31}\) [Socrates:] Καὶ μὲν καὶ ὁ ὁργανόν ἃ ἐπὶ ἔργον παρέχεσθαι ὑπὸ πενίας ἢ τι ἄλλο τὸν εἰς τὴν τέχνην τὰ τε ἔργα
πονηρότερα ἐργάζεται καὶ τοὺς τεῦχες ἢ ἄλλους ὡς ἂν διάδοντας δημιουργοὺς διδάξεται. [Adeimantus:] Πῶς
δ’ οὖ; [Socrates:] ὑπ’ ἀμφοτέρων δή, πενίας τε καὶ πλούσιου, χείρος μὲν τὰ τῶν τεχνῶν ἔργα, χείρους δὲ αὐτοῖ.
indications that this is the same concept that is found in Plato’s ergon argument. First, the verb ἐργάζεται is again paired with erga as its direct object at 421d12, just as we saw in the ergon argument (353c67; cf. 353a11). And second, Socrates speaks of “the erga of the arts” using the “ergon”-plus-genitive construction that, as we just noted, regularly signifies the ergon proper to a thing.

Further support comes from the famous discussion of art in Republic X. There Socrates makes it clear that the ergon of a couch-maker is a couch (not couch-making); that this is what the couch-maker makes (ποιεῖ) (597a4-7). The painter imitates the couch of the couch-maker (597d13-e1) and more generally the erga of the craftsmen (598a1-3). Hence: “Painting—and in general imitative arts—produce [ἀπεργάζεται] erga which are far from the truth” (603a9-b1, cf. 598e6). And there are at least two reasons to doubt that Plato is using the word “ergon” in a sense different from that found in his ergon argument. First, he again pairs the same verbs (ποιέω and ἐργάζομαι) with the erga as their direct objects as he does both in the ergon argument’s two accounts and in 346d1-8. Second, in the course of his argument in Rep. X he says that the ergon of the rational part of the soul is to deliberate (603e2), echoing a similar claim made in the course of the ergon argument (cf. 353d5). This, in turn, implies 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).

Even those few passages that may, at first glance, seem to imply the ergon-as-function view turn out, at second glance, not to do so. Consider a passage we mentioned earlier. Socrates, determining how to build the city from the ground up, identifies the basic needs of life (food, shelter, clothing, etc.) and then discusses how to best supply them. He then suggests (in Reeve’s translation): “Each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to
one job [ergon], another to another” (Rep. II, 370b1-3). The context, however, should make us question this translation. For only a few lines earlier we read: “Well, then, should each of them contribute his own ergon for the common use of all?” (369e3-4). The farmer, he says, would contribute grain (369e4-5). This gives us reason to think that Plato here articulates not so much a “one job” as a “one ergon” principle, where the ergon in many cases is a product, not an activity.

Now we should return to the ergon argument of Republic I. We have already found a number of reasons to think that the same single concept of an ergon ought to be present there. But does the text allow us to find it there? So far as I can see, it does. As we noted earlier, though in his ergon argument Plato only mentions erga that are activities (e.g. seeing and hearing), we can accommodate this. Since the proper activities of eyes and ears do not issue in products, their erga would just be the activities. But what about Plato’s two accounts of what an ergon is? Current translations suggest that the 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). But, as we have seen, ἀπεργάζομαι and ποιέω do not always indicate a “doing.” For we saw that 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 its 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: e.g. “achieve,” “execute,” and “accomplish.” We can intelligibly speak of a statue as something that a sculptor has accomplished, and we can likewise speak of a flute-player’s performance as something that the flute-player has accomplished.32 Now in certain passages it may not be that important to

32 Though this use of “accomplish” 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
retain the core meaning of the verbs in question, but in other passages it is important—and the
ergon argument is one of these passages. I suggest 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
accomplish [ποιῇ] only with it or best with it? (352e3-e4)

[2nd Account:] “…the ergon of each thing is what it alone can accomplish [ἀπεργάζηται] or what it can
accomplish 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 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. To use our earlier analogy, this is just as one might give a single
account of “the limit of an X” (perhaps as “the extremity 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 two difficulties—difficulties that Aristotle responds to in the Eudemian Ethics. The
first is discernable without the recovered concept of an ergon, but the second only with it.
Neither has anything to do with an ambiguity in the word “ergon.”

The first concerns whether Plato’s account carves nature at its joints. It looks like it
doesn’t, and this is because the account is disjunctive: an ergon is said to be either what
something alone can accomplish or what it can accomplish best. By “best” Plato means “better
than anything else” for he explains that we can cut away the branches of a vine with swords,
chisels, and many other things (Rep. I, 353a1-2), but we can accomplish this best with pruning-
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”).

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knives (Rep. I, 353a4-5); therefore, this is the ergon of a pruning knife (Rep. I, 353a7-8). But if an ergon is one sort of thing such that we are justified in picking it out with one concept, surely our account of it will need to be unified and not disjunctive? Now you might think that Plato could easily fix this. He could drop the first disjunct (that the ergon of X be what X alone of all things can accomplish) and just go with the second (that the ergon of X be what X can accomplish best) on the assumption that what you alone can accomplish you necessarily can accomplish best. This is a fairly obvious solution, but I think there is a reason Plato does not go for it. Consider that if we assume that whenever the ergon of an X is what X alone can accomplish it is also the case that this is what X can accomplish best, then by parity of reasoning whenever the ergon of an X is what X alone can accomplish it is also the case that this is what X can accomplish worst. Yet “best” and “worst” are opposites, and when Plato finds opposites holding of the same thing, he tends to think that that thing cannot be fully real. Indeed, it seems to be because Plato found opposites holding of objects in the perceptible world that he was led to posit the intelligible world of forms (Rep. VII, 523ff). Consequently, it is unlikely that Plato would want to admit that opposites hold of something intelligible, namely, what an ergon is.

Plato, then, must be assuming that if the ergon of X is what X alone can accomplish, it is not true that this is what X can accomplish best—in which case his account requires both disjuncts.

To see the second difficulty, we should again notice that when Plato in each of his two accounts speaks about accomplishing something “best” (“κάλλιστα” or “ἄριστα”) he understands

33 Is the ergon of the pruning-knife the cutting away of vine-branches or is it the pruned vine? Plato does not clearly say. But even if it is the cutting away of vine branches I think we can say something about this. For you might think that because tools are incomplete (cf. NE 17, 1097a25-28) they might play a role in a more complex activity that does properly speaking issue in a product. Thus, just as the ergon of a certain drug might be purging, while the ergon of the doctoring-art (which uses the drug as a tool) might be health, so the ergon of the pruning-knife might be cutting away, while the ergon of the pruning-art (which uses the pruning-knife as a tool) might be the pruned vine.

34 Might it help Plato (or Socrates) to recall the earlier claim that each art does not act badly insofar as it is wholly and precisely the art that it is (Rep. I, 342a-b)? I do not think so. This is because “worst” (like “best”) is here understood by reference to a comparison class of things that can accomplish similar erga. Consequently, it does not follow from the fact that X accomplishes its ergon worst that X also accomplishes its ergon badly.
“best” by reference to a comparison 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 in 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 loophole. We are not given sufficient conditions for picking out health (as opposed to healing) as the ergon of the doctoring-art. For while the doctoring-art accomplishes health best (in comparison with the shoemaking-art or any other art), the doctoring-art also accomplishes healing best.35

2.3 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,36 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 [τὸ περὶ τῶν ἀληθευόντων]. But if he is naturally composed of several capacities, it is clear that when a thing can accomplish several <things>,

35 In fairness to Plato, I should note that he may have ways of dealing with this loophole. He could introduce a new condition to his account. He could add that the ergon of a thing must be the best—in the sense of the most unified or most determinate or most Form-like—of whatever that thing can accomplish. Or he could say (much like Aristotle) that a thing’s ergon must be the end of that thing. Indeed, he could (like Aristotle) say that the ergon of a thing must be the best in the sense of being an end. And the idea that there is an intimate connection between “end” and “best” is not foreign to Plato. In the Philebus, for example, he writes: “That for the sake of which something-which-comes-to-be-for-the-sake-of-something always comes to be, is in the class of things that are good; while that-which-comes-to-be-for-the-sake-of-something ought to be put in another class, my friend” (54c9-11). His current account, however, does suffer from the loophole mentioned above and it may very well have led to him to a different understanding of virtue than Aristotle’s (on which see Chapter 5).

36 Here it is also worth noting that new arguments for the authenticity of the Protrepticus fragments may be found in Hutchinson and Johnson (2005, 193-295).
the best of these is the ergon: 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.\textsuperscript{37}

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 \textit{Republic}. Aristotle seems to claim that, if a thing can accomplish only one thing, then that will be its ergon. But if a thing is naturally fit to accomplish 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,\textsuperscript{38} yet he also identifies the ergon of the thinking part of the soul as “truth,” earlier glossed by him as “thinking truly” (\textit{ἀληθεύειν}).\textsuperscript{39} Consequently, he understands the ergon of an X to be “the best” that an X, \textit{qua} X, is fit to accomplish, 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 \textit{Eudemian Ethics} Aristotle goes into more detail about what he takes an ergon to be, and the \textit{EE} account is not obviously the same as the one in the \textit{Protrepticus}. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s \textit{Protrepticus} account already differs from that of Plato. The reason is as follows.

When Plato in the \textit{Republic} speaks of the ergon of X as what X can alone accomplish or what it can do most truly or judging truly. I take this interpretation to dovetail with the remarks we find in \textit{NE} VI 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 (\textit{μάλιστα ἀληθεύειν}, 1039b13). And 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. \textit{Metaphysics} E 4, 1027b25-27). For a different view, see Crivelli (2004, 7) who maintains that true and false things (\textit{πράγματα}) “contribute to explaining the what it is to be true or false for thoughts and sentences.” Crivelli does not discuss \textit{Protrep}. B65 or \textit{NE} VI 2. For scholars who find Crivelli’s claims about true and false \textit{πράγματα} problematic, see M. Wheeler (2006) and U. Coope (2005).

\textsuperscript{37} Εἰ μὲν οὖν ἄπλοιοι τι ζῆσιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ κατὰ λόγον καὶ νοῦν τέτακται αὐτοῦ ἢ οὐσία, οὐκ ἄλλο ἔστιν αὐτοῦ ἔργον ἢ μόνῃ ἢ ἀκριβεστάτη ἀληθεία καὶ τὸ περὶ τῶν ἄντων ἀληθεύειν: εἰ δ’ ἔστιν ἐκ πλείονον δυνάμεων συμπεριφόρος, δηλὸν ἔστιν ὡς ἄρ’ οὗ πλεῖον πέρασεν ἀποτελεῖσθαι, ἀεὶ τοῦτον τὸ βέλτιστον <τὸ> ἔργον ἔστιν, οἷον ἰατρικοῦ ὑγίεια καὶ κυβερνήτης σωτηρία. βέλτιστον δ’ οὐδὲν ἔχωμεν λέγειν ἔργον τῆς διανοίας ἢ τοῦ διανοούμενου τῆς ψυχῆς ἢμών ἀληθείας. ἀληθεία ἄρα τὸ κυριότατον ἔργον ἔστι τοῦ μορίου τούτου τῆς ψυχῆς. I rely on the text and translation of Düring (1961), but with some alterations to the translation.

\textsuperscript{38} Presumably, the many things that Aristotle thinks a doctor, for example, can accomplish will be health but also healing, and all the various activities that form a part of healing (rubbing, purging, etc.).

\textsuperscript{39} Since Aristotle first describes a case where something has only one capacity, the \textit{καὶ} that links “most exact truth” and “thinking truly about what is” is epexegetically. 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 \textit{NE} VI 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 (\textit{μάλιστα ἀληθεύειν}, 1039b13). And 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. \textit{Metaphysics} E 4, 1027b25-27). For a different view, see Crivelli (2004, 7) who maintains that true and false things (\textit{πράγματα}) “contribute to explaining the what it is to be true or false for thoughts and sentences.” Crivelli does not discuss \textit{Protrep}. B65 or \textit{NE} VI 2. For scholars who find Crivelli’s claims about true and false \textit{πράγματα} problematic, see M. Wheeler (2006) and U. Coope (2005).
can accomplish best (ἄριστα and κάλλιστα), the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of things that can accomplish 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 accomplish. As we will see, this thought is developed in the EE.

2.4 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. And in the EE ergon argument, we find what 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: 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 II 1, 1219a11-18)

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40 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 we assume that the EE is a later work of Aristotle, there will be evidence that Aristotle subscribes to the relevant distinction both before and after the NE.

41 “Employment” translates χρήσις. 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.

42 ἄλλα τὸ ἔργον λέγεται διήγεραι, τόν μὲν γὰρ ἐστιν ἑτερόν τι τὸ ἔργον παρὰ τὴν χρήσιν, οἷον οἰκοδομικῆς οἰκία ἄλλη, οἷς οἰκοδόμησις καὶ ἑτεροκής ὑγίαις ἄλλης οἷς ὑγίανσις οὐδὲ ἱέρειας, τόν δ’ ἢ χρήσις ἔργον, οἷον ὑγειεως ὑγειας καὶ μαθηματικῆς ἐπιστήμης θεωρία. ὅστ’ ἀνάγκη, ὅν ἔργον ἢ χρήσις, τὴν χρήσιν βέλτιστον εἶναι τῆς ἔξεσος.
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 I 7*. Reeve suggests that Aristotle is here noting that the term “ergon” is “act/result ambiguous.”

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.

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

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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),44 explaining that “the end is best, as being an end” (EE 1219a10).45 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).46 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, but he does not do this. He only gives this one account of what an ergon is; 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 II 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 because a house is the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, qua housebuilding-art, exists or has being.

44 τέλος ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον
45 τὸ γάρ τέλος ἄριστον ὡς τέλος
46 τέλος τὸ βέλτιστον καὶ τὸ ἄριστον, οὗ ἐνεκα τὰλλα πάντα. It is worth noting that here Aristotle clearly explicates the relevant notion of “best” that we already encountered in Protrepticus B65 by tying it to the notion of an end. Hints of this were already present in Protrepticus B68.
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. The same holds in other cases also. Now let us assume that the ergon of the soul is to accomplish living, 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 a good life (*EE* 1219a18-27).

First 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* I 7, 1098a8), though different (presumably because one is accomplished well, cf. *NE* I 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 ergon of its virtue is good living (1219a23-27). The implication is that when

47 Since Aristotle identifies the ergon of the excellent soul as “good life” or “good living” (τὸ ἔργον τῶν ἄρετῶν), 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 Woods’ translation that the ergon of the soul is “to make things live.” (Cf. Rackham’s (1996) translation “to cause life” and Solomon’s (1984) “to produce living.”) The Greek is ὑποτεύχειν. My solution is to understand “ποιεῖ” in the way that Plato uses it in *Republic* I. We argued that when Plato uses the word in his account of what an ergon is, the word, while retaining the same meaning, could indicate a “doing” or a “making” as the case may be. Consequently, Aristotle is not saying that the ergon of the soul is to make things live, but rather to accomplish living, which would be the same as “living” or “life.”

48 τούτων δὲ τούτων τὸν τρόπον διαπερισσόνων, λέγομεν ὅτι <ταύτῳ> τὸ ἔργον τοῦ πράγματος καὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς, ἄλλ᾽ οὐχ ὑπολογίζων. οἶνον σκωτώματι καὶ σκυτεύσεως ὑπάρχει. εἰ δὲ τίς ἔστιν ἀρετὴ σκυτική καὶ σπουδαίας σκυτεύσεως τὸ ἔργον ἔστι σπουδαῖον ὑπόλογον. τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ ἕπι τῶν ἀλλών. ὁ γὰρ ὕπολος ἵππος τὸν ἔστιν παρείναι, τοῦ δὲ χρῆμας καὶ ἐγρήγορσις· ὁ γὰρ ὕπολος ἵππος τις καὶ ἑσυχία, ὅστε ἐπεὶ τὸ ἔργον ἀνάγκη ἐν καὶ ταύτῳ εἶναι τῆς ἰκεχής καὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς, ἔστω ἀν ἐπὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς ζωὴ σπουδαίᾳ.
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 II 1, 1219a13). 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,” 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 II 1, 1219a3 is using this “λέγεται διχῶς” in this latter way. And it is worth adding that Aristotle seems to use the phrase in this latter way just a few pages earlier at EE I 7, 1217a36. Once we appreciate this, I believe we remove the last impediment that one might reasonably have to thinking that Aristotle in EE II 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.

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50 In EE I 7 Aristotle speaks of what is πρακτόν (“accomplishable in action”), and he says: “Since accomplishable-in-action [τὸ πρακτόν] is said in two ways [λέγεται διχῶς]: some things we act for the sake of and other-things-that-are-for-the-sake-of-these partake of action (for example, we put among things accomplishable in action both health and wealth as well as the things done for their sake, i.e. what produces health and what produces wealth), it is clear that eudaimonia must be set down as the best among the things accomplishable by humans in action [τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρακτῶν ἄριστον].” (1217a36-39).” Aristotle is not here saying that there are two different meanings to the word “τὸ πρακτόν.” Instead he is indicating that the same sense of πρακτόν applies to two sorts of things: an end or something done for the sake of that end. Thus, he says that we “put” both sorts of things “among the things accomplishable in action” (1217a37), and that eudaimonia is the best “among the things accomplishable by humans in action” (1217a40). In the latter quotation Aristotle uses the word “πρακτόν,” and does not indicate which sense of the word he is using and that is because he hasn’t distinguished different senses of the word. He has instead indicated the two sorts of things that the same sense of πρακτόν can apply to.
Now that we have outlined Aristotle’s account, we are in a position to see how it addresses the two difficulties present in Plato’s accounts. The second of these was that Plato did not have the resources to pick out a house as opposed to housebuilding as the ergon of the housebuilding-art. This loophole was due to Plato saying that the ergon of X could be what X can accomplish best, where the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of things that can accomplish similar erga (Rep. I, 353a1-8). But a housebuilder not only accomplishes a house better than anyone, but also accomplishes housebuilding better than anyone, so Plato’s definition of an ergon leaves open whether the ergon of a housebuilder is housebuilding or the house – even though, as we have seen, Plato wants to identify the ergon of the housebuilder as a house. Aristotle closes this loophole 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 II 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 II 1, 1219a10-11). Here the notion of “best” is with respect to a comparison class of other things that an X, qua X, can accomplish, 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, exists. 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 I (346d1-8)—the examples of the housebuilding-art and the doctoring-art—that Plato’s account could not accommodate and Aristotle pointedly remarks that that the ergon of the housebuilding-
art is a house, “not housebuilding” (EE 1219a15), and that the ergon of the doctoring-art is health, “not healing or doctoring” (EE 1219a15-16).

Aristotle’s account also sidesteps the first difficulty in Plato’s account, which was its disjunctive nature: for Plato said that the ergon of an X was what X alone could accomplish or what X could accomplish best. Aristotle is able to do so by understanding the ergon of an X as the end of an X, and then by explaining that the end is “best as being an end” (1219a10) or rather as being “the last <thing> for the sake of which every thing else [is or is done]” (EE II 1, 1219a10-11). This gives him an account that can apply equally to both cases: for just as a house is the “last <thing> for the sake of which” the housebuilding-art, qua housebuilding-art, exists, so seeing is the “last <thing> for the sake of which” the eye, qua eye, exists. Aristotle also probably highlights this advantage of his account by using the example of the eye since, in Plato’s ergon argument, the ergon of the eye is a prime example of an ergon of X being what X alone can accomplish (Rep. 352e5). And, though Aristotle probably would not have been bothered if his account did imply that the ergon of an X was somehow both “best” and “worst,” it is worth noting that his account does not do so. Because the end is best “as being an end” and because if there is to be an end there must also be something that is for the sake of it (otherwise it would not be an end), it follows that there is always something that the end is better than.

2.5 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 II 3, 286a8-9: “Everything that has an ergon exists <or
has being> for the sake of its ergon” ("Εκαστόν ἐστιν, ὃν ἐστιν ἔργον, ἕνεκα τοῦ ἔργου").” And if we pair this with the following passage from the Politics: “The housebuilders’ art exists <or has being> for the sake of a house” (ἐστι τῆς οἰκίας χάριν ἢ τῶν οἰκοδόμων τέχνη; Politics VII 8 1328a33), we get the very claim we detected in EE II 1: the housebuilding-art exists for the sake of a house, which is its ergon.51

There are also reasons even within the De Caelo to think that Aristotle there is employing the recovered concept of an ergon. 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 ἀΐδιον; II 3, 286a10).53 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” (III 7, 306a14-16).54 Scholars naturally understand “the ergon” here to refer to the product of the productive art since this is the “results” (306a15). (Stocks, for example, translates “ergon” in this passage as “product” but in De Caelo II 3 as “function.”55) But notice that Aristotle also identifies the ergon of the productive art as that art’s

51 Here Aristotle uses “χάριν” instead of “/octetे ἔνεκα,” but this is of little importance. The context of Politics VII 8 makes it clear that he considers the two expressions to be equivalent (cf. VII 8, 1328a29).

52 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 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, 2. 4. 5, in Busa [1980]).

53 It is perhaps worth noting that eternal motion is a very special kind of motion (if a motion at all) because there is no point at which it must stop, which Aristotle elsewhere seems to think holds of all motions.

54 ὡσπερ οὐκ ἔνιας δέων κρίνειν ἐκ τῶν ἀποβαίνοντων, καὶ μᾶλθα ἐκ τοῦ τέλους. Τέλος δὲ τῆς μὲν ποιητικῆς ἐπιστήμης τὸ ἔργον

end, and remember that Aristotle earlier identified the ergon of each thing as the end for the sake of which it exists (De Caelo II 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 II 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 recovered concept of an ergon in the very argument of De Caelo II 3. Aristotle’s task in this chapter is to explain why there are different motions among the heavenly bodies, and to do so he says we must employ the teleological principle “each thing with an ergon exists for the sake of its ergon” (II 3, 286a8-9). He first shows that since the activity of what is divine is “eternal life” (ζωὴ ἀΐδιος, 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

56 The steps seem to be as follows. If there is to be this eternal motion, the revolving sphere must have a center that remains at rest. If there is to be a fixed center, there must be earth. If there is to be earth, there must be there must exist the other elements; and if there are to be the other elements, there must be an eternal process of generation (since the elements themselves are not eternal).
of these motions. Consequently, it looks like the ergon of the outer sphere is its proper activity (namely, the eternal circular motion), while the erga of the inner spheres containing planets is something beyond their proper activity (namely, the eternal process of terrestrial generation).

2.6 Remarks on the Expressions “End of Something” and “Ergon of Something”

When Aristotle identifies “the end” of the doctoring-art as health (NE I 1, 1094a8; EE II 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. And it is “the end of an X” in this sense that Aristotle identifies—in the EE and elsewhere—as the ergon of an X. To clarify what Aristotle has in mind by this, we should consider three questions that one might have at this point.

First, you may have noticed that 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 (II 1, 1219a). Is there much at stake in this difference? I do not think so. Aristotle is comfortable

57 Though Leunissen does not draw this conclusion, it seems ripe for the picking in her summary of Aristotle’s thought in De Caelo II 3: “The complete explanation of why there are several motions of the heavens is thus that there are different functions that require the presence of different motions. There is one eternal motion in a circle (performed by the outer sphere carrying the fixed stars) that is required for the sake of realizing the immortality of the heavens, and there are other motions (performed by the inner spheres carrying the planets) that must take place, if there is to be generation” (2010, 164).

58 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. And 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, 1174a20ff).

59 For example: “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); “if each body had the power of progression but not perception, it would perish and would not arrive at its end, which is the ergon of its nature” (De Anima III 12, 434a32-b1); and “Each thing exists for the sake of its ergon” (De Caelo II 3, 286a8-9).
with 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 is what holds of him in virtue of his
doctoring-art. Aristotle more or less articulates this point in *Physics* II 3, where he discusses
causation in nature. He writes:

It is 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 (195b22).\(^\text{60}\)

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 the more exact
locution, and so it seems to be Aristotle’s preferred expression. However, because such
exactness is not always necessary, Aristotle also speaks of “the ergon of the housebuilder.”

Second, does it follow from Aristotle’s account of what an ergon is (“the end for the sake
of which an X, qua X, exists,” cf. *EE* II 1, 1219a8-11) that “ergon” is simply synonymous with
“end”? It does not. This is apparent if we observe that the ergon of something is an end
*accomplishable* by that thing, and that there are ends that are not “accomplishable” by anything.
For example, the Unmoved Mover (or God) is the end of the heavenly bodies because they move
for the sake of him (*Meta. Α 7, 1072b1-4*). He is their end by being their organizing principle
and object of emulation—not by being *accomplished* by them. God exists in his own right, and
is not accomplished by anything.

Third, because “the ergon of each thing is its end” (*EE* II 1, 1219a8) and eudaimonia is
the end of all things accomplishable in action (*EE* I 8, 1218b10, cf. *NE* I 2, 1094a18-22), does it

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\(^{60}\) δει δ’ ἄει τὸ ἀτιον ἐκάστου τὸ ἀκρότατον ζητεῖν, ὅσπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων οἶν άνθρωπος οἰκοδομεῖ ὅτι
οἰκοδόμος, ὃ δ’ οἰκοδόμος κατά τὴν οἰκοδομικήν.
follow that eudaimonia is somehow the ergon of every accomplishable 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 eudaimonia. As we have seen, Aristotle’s examples from EE II 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 II 1, 1219b4). Even if eudaimonia is the end of the various arts because it is the end of all accomplishable things, it is only the end of the various arts, qua things accomplishable in action.

To see this, 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 accomplishable in action, exists? Eudaimonia. And what is the end for the sake of which the doctoring-art, qua thing accomplishable in action, exists? Also, eudaimonia. 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.
2.7 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*, *Eudeman Ethics* and *De Caelo* do not seem to think that the ergon of an X is always an activity. Instead, they both seem to think that 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. But is there reason to think that this is the concept at play in the *NE* ergon argument? I think so. But I should begin by noting that if scholars are right that in the *NE* ergon argument Aristotle uses the word “ergon” to express the concept of a proper activity, then Aristotle would seem to be breaking with a fairly well established precedent. Focusing just on the *NE* and the *EE*, the predicament will look like this. The *NE* will have it that the ergon of something is its proper activity, while the *EE* will have it that the ergon of something is its proper end, whether an activity or a product. Thus, the *NE* will have it that the ergon of a shoemaker is the activity of shoemaking (as Barney affirms),\(^{61}\) while the *EE* will have it that the ergon of a shoemaker is a shoe (as Aristotle at *EE* 1219a21 affirms).\(^{62}\) This will be surprising, and will call for explanation. But, as we will see, there are good reasons for thinking that Aristotle in the *NE* still subscribes to his *EE* understanding of an ergon.

Before we focus on the ergon argument itself, it is worth noting that 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.),\(^{63}\) but

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\(^{62}\) I should note that while *NE* often talks of the ergon of a shoemaker, the *EE* talks of the ergon of the shoemaking-art; and while the *NE* talks of the ergon of man, the *EE* talks of the ergon of the soul. Aristotle, I believe, would think that both expressions are acceptable, though he would also think that the *EE* way of talking is more scientific, as we earlier discussed (cf. *Physics* II 3, 195b21-25). For our present purposes, this difference does not matter.

\(^{63}\) I say “explicitly” not because I think there are cases where Aristotle implicitly identifies the ergon of a productive art as its proper activity, but because I do not want to prejudge whether he does so or not.
as its product (a shoe, a house, etc.). One example comes from Aristotle’s discussion of justice in exchange:

Let A be a housebuilder, B a shoemaker, C a house, D a shoe. The housebuilder must receive the shoemaker’s ergon from him, and give him the housebuilder’s own ergon in return. (NE V 5, 1133a7-10)\(^{64}\)

Here Aristotle clearly implies that the ergon of a shoemaker is a shoe (not shoemaking) and the ergon of a housebuilder is a house (not housebuilding). \textit{These} are the things that the housebuilder and the shoemaker receive and give in return. Aristotle here also speaks of the “the ergon of an X,” using the special ‘ergon’-plus-genitive expression that, as we noted earlier, seems to denote the ergon proper to an X.

Later in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, when Aristotle is discussing the nature of benefactors and beneficiaries, he also seems to identify the ergon of a certain X as the product of that X.\(^{65}\)

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 [ὑπὸ 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 IX 7, 1167b34-1168a2)\(^{66}\)

This text forms part of a rich chapter, but for our present purposes we need only notice two things. First, Aristotle implies that the proper ergon of (at least certain) artisans is a product

\(^{64}\) οἰκοδόμος ἔρ’ ᾧ ἃ, σκυτότομος ἔρ’ ᾧ β, οἰκία ἔρ’ ᾧ γ, ὑπόδημα ἔρ’ ᾧ δ. δεὶ ὁν λαμβάνειν τὸν οἰκοδόμον παρὰ τοῦ σκυτότομου τὸ ἐκεῖνον ἔργον, καὶ αὐτὸν ἐκεῖνῳ μεταδίδοναι τὸ αὐτὸν. This passage comes from a common book (one shared between the \textit{EE} and the \textit{NE}). But I think it is legitimate to use it as evidence for how Aristotle thinks of the ergon of an X in the \textit{NE} because I assume (no doubt controversially) that if the common books originated in the \textit{EE}, they would have presumably been revised before they were included in the \textit{NE}.

\(^{65}\) A similar passage occurs at \textit{NE} IV 1, 1120b13-14: “Everyone is especially fond of his own ergon, as parents and poets are.”

\(^{66}\) πάς γὰρ τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον ἀγαπᾷ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγαπηθεὶ ἢν ὑπὸ τοῦ ἔργου ἐμψύχου γενομένου: μᾶλλον δ’ ἰσος τοῦτο περὶ τῶν ποιητῶν συμβαίνει: ὑπεραγαπᾶσι γὰρ οὗτοι τὰ οἰκεία ποιήματα, στέργοντες ὡσπερ τέκνα.
beyond their activity: in the case of the poet, his ergon is his poem.\textsuperscript{67} Second, the phrase “τὸ ὁικεῖον ἔργον” (“the proper ergon”) used in the first sentence regularly signifies the ergon proper to something’s nature. This is, for example, how Aristotle uses it in lines that come at the beginning of his discussion of the intellectual virtues: “we should consider what is the best state of each <of the parts of reason> for this is the virtue of each, and the virtue <of something> is relative to its proper ergon [τὸ ὁικεῖον ἔργον]” (\textit{NE} VI 1, 1139a15-17). This is a thought articulated and employed in the ergon argument (\textit{NE} I 7, 1098a15). And so I take Aristotle’s use of the phrase “τὸ ὁικεῖον ἔργον” in the passage from \textit{NE} IX 7 to give us reason for thinking that Aristotle understands the proper ergon (in the sense of “ergon” relevant to the ergon argument) to be in some cases a product.

Remember also that in the \textit{De Caelo} (II 3, 286a8-9 and III 7, 306a14-16), the \textit{EE} (II 1, 1219a8) and elsewhere, Aristotle maintained that the ergon of X was “X’s end,” or more specifically, the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists. But if in the \textit{NE} Aristotle still subscribes to this account of what an ergon is (and I see no reason to think he does not), then \textit{NE} I 1 gives us good reason to think that the ergon of an X is an activity in some cases but a product of an activity in others. For one thing, Aristotle clearly identifies the ends of certain arts as products: “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; cf. \textit{Protrep}. B12).\textsuperscript{68} But Aristotle also, just before

\textsuperscript{67} I say “at least certain” because I think that Aristotle claim can be heard to apply to the case of the kitharist, whose ergon is an activity. It is not too much of a stretch to think that just as a poem could acquire a soul, so could a certain musical performance. But Aristotle’s example of the poet does show that with the phrase “proper ergon” he is thinking of the product, when there is one.

\textsuperscript{68} 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 (\textit{NE} I 7, 1097a15-22). And later in the \textit{NE} Aristotle writes, “Every good is the ergon of an art” (\textit{NE} VII 11, 1152b19). If we link these claims, we find that the ergon of an X may be an activity in some cases, but a product in others. I should also note that, though the claim
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. Where there are certain ends beyond the actions, the erga in these cases are by nature better than the activities [*ἐνεργειῶν*]” (I 1, 1094a3-6).69

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 first note that, though nearly every translation renders “erga” at 1094a5 as “products” (or some equivalent), it is not obvious that the word here means this. Instead, 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 would also very possibly signal 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 τινὰ (“certain” or “some”) also suggests this, and I think we should be discomfited by the fact that the word is often downplayed and sometimes left untranslated. Irwin, for example, drops the τινὰ, 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

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69 Πάσα τέχνη και πάσα μέθοδος, ὡμοίως δὲ πράξεις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἠγαθοὶ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ· διὸ καλῶς ἀπεφήναντο τὰ ἔργα, οὐ πάντ' ἐφίεται, διαφορά δὲ τις φαίνεται τῶν τελῶν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ εἰσὶν ἐνεργεῖαι, τὰ δὲ παρ' αὐτάς ἔργα τινὰ. ὅπε δ’ εἰσὶ τέλη τινὰ παρὰ τὰς πράξεις, ἐν τούτοις βελτίω πέφυκε τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τὰ ἔργα.
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. 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 what he takes “παρ’ αὐτάς ἔργα τινά” (“certain erga beyond the activities,” 1094a4-5) to mean by immediately glossing it as “τέλη τινά παρά τάς πράξεις” (“certain ends beyond the actions,” 1094a5). Because the phrase τέλη τινά clearly means “certain ends” it makes sense to take ἔργα τινά as “certain erga.”

Now if we suppose Aristotle to be using the recovered 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. I should also add that if “erga” here really does mean “products” the last sentence is surprisingly wordy. Surely

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70 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 should expect him to add a similar qualification to ἐνέργειαι (“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’ αὐτάς ἔργα τινά” (“certain erga beyond the activities,” 1094a4-5) by immediately glossing it as “τέλη τινά παρά τάς 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. Here it is worth noting that just as the first τινά in 1094a5 has been left untranslated, so has the second. For example, Irwin, *Ethics*, ad loc. translates: “Whenever there are ends apart from the actions…”

71 I should perhaps add that even though I take the phrase ἔργα τινά at 1095a4-5 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 the meaning of these words.
Aristotle would have only needed to say: “products are by nature better than the activities that produce them.” Instead, Aristotle 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 I think it no accident that Aristotle introduces it here. By it, 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 Section A of the ergon argument is not speaking of a function by means of the word “ergon.”

Let us consider section A once again. After reminding us that eudaimonia is the best thing accomplishable by humans in action, Aristotle says we still need clarity on what this is. He suggests that we will attain this if we grasp the ergon of a human. Then he offers an explanation:

For, 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, 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 I 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

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

73 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. But I should note that at the beginning of NE I 2, Aristotle designates a sense of “the good” by using καὶ in just this way. He writes: “If there is an end of things accomplishable 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).
attempt to determine the best good accomplishable in action (1097b22; cf. I 2, 1094a18-22 and I 4, 1095b16-17). 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), he must be assuming there is not another sort of thing that such an agent can accomplish 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. For example, the best sort of thing that a sculptor can accomplish 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 accomplish. The thought of Section A, then, will need to be something like this: Just as the best accomplishment of a sculptor is found in his ergon (his sculpture), and that of a flute-player in his ergon (his performance), so the best accomplishment 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).

Lest anyone think that this is an outlandish suggestion, I now note that this understanding 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 the Peripatetic philosopher Aspasius, was immersed in Aristotle’s text and wrote his commentary in Ancient Greek, though in the koinē of his own era. Commenting on section A, he writes:
If, then, the ergon of the shoemaking-art is a shoe, and we are looking for what the end of a human is, we need to grasp the ergon of a human, qua human. (17. 22-23)

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 αὐλείῳ] and the good of a sculptor in the sculpture [ἐν τῷ ἀγάλματι] (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)

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

And though my arguments have so far primarily focused on the concept of an ergon used in the section A, I now note that whatever concept of an ergon is used in section A must also be used throughout the ergon argument. When Aristotle speaks of the ergon of man and the ergon of a kitharist later in the ergon argument, he is not now using the word to express a different concept. This is because section A makes a claim about whatever has an ergon and an action;

74 "εἰ οὖν ἔργον σκοτικῆς ὑπόδημα, ἀνθρώπου δὲ ζητοῦμεν τὸ τέλος τί ποτε ἔστιν, ληπτέον ἢν εἰδὶ τὸ ἔργον τὸ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἢ ἀνθρωπον." *Aspazii in ethica Nicomachea quae supersunt commentaria* in Heylbut (1889, ad loc.).

75 "ὅσπερ γὰρ παντὸς τεχνίτου ἄγαθον ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ αὐτοῦ ἔστι, καὶ αὐλήτου μὲν ἐν τῷ αὐλείῳ, ἀγαλματοποιοῦ δὲ ἐν τῷ ἀγάλματι, καὶ όλος ἐπὶ παντὸς ἔργου καὶ πράξεως ὦτου ἔχει, ότει καὶ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἄγαθον ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ αὐτοῦ ἔστιν, εἴπερ τι ἔργον ἔστι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, καθ’ ὃ ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος," *Heliodori in ethica Nicomachea paraphrasis* in Heylbut (1889, ad loc).
and the whole point is that, while this claim obviously holds for every artisan (παντὶ τεχνίτη, 1097b26), it will also hold true for a human, if he has an ergon. Since Aristotle takes section A to link up to what comes later in the argument, the concept must stay the same.

Of course, when Aristotle speaks of “the ergon of a human,” that expression may refer to a proper activity, but “ergon” does not thereby mean what “proper activity” means. “Ergon” and “proper activity” express different concepts. Similarly (to draw a familiar comparison), when Aristotle speaks of “the limit [πέρας] of a plane,” that expression may refer to a line, but “limit” does not thereby mean what “line” (or “γραμμή”) means. “Limit” and “line” express different concepts. If this is so, and if I am right about what an ergon is, then it is an error to suppose, as so many scholars do, that “ergon” in NE I 7 means “function” or “proper activity.”

2.8 The Translation of “Ergon”

Now that we have gone some way toward excavating the concept of an ergon, we can ask: how should we translate “ergon”? I am afraid there is no perfect translation available in English. This surely exacerbates the interpretive problem, and is one of the reasons why the concept has stood in need of excavation. Yet we can offer help. 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” is capable of doing so, I believe that is only due to an etymological branch of the word that is in

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76 This is true if for no other reason than that the πέρας of a line is a point. Cf. Topics IV 4, 141b19-22: “Among definitions of this kind are those of a point, a line, and a plane, all of which explain the prior by the posterior; for they say that a point is the limit of a line, a line <the limit> of a plane, a plane <the limit> of a solid.” εἰς δὲ τὸν τοιούτον ὀρισμὸν ὁ τε τῆς στιγμῆς καὶ ἡ τῆς γραμμῆς καὶ ὁ τοῦ ἐπιπέδου· πάντες γὰρ διὰ τῶν ύστερων τὰ πρῶτα δηλοῦσιν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ γραμμῆς, τὸ δὲ ἐπιπέδου, τὸ δὲ στερεοῦ φασὶ πέρας εἶναι.
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.” 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). This is no accident: English “work” and Greek “ergon” are cognate, having both descended from the Indo-European base “worg-, werg-, wrg-.” Another possibly feasible translation is “product” because it is natural to speak of the house of a housebuilder as his product, and it is not too procrustean to speak of product of the eye as its seeing or the product of a flautist as his performance. Consequently, if we translate “the ergon of X” as “the work of an X” or “the product of X” that may aid readers in seeing how such disparate things (as houses, shoes, and activities of living) might fall under a single concept. And if we wish to articulate the pre-theoretical concept of an “ergon of an X” that Plato and Aristotle seem to share, we will do well to think of it as the “work of an X.”

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77 In mathematics, the word “function” can signify “a variable quantity in its relation to one or more other variables in terms of which it may be expressed” (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] “function, n.” §6). Thus, we can describe “y” in the equation “y = x^2 + x” as a *function* of “x.” By transference, the word can now mean “any quality, trait, or fact so related to another that it is dependent upon and varies with it” (*OED, “function, n.” §6*) with the result that we read: “sand height is not a *function* of sea level height” (“function, n.” §7 in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged [W3]*). The *OED* implies that the mathematical use (which they trace back to Leibniz’s use of the Latin *functio*) creates a branch of the word that is distinct from those branches according to which the word means “the special kind of activity proper to anything” (§3) or “the kind of action proper to a person as belonging to a particular class” (§4). The two uses, however, are superficially similar insofar as both can employ the phrase “function of”: e.g., “the function of the eye is seeing” and “health is a function of several variables.” Nevertheless, it has been suggested to me that when the *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines “function” as “an activity or purpose natural to or intended for a person or thing,” it may be leaning towards the idea that the function of an X is be the *purpose* of an X, which might in some cases be a product. If this is the case, then scholars would have landed by chance on acceptable translation for ergon (“function”) without knowing how they did so.


79 “work, n.” and “work, v.” in *OED.* Cf. the entries on ἔργον in *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Grecque* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1968), and in the *LSJ.*

80 I should here note that “ergon” is commendably translated as “work” both in *NE I 11* and *I 7* in two recent highly literal translations: Bartlett and Collins (2011) and Sachs (2002). However, both translations render “τὸ ἐὰν” at *NE I 7,* 1097b27 in a way that implies that the ergon in question is a proper activity. I should also note that there is another viable translation for “ergon” in English: “output.” The defining output of some things, we may say, is
2.9 Reasons why Aristotle’s Concept of an Ergon in NE I 7 Has Been Misunderstood

There are a variety of factors that have led to the ergon-as-function reading of NE I 7, but I will here discuss two that concern the text of the ergon argument itself. First, though Aristotle mentions several kinds of “artisans” (τεχνῖται) in the ergon argument, he only explicitly indicates the ergon of one of them: the kitharist, whose ergon is his performance (κιθαρίζειν at NE I 7, 1098a12, lit. “to kitharize”). This might lead one to think that an ergon just is a proper activity. But it need not. The recovered concept of an ergon can accommodate this example because the kitharist does not produce a product beyond his activity. Indeed, at Magna Moralia 1.34 Aristotle (or some Aristotelian) indicates that he does not think that there exists an end beyond the activity of “kitharizing” in the way that there exists an end beyond the activity of housebuilding. We read:

The arts of making have some other end beyond the making; for instance, beyond housebuilding, since that is the art of making a house, a house as its end beyond the making, and similarly in the case of carpentry and the other arts of making; but in arts of doing there is no other end beyond the doing; for instance, beyond the performance of the kitharist [κιθαρίζειν] there is no other end, but this is the end, the activity and the doing. (I 34, 1197a5-10; ROT with alterations)\footnote{τῶν μὲν γὰρ ποιητικῶν ἐστὶ τι παρὰ τὴν ποίησιν ἄλλο τέλος, οἷον παρὰ τὴν οἰκοδομικὴν, ἐπειδὴ ἐστὶν ποιητικὴ οἰκίας, οἰκία αὐτῆς τὸ τέλος παρὰ τὴν ποίησιν, ὡμοίως ἐπὶ τεκτονικῆς καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν ποιητικῶν· ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν πρακτικῶν οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο οὐθέν τέλος παρ’ αὐτὴν τὴν πράξιν, οἷον παρὰ τὸ κιθαρίζειν οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο τέλος οὐθέν, ἄλλ’ αὐτὸ τοῦτο τέλος, ἡ ἐνέργεια καὶ ἡ πράξις. Cf. MM 2.12.3.1 – 2.12.4.1. For a defense of the Aristotelian provenance of the Magna Moralia, see Cooper ([1973] 1999).}
And so the recovered concept of an ergon would still yield the result that the ergon of the kitharist is his performance (κιθαρίζειν). Noting this is enough for my argument, but it is worth adding that the common translation of κιθαρίζειν at NE I 7, as “to play the kithara [or harp]” has perhaps done harm, as well. This is because it seems to separate off the playing of the kithara from the music brought about in such playing, and this might lead one to think that the music is a product apart from the activity of playing in the way that a house is a product apart from the activity of housebuilding. But the word κιθαρίζειν need not suggest such a separation, and Magna Moralia 1.34 implies that the separation would be in error. A safer translation of κιθαρίζειν is probably “performing on the kithara.” For the notions of activity and music seem united when we say, for example, “I want to hear the harpist perform.”

Because Aristotle in NE I 7 only explicitly identifies the ergon of the kitharist and because this ergon is an activity, interpreters have felt no need to question their belief that the ergon of any artisan is his proper activity. That Aristotle in the argument does not explicitly name any erga that are beyond activities is due, I think, partly to chance and partly not. For, on the one hand, the argument does not strictly require the example of the kitharist. Aristotle could have made the same point (as he more or less does at EE 2. 1, 1219a20-23) with the example of the shoemaker, whose ergon is a shoe. On the other hand, the example of the kitharist does not seem random. Because the ergon of kitharist is not a product, Aristotle uses this example to draw a pertinent analogy to the human case: the ergon of a human, like that of a kitharist, is an activity.

Second, Aristotle makes his claim in section A with reference to anything with “an ergon and an action” (ἔργον τι καὶ πρᾶξις, 1097b26), and some scholars seem to have taken the “καί”
here to be epexegetic so that one could understand the phrase as “an ergon, that is, an action.”

But there is reason to be cautious about taking “καὶ” this way. And if I am right about what an ergon is, we definitely should not. We should understand the ergon of a shoemaker to be a shoe, but the action of a shoemaker to be shoemaking. If we should wonder why Aristotle speaks here (and a few lines later at 1097b29) of “action” (πράξις), I offer the following explanation.

Aristotle seems to make the claim of section A only about those things that have both an ergon and an action (πράξις). That is to say, the principle is probably not here meant to apply to just anything with an ergon, including artifacts. Not only would it seem somewhat odd to say that a knife (for example) has a πράξις, but Aristotle in his ethics is not prone to liberal uses of the term: at NE 6.2, Aristotle claims: “it is clear that wild animals [θηρία] have perception but no share in action [πράξεως]” (1139a19-20). But, as is implied in the ergon argument and as is clear from elsewhere in the NE (10.5, 1176a3-4), every animal has an ergon. Thus, Aristotle

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82 For example, M. Nussbaum (1995, 112) translates ἔργον τι καὶ πράξις (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.”

83 Besides the fact (discussed in the main text) that some things with erga do not have πράξεις, there seem to be other difficulties if we take καὶ epexegetically both at 1097b26 and 1097b29. It seems like the phrases would propose incompatible extensions for an ergon. The first (ἔργον πράξις rendered as “an ergon, i.e. an action”) will have it that every ergon is an action, while the second (ἔργα 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). It is also worth noting that neither of the ancient commentators takes the καὶ this way.

84 Pace, for example, Lawrence (2009, 206) who commits himself to the claim that “the principle [in Section A] is being generalized over all functional items, including artifacts.”

85 The entry in the LSJ lists no meaning that would easily accommodate the idea that a knife has a πράξις.

86 At EE II 8 he similarly notes that we would not say that a wild animal or a small child “acts”: οὐ γὰρ φαμεν τὸ παιδίον πράττειν, οὐδὲ τὸ θηρίον (1224a29). I should also add that these two claims are not obviously in conflict with the comment at NE III 1, 1111a25-26 to the effect that children (παιδες) and at least some animals (ζῷα) act. This is because the EE’s claim uses the word παιδίον, signifying a “small child,” is thus compatible with the claim that children (παιδες), in general, act. Also, the EE’s and the NE 6’s claims use the word θηρίον, signifying a “wild animal,” and are thus compatible with the claim that some animals (ζῷα) (i.e. those that can be tamed, like dogs or horses) act. For these reasons, I think it should be surprising if Aristotle in his ethics would say that an artifact, a plant or a wild animal has a πράξις.
seems to be making his claim only about those things who have erga and whose proper activities count as actions \([\piράξεις]\), presumably because they partake in reason to some extent.\(^{87}\)

Why would he be making this restricted claim? From the start of the \(NE\), Aristotle has emphasized that the good we are seeking is \(\piρακτόν\) “accomplishable in action.” In I 6 he says that even if there were a separate good, like Plato’s Form of the Good, it would not be the good we are seeking because it is not \(\piρακτόν\ \dot{\alpha}νθρωπο\), “accomplishable by humans in action” (1096b34). Even in the first part of \(NE\) I 7 Aristotle again notes how the various artisans “act” for the sake of their respective ends (1097a18). And the ergon argument is itself offered as an attempt to get clearer on what might be “the best good” (τὸ ἄριστον), by which he clearly means “the best good accomplishable by humans in action.” Thus, it makes sense for the claim of section A to concern a sort of good that is accomplished by something that has both an ergon and an action.\(^{88}\)

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\(^{87}\) Here are four further points in support of this reading. First, in the \(NE\) ergon argument the word \(πράξεις\) is only used in conjunction with artisans and humans generally, and not with bodily organs or non-human animals. Second, Aristotle seems to be presupposing that anything with “an ergon and an action” has a τὸ εὖ (“the well” or “excellent accomplishment”), where the τὸ εὖ is better than the mere ergon. But it is not obvious whether the ergon of just any ergon-bearing thing admits of improvement in this way (that is, being well accomplished). For example, Aristotle implies that fire has an ergon (\(Meteorologica\) IV 12, 390a15), but I doubt whether fire has a τὸ εὖ because it does not seem like fire can have its ergon improved. Third, the examples in the passage (“a flautist, a sculpture-maker and every artisan,” 1097b25-26) are surprisingly restricted if Aristotle is making his claim with respect to anything with an ergon. And fourth, even if he does think that the claim holds for anything with an ergon, he need not say so here. Only the weaker claim is needed for his argument.

\(^{88}\) Here is another possible explanation for the presence of καὶ \(πράξεις\) at 1097b26 that is worth mentioning. The καὶ may be quasi-epexegetetic such that the phrase should be understood as “including action.” (The same explanation could hold for “καὶ πράξεις” 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 \(NE\) I 1, 1094a5) used the word “erga” to refer to products.
2.10 Conclusion

For quite some time, readers of the *NE* have assumed that the concept of an ergon that Aristotle employs in his ergon argument is the concept of a proper activity. I believe I have shown that, at the very least, there is reason to doubt this. But I hope I have shown more. I hope I have shown that there is good reason to think (1) that 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) that Plato and Aristotle share this basic concept of an ergon, but differ in their accounts of what an ergon is, (3) that Aristotle’s account of an ergon is “the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists,” and (4) that the recovered concept of an ergon opens up the possibility of reading the *NE* ergon argument in a new way. A full explication and defense of this new reading still awaits us, but I believe I have here given good reasons to take this new reading seriously.
3 Erga and the Two Sorts of Proper Activities

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we began by considering the first lines of the NE ergon argument in which Aristotle speaks of the ergon of a flautist, a sculptor, every artisan, and in general whatever has an ergon and an action. We saw that interpreters ubiquitously assume that the ergon of something is the proper activity of that thing—the performance of the flautist, the sculpting of the sculptor, and the housebuilding of the housebuilder. We then looked at a number of passages that suggest this is not so. Instead, there is good reason to think that Aristotle (as well as Plato in the Republic) assumes that the ergon of an X will be an activity in some cases and a product in others, in accordance with the sort of thing the X is. Thus, while the ergon of the flautist is his musical performance, the ergon of a sculptor is not sculpting but a sculpture. We also saw that Aristotle’s account of “the ergon of an X” is “the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists or has being.” In this chapter we will look more closely at the reasons why Aristotle would think that such a concept carves nature at its joints, and why he thinks his account of an ergon is the correct one. An interesting upshot of our discussion will be that because the recovered concept of an ergon tracks an important distinction among activities, namely between “complete” and “incomplete” activities, to use Aristotelian terminology, it is a more powerful normative concept than the concept of a function or proper activity. In effect, where the ergon is a product, the proper activity is an incomplete one, but where the ergon is an
activity, the activity is a complete one. I will explain this distinction between activities as I proceed, and show how it fits the distinction among erga drawn in the previous chapter.

3.2 Problems with Two Current Accounts of What an Ergon Is

To begin it will help to consider two competing accounts of what an ergon is. On both accounts, the ergon of an X is assumed to be the proper activity (or function) of an X.¹ According to the first, the ergon of something is directly its end, and according to the second, the ergon of something is the end-directed activity proper to that thing (it being assumed that all proper activities are goal-directed).

The first account is held by a number of scholars. Barney seems to be one of these and she offers as evidence a passage from *Metaphysics* Θ 8: “The ergon is an end and the activity is the ergon” (1050a21).² Gabriel Lear, commenting on the first lines of the *NE* ergon argument, writes: “The function of a thing just is the end to which it is naturally suited.”³ She takes this to account for the ergon of the eye, which is seeing, and the ergon of the flautist, which is his performance. The ergon of the housebuilding-art is a trickier case, but Lear plausibly notes that a housebuilder, qua housebuilder, may be capable “of doing many things in addition to *building a house*—selecting screws and wood, building sawhorses, reading architectural plans…”

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¹ These are the only two explanations known to me of what an ergon is that seem to rise to the level of “accounts.” But other authors have made different suggestions. Joachim (1955, 48), for example, supposes that Aristotle’s account is the same as Plato’s, but I hope I have already shown that this is not the case. McDowell recommends that we think of the ergon of an F as “what it is the business of an F to do” (2002, 12), but says little else.

² Barney (2008, 301). Cf. Lawrence (2009, 215): “In types of functional thing, their good—their end and their organizing principle—is constituted by their function.” Reeve, (2012, 238): “[S]omething’s nature is ‘its end—that is, what it is for the sake of’ (*Ph. II 2* 194a27-28), as too is its function, since each thing with a function “exists for the sake of its function” (*Cael. II 3* 286a8-9)...[W]here there is a characteristic activity, there is a function, whose actualization has that activity as its internal end...”

³ Lear (2004, 43).
Nevertheless, Aristotle’s point is that where there is a function, all the other typical capacities and activities are worth choosing for its sake.”4 Because the housebuilding-art and the activities preliminary to housebuilding both seem worth choosing for the sake of housebuilding, Lear seems right to suppose that the activity of housebuilding is, in a way, an end. And so on this view, housebuilding seems like it can be the “end to which the housebuilding-art is naturally suited.”5

Lear indicates that she takes herself to be here following Aquinas, citing his commentary on the NE.6 There Aquinas gives a reason why someone might mistakenly identify the end of an activity X with the product of an X:

[T]he final good of everything is its ultimate perfection [perfectio], and the form is its first perfection while its operation is the second. If some exterior thing be called an end that will only be because of an operation by which a man comes in contact with that thing, either by making it as a builder makes a house, or by using or enjoying it. Accordingly, the final good of everything must be found in its operation.”7

It is not perfectly clear what Aquinas’s reasoning is here. But he is very likely making use of what is known as “pros hen predication” or “focal meaning” in order to explain why the house might be called the end of the housebuilder. Such predication occurs, as Aristotle explains it, when there is a central application of a term (e.g. “health” as applied to the body) and other applications of the term that are explained by reference to the central case (e.g. food is “healthy” because it is the cause of health in the body).8 Aquinas seems to make a use of such predication

5 Lear (2004, 44) makes it clear that she has in mind an activity as the end when she writes, “Virtuous functioning is a thing’s ultimate end.”
6 Lear (2004, 43n71)
7 “…bonum finale cuiuslibet rei est ultima eius perfectio, forma autem est perfectio prima, sed operatio est perfectio secunda. Si autem aliqua res exterior dicatur esse finis, hoc non erit nisi mediante operatione, per qua scilicet homo ad rem illam attingit vel faciendo, sicut aedificator domum, aut utiotor seu fruitir ea; et sic relinquitur quod finale bonum cuiuslibet rei in eius operatione sit requirendum.” 1 10 29-37 in Busa (1980).
8 See Meta 1 2. If the argument of this paper is right, Aquinas here is incorrect in his understanding of what an end is. And I should add that Aquinas is here defending a principle that is crucial to his theory of “the Good” since
when he identifies the central case of “the end” as a thing’s proper activity, and explains that a product can also be called “an end” only insofar as it bears some relation to that activity.

Now in contrast to this way of thinking about what an ergon is, there is the account of Irwin, who translates ergon as “function” in NE I 7 and explains: “The examples of craftsmen [in the first lines of the NE ergon argument] suggest that the function of some kind F is the goal-directed activity that is essential to F.”

Take the case of sculpting. It seems to be a goal-directed activity and the goal to which it is directed is a sculpture. Similarly, housebuilding seems to be a goal-directed activity and the goal to which it is directed is a house. What would the end be in the case of the flautist? As Irwin seems to suggest elsewhere, the “functions” of the craftsman are always directed to an “external” end.

And so, presumably, Irwin would also think both that the flautist’s performance is a goal-directed activity and that its goal is something external to, or beyond, that activity.

So which view is right about the nature of an ergon? My answer will be that in a way Lear and Aquinas are right, and in another way Irwin is. To see the difficulty facing both views, it will help to recall how Aristotle in NE I 1 says that while some ends are activities, other are not activities but “certain erga beyond activities” (1094a4-5). He then applies this thought by noting that the end of the bridlemaking-art is a bridle, and the end of horsemanship is an action

Aquinas elsewhere supposes the “perfectio” of a thing to be its end (cf. ST I, 4) and the perfectio of a thing to be its goodness (cf. ST I, 5). And so my argument will also have the upshot that Aristotle would not want to accept Aquinas’ theory (as it stands) because he does not think that each thing’s end is its activity.

9 T. Irwin (1999, 183). Irwin (2007, 136) says that “According to Aristotle, a function is a goal-directed motion or state. A motion or state is goal-directed when it has a final cause, or ‘end’. A final cause is the real or apparent good whose presence explains the occurrence of the motion or state in question.” When Irwin here says that the ergon is a “goal-directed motion or state,” he seems to mean that the ergon of a thing could be the possession of some particular power or capacity—for example, he may think that the ergon of the eye is to be able to see. If this is so, then there will be cases in which an ergon will not be a “goal-directed activity” (and so this would mark a change in Irwin’s view).

10 Irwin (1988, 607) writes, “Craftsmen perform their functions well when they perform the right actions for some end external to them” (emphasis added).

11 Cf. Reeve, (2012, 142, 238). Alternatively, Irwin could maintain that the flautist’s performance is an end-directed one, its end being the tune that is nevertheless somehow internal to that activity.
(presumably horse-riding) (1094a10-13). A particularly helpful application of this thought comes in *Magna Moralia* [MM] 2.12, where Aristotle (or some Aristotelian\(^\text{12}\)) uses examples ("the flautist" and "the housebuilding-art") that are nearly the same as those we find in the first lines of the *NE* ergon argument ("the flautist" and "the sculptor," 1197b25).\(^\text{13}\) He writes:

> In some *cases* the end and the activity [ἐνέργεια] are the same, and there is not any other end beyond the activity; for instance, for the flautist [τῷ αὐλητῇ] the activity and the end are the same (for the performance on the flute [τὸ αὐλείν] is both his end and his activity); but not for the housebuilding-art (for it has a different end beyond the activity). (MM 2.12.3.1 – 2.12.4.1)\(^\text{14}\)

Here it seems to be presupposed that both the flautist and the housebuilding-art have proper activities. However, there is a distinction between these proper activities, and it is this distinction that yields difficulties for the accounts above. The proper activity of the housebuilder (which is housebuilding) seems to conflict with the Lear-Aquinas account because Aristotle identifies the end of the housebuilding-art as a house, not housebuilding (MM 2.12.3.5-4.1).

Housebuilding therefore seems to be an end-directed activity, its end being a house. On the other hand, the proper activity of the flautist (which is his performance) seems to conflict with Irwin’s account because Aristotle identifies it not as an end-directed activity but as an end: “The flautist’s performance is both his end and his activity” (MM 2.12.3.4-5). And so, even if the

\[^{12}\] For a defense of the Aristotelian provenance of the *Magna Moralia*, see Cooper ([1973] 1999). For convenience, I will continue to speak of Aristotle as the author. I use this passage from *MM* because of the similarity of its examples to those used at the beginning of the *NE* I 7 ergon argument, but I think that *NE* I 1 alone clearly presents the same idea.

\[^{13}\] We could other passages for this purpose, not least among them *EE* II 1, 1219a8-18 and *NE* I 1, 1094a3-6.

\[^{14}\] ἐστὶ μὲν ὁν τὸ αὐτὸ τέλος τε καὶ ἐνέργεια, καὶ οὐκ ἄλλο τι παρὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τέλος, οἷον τῷ αὐλητῇ ἡ στή ἐνέργεια καὶ τέλος (τὸ γὰρ αὐλείν καὶ τέλος αὐτῷ ἐστι καὶ ἐνέργεια), ἄλλῃ οὖ τῇ οἰκοδομικῇ (καὶ γὰρ καὶ ἐνέργεια), ἄλλῃ οὖ τῇ οἰκοδομικῇ (καὶ γὰρ ἢτον τέλος παρὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν). Here it is also worth noting that Aristotle moves in between speaking of the ergon of the artisan and the ergon of the art in the passage from *MM*. This does not involve any error on his part since both locutions are acceptable, as we earlier noted.
proper activity of the flautist turns out to be in some way an end-directed activity, it will not be the same way in which housebuilding is an end-directed activity.\footnote{As we will later see, by calling housebuilding a goal-directed activity, Irwin would seem to be highlighting the fact that housebuilding has incomplete aspect. However, if this is so, then when a flautist’s performance is a goal directed activity, it cannot be one in the same sense because it does not have incomplete aspect. However, I should perhaps note that if Irwin understands the end of the flautist’s performance to be internal to that performance (though he does say the ergon is an external end), then this passage from \textit{MM} will not necessarily conflict with his account of what an ergon is.}

The upshot is this: given the way scholars traditionally carve the concept of an ergon, it looks like the two accounts can each explain only one of the two relevant cases that Aristotle here discusses. The “ergon as goal-directed activity” account can explain the case of housebuilding, and the “ergon as end” account can explain the case of performing on the flute. In the previous chapter I argued that it is wrong to suppose that the ergon of something is always the proper activity of that thing (as both accounts accept). But I also think the evidence clearly favors some version of the “ergon as end” account, having also argued that the ergon of something is the end for the sake of which that sort of thing exists. This account emerged from the consideration of two Aristotelian texts: \textit{Eudemian Ethics} II 1 (“the ergon of each thing is its end,” 1219a8) and \textit{De Caelo} II 3 (“Everything which has an ergon exists for the sake of its ergon,” 286a8-9). Other passages have a similar import,\footnote{These include: “The reason for their [the teeth’s] growth is their ergon” (\textit{GA} 745a27); “That for the sake of which <a house exists> is <its> ergon...” (\textit{Meta} A 996b7); “each body possessing the power of progression but not perception would perish and would not arrive at its end, which is the ergon of its nature” (\textit{DA} 434a32-b1); “…exists for the sake of the ergon” (\textit{EE} 1242a16).} and soon we will discuss his claim in \textit{Metaphysics} Θ 8: “The ergon is the end” (1150a21). I will be arguing that those who affirm a version of this account have not fully appreciated what Aristotle takes an end to be—otherwise they would not identify the activity of housebuilding as the end of the housebuilder. So let us now look at some passages where Aristotle explains what an end is and what it would take for an activity to be an end.
3.3 Aristotle on What an End is (Physics II)

In Physics II 2, while arguing that the natural philosopher must study both the matter and the form of natural things, Aristotle introduces the notion of “the end” (τὸ τέλος). The argument implicit in the following passage seems to be that the natural philosopher must study the form as well as the matter of something because the form is (or at least can be) the end, and matter is for the sake of form.

Moreover, <it belongs to natural science to know> that for the sake of which and the end, and as many things as are for the sake of these. Nature is an end and that for the sake of which. For where there is some end of a continuous process (συνεχούς τῆς κινήσεως), this is last and that for the sake of which. That is why even the poet was jocularly led to say, “He has attained the end — that for the sake of which he was born.” For it is not every last <thing> that is an end, but the best.

Aristotle says “the end” is “that for the sake of which,” “best,” and “last.” This echoes the claim from EE II 1 that “the end is the best in the sense of being the last [thing] for the sake of which everything else is” (1219a10-11). That this is what Aristotle has in mind here is clear from his comments on the end of a continuous kinēsis (κίνησις, “change” or “process”). He says that such an end must satisfy two unified conditions (1095a30): it must be (I) what comes sequentially last

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17 Aristotle is a realist both about the four causes and their corresponding causal explanations that he lists in Physics II. Realism about both is required because, on Aristotle’s view, in order for an explanation to be genuinely explanatory it needs to map onto a real causal relation in the world. Cf. Leunissen (2010).
18 Unfortunately, kinēsis (κίνησις) is difficult to translate, and scholars variously render it as “process,” “change,” and “motion.” However, Aristotle takes “kinēsis” to express a unified concept, and this concept will emerge in the following discussion. But I should note that, while I will often translate kinēsis as “change,” I think that such a translation would not always be appropriate.
19 I translate ἔσχατον here as “last” but, as the LSJ also notes, the word can signify simply “extreme” or “uttermost,” and this could indicate either the beginning or the last thing (cf. horos eschatos which can signify the major or the minor term in a syllogism). However, as the LSJ notes, “ἔσχατον” does normally mean “last” in contexts that deal with time, and this seems to be one of those (since as we will see later, all kinēseis occur in time).
20 Here Aristotle is citing with approval, and explaining the joke behind, a trimeter line from comedy. I thank Christian Wildberg for this point.
21 ἔτι τὸ οὖν ἔνεκα καὶ τὸ τέλος τῆς αὐτῆς, καὶ δὲ σαντον ἔνεκα, ἢ δὲ φύσις τέλος καὶ οὐ ένεκα (ἀν γὰρ συνεχοῦς τῆς κινήσεως ούς ἐστὶ τί τέλος, τὸτε <τὸ> ἔσχατον καὶ τὸ οὖν ἔνεκα: διὸ καὶ ὁ ποιήτης γέλασις προήχθη ειπεῖν ἑχαι τελευτήν, ἢπερ οὖν ἐγένετο: βούλεται γὰρ οὐ πάν εἶναι τὸ ἔσχατον τέλος, ἀλλὰ τὸ βέλτιστον).
and (2) that for the sake of which.\textsuperscript{22} The idea seems to be that the end will be what comes sequentially last in the relevant ordered series of for-the-sake-of relations. For example, the natural development of an infant is for the sake of being an adolescent, and the natural development of an adolescent is for the sake of being a fully developed human. But because natural development is a continuous change, the end of the natural development of a human—that for the sake of which it occurs—must be what comes sequentially last: the fully developed human being. Being an adolescent is not the end, even though other things do occur for the sake of this.

If we understand condition (1) apart from condition (2), we will understand it as merely the last stopping point, and Aristotle suggests that some people in fact use the word “end” (τέλος) to indicate merely this. For example, the natural development of a human may be stopped by an untimely death, but a premature death is only the end in the sense of the last stopping point, not the end in the sense of that for the sake of which.\textsuperscript{23} This helps to explain why Aristotle finds the poet’s joke funny. When the poet says that death is the end for the sake of which a man was born, he is playing on the two ways of using the word end—“end” as last stopping point and “end” as the last thing for the sake of which (\textit{Meta} Δ 16, 1021b25-30).

Elsewhere in \textit{Physics} II, Aristotle makes remarks that help us cotton onto his notion of an “end.” Here are two. First, in \textit{Physics} II 3 Aristotle explains that “that for the sake of which” is

\textsuperscript{22} While this may suggest that Aristotle distinguishes between “the end” and “that for the sake of which,” it is not clear that he does so. For example, at \textit{Ph} II 2, 194a27, the two phrases seem to be on a par. Perhaps Aristotle thinks there are stronger and weaker sense of “that for the sake of which” as well as of “end.” And so, just as he thinks that housebuilding can be more an end than the housebuilding-art (cf. \textit{Meta} Θ 8, 1050a28) while not being the end, perhaps he also thinks that it can be more “that for the sake of which” without being “that for the sake of which.”

\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, the natural process of aging has death as its natural last stopping point, but it is not that for the sake of which aging occurred. This is because the process of aging ( unlike the process of natural development) does not have an end in the sense in which Aristotle is here interested; aging is not for the sake of anything, but just happens by naturally necessary features of the materials involved in the organs for living. Here I acknowledge what seems to me a tension between the \textit{NE} and the \textit{Physics}. On the one hand, \textit{NE} X 4, 1174a19-20 says that every knēsis is for the sake of something. On the other hand, Aristotle in the \textit{Physics} does say that aging is a knēsis, but as I have just said, aging seems to have no discernable end.
sometimes the correct sort of answer to an “on account of what? (διὰ τί) question. For example, one can ask, “On account of what is he walking?” We answer “in order that he may be healthy,” and in doing so think we have assigned a cause (194b34-35). In this way, “health is the cause of walking about” (194b33); it is a cause in the way that a goal is a cause. Here it is worth noting that even though Aristotle uses psychological examples (e.g. someone intentionally acting for the sake of health), craft examples (e.g. housebuilding being for the sake of a house) and natural examples (e.g. the natural generation of living things), he thinks they admit of the same kind of explanation because they have the same type of cause, namely a final cause—an end. Second, Aristotle in Physics II 9 invites us to think of “means to an end” as those things that are hypothetically necessary—that is, necessary on the assumption that the end will be. He writes:

If then there is to be a house, such-and-such things must come to be or be there already or generally the matter, which is for the sake of whatever may be, must exists, bricks and stones if there is to be a house. But the end is not due to these… (200a24-27; ROT with alterations)

The house is the end, and the bricks are means to this end. Thus, on the assumption that there will be a house, it is necessary that bricks will also be. But on the assumption that there will be bricks, it is not necessary that there will be a house. This is why it is possible to have bricks without a house, but not a house without bricks.

Housebuilding too would seem to be a means to an end since it is the coming-to-be of the house, and the coming-to-be of the house is for the sake of the house. Aristotle also regards housebuilding as an end-directed “a continuous process” in the same way that the natural development of a human is (PA I 1, 639b27-30). Consequently, just as the end of natural

24 ὡστ' εἰ ἔσται οἰκία, ἀνάγκη ταῦτα γενέσθαι ἢ ὑπάρχειν, ἢ εἶναι [ἡ] ὀλος τὴν ὑλὴν τὴν ἑνεκά του, οἷον πλίνθους καὶ λίθους, εἰ οἰκία· οὐ μέντοι διὰ ταῦτα ἐστι τὸ τέλος ὄλλ. ἢ ὡς ὑλὴν, σοῦ ἐσται διὰ ταῦτα.
25 I should note, however, that Aristotle uses the notion of “hypothetical necessity” to explicate the notion of a “means to an end.” I do not believe that for any end there must be things hypothetically necessary for that end.
development is the fully developed human being, so the end of housebuilding is a house.

Discussing a similar case, Aristotle goes so far as to say, “If the shipbuilding-art were in the wood, it would produce the same results by nature [that it now does by human agency]” (Physics II 8, 199b28-29). As it is, the shipbuilding-art is in the soul of the shipbuilder as the form of a ship without the matter, and in the process of shipbuilding this form is realized in the matter necessary to bring about a ship.

Just as we saw in the EE, Aristotle in the Physics explains what an end is by saying that it is the “last thing for the sake of which.” In the case of continuous changes, like housebuilding or natural development, the end must be what comes sequentially last in the relevant series of for-the-sake-of relations: a house or the fully developed human. In the next section, we will see how Aristotle thinks about activities that do not have ends, but rather are ends.

3.4 Some Activities are Ends and Some are Not: Metaphysics Θ 6, 1048b18-35

Aristotle’s distinction between activities that are ends and activities that are not ends can be found in a number of Aristotelian texts, but the locus classicus is Metaphysics Θ 6, 1048b18-35, the famous “Κίνεσις-Ενεργεία” passage. The first lines run:

Since of actions which have a limit [πέρας] none is an end [τέλος], but all belong to the class of means to an end, e.g. making someone slim, and since the things themselves, when one is making them slim, are in process of changing in this way, that what is aimed at in the change is not yet present, these are not cases of action, or not at any rate of complete [τελεία] action. For none of them is an end. (Meta Θ 6, 1048b18-22)26

26 Ἐπεὶ δὲ τῶν πρᾶξεων ὁν ἔστι πέρας οὐδεμία τέλος ἄλλα τῶν περὶ τὸ τέλος, οἷον τὸ ἱσχυνεῖν ἢ ἱσχύσαι [αὐτῷ], αὐτὰ δὲ δέ οὐκ ἱσχυντίσῃ οὕτως ἐστίν ἐν κινήσει, μὴ ὑπάρχοντα ὁν ἕνεκα ἢ κίνησις, οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα πράξεις ἢ οὐ τελεία γε (οὐ γάρ τέλος). Throughout my discussion of 1048b18-35 I use Burnyeat’s (2008) translation, though with small alterations. But I should here make three notes. First, Burnyeat says that the purpose of his translation is just to help us see how the perfect verbs function in the passage (2008, 253). Second, while I do not adopt Burnyeat and
Aristotle here draws a distinction between two sorts of “actions” (πράξεις)—here understanding an “action” as something that is (broadly speaking) done. One sort is an end and the other sort is not an end, but a means to an end (τὰ περὶ τὸ τέλος). Actions that are ends are “complete” (τελεία, 1048b22) and Aristotle goes on to give the examples of seeing and living. Actions that are means to ends are “incomplete” (ἀτελής, 1048b29), and Aristotle here gives the example of slimming (i.e. making thin). While the slimming goes on, what is aimed at in the action of slimming (the slimmed body) is not yet present. This gives slimming a “limit” (πέρας) because once the body has become slim, the action of slimming must stop. No further actions can count as slimming—since if one were to keep on doing the same things, one would not be slimming the body but emaciating it. Housebuilding too is an example of an incomplete action (1048a19-20). For while housebuilding goes on, what is aimed at in the action of housebuilding (the house) is not yet present. This, in turn, gives housebuilding a limit, because once the house is complete, the activity must stop, or it ceases to be an activity of building that house.

Just after the quoted passage Aristotle calls a complete action an “energeia” (ἐνέργεια, “activity”) and an incomplete action a “kinēsis” (κίνησις, “process”). This terminological contrast seems to occur only in this passage, but the same metaphysical distinction occurs elsewhere. In those passages, Aristotle speaks of “energeia” as the genus under which “kinēsis”
“Every kinēsis is an energeia, an incomplete kind, as has elsewhere been explained” (DA II 5, 417a16). This is worth noting in general, but also in particular because Aristotle seems to rely on this metaphysical distinction in the passage that we considered from Magna Moralia, and he there uses “energeia” in its broader and more common use. He claims that in the case of the flautist the energeia and the end are the same, while in the case of the housebuilding-art the end is something beyond the energeia (MM 2.12.3.5-4.1).

As the passage in Θ 6 continues, Aristotle explains this distinction by making use of the Ancient Greek perfect tense. He evidently thinks it an indication of his distinction that in the case of complete activities the perfect and the present verbs hold at the same time, while in the case of incomplete activities they do not hold at the same time. Before examining that passage, it will help to note two features of the Ancient Greek perfect tense. First, as in English, the perfect tense in Greek must express completed aspect, and it is the aspect, not the tense, of a verb that indicates whether the action (represented by the verb) is complete or not. For example, if I say “John has built a house” the perfect verb expresses completed aspect, thereby implying that the activity of building is finished and over with; but if I say “John was building a house” the imperfect verb expresses incomplete aspect, thereby implying that activity was ongoing and therefore still unfinished. Second, unlike English verbs forms, Greek perfect verbs need not imply a reference to the past. This is why a verb like “οἶδα” (“I know”) may remain grammatically perfect, but still be translated into English as present. Now in the following

31 καὶ γὰρ ἐστιν ἡ κίνησις ἐνέργειά τις, ἀτελής μέντοι, καθάπερ ἐν ἑτέροις εἴρηται. Cf. Physics III 2, 201b31-33).
32 Goodwin (1897, 13-14).
33 Burnyeat (2008, 248) makes this point, noting other similar verbs: ἔοικα, μέμνημαι πόροικα, etc. Makin and Burnyeat also think that there are a few examples in English of grammatically perfect verbs that nevertheless have present meaning: e.g. “I have inherited the throne.” But even though these verbs express present meaning, they are not structurally parallel to the verbs that Aristotle is using because those perfect verbs have present meaning and express that the activity is somehow ongoing. However, when someone says “I have inherited the throne,” they do not seem to be indicating an ongoing activity.
passage Aristotle uses perfect verbs to make a point about aspect, and the following translation attempts to capture this:

Action properly speaking is one in which the end is present. For example, at the same time one sees a thing and has it in view and one is wise and has achieved wisdom, and one understands something and has understood it, but it is not the case that at the same time one learns something and has learned it, or that at the same time one is being cured and has been cured. One lives well and has achieved the good life at the same time, and one is happy and has achieved happiness at the same time. If that were not so, the action would at some time have to cease, as when one is slimming someone. But as it is, this is not the case: one lives and has stayed alive. (Meta Θ 6, 1048b22-27) 

Aristotle’s claim seems to be that whenever a complete activity (e.g. seeing, living, etc.) can be expressed by a Greek present tense verb, it can also be expressed by the Greek perfect tense of the same verb. The reason for this, Aristotle seems to think, is that the meanings of certain verbs in the present tense express completed aspect, and for this reason their perfect tense will always hold whenever the present tense does. Aristotle makes use of this linguistic phenomenon because he sees it as tracking the metaphysical distinction between complete and incomplete actions. By doing so, he is trying to illustrate the fact that in the case of complete

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34 This seems to be the growing consensus among recent interpreters, and it also seems to make the best sense out of the passage. Cf. (among others) Burnyeat (2008, 245-253); Makin (2006, 148) and Beere (2009, 221-222).
35 ἀλλ᾿ ἐκεῖνη ἐν ἐναρκτῇ τὸ τέλος καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ὅλῃ ὁ ὁμόλογος ἐνταῦθα ἡμᾶς ἠδυνατεὶ καὶ ἐφεδρονεῖ καὶ πετρονήσει, καὶ νοεῖ καὶ γινόμενον, ἀλλ᾿ οὗ μαθάνει καὶ μεμάθηκεν οὐδὲ γίγανται καὶ γίγανται· εὖ δὲ καὶ εὖ ἔζηκεν ἡμᾶς, καὶ εὐδαιμονεῖ καὶ εὐδαιμόνησεν. εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἐδει ἅν ποτε παῦσθαι ὁσπερ ὅταν ἴσχυνεν, νῦν δ᾿ οὖ, ἀλλὰ ζῆ ἡ καὶ ἔζηκεν. Though I retain Burnyeat’s translation of ἔζηκεν as “has achieved happiness” and εὖ ἔζηκεν as “has achieved the good life,” these translations can be misleading. This is because Aristotle thinks that eudaimonia is something that must occur over a sufficiently long period of time, namely, in a complete life (NE I 7, 1098a18). Thus, even though eudaimonia is complete as an energeia at every moment, it is not complete as eudaimonia at every moment.
36 Ackrill (1997) seems to have been the first to argue that Aristotle affirms an inference from the present to the perfect. Burnyeat (2008) builds on Ackrill’s work, and says that Aristotle holds a biconditional such that the present holds if and only if the perfect holds. In support of this, Burnyeat notes that Aristotle switches the order of the verbs later in the passage at 1048b33-4: “One has seen and sees the same thing at the same time.” Ackrill did not think that the biconditional held because he does not, like Burnyeat, shift the focus solely to aspect.
37 When the aspect of a verb is contained in the meaning of a verb (as opposed to the grammatical structure of the verb), it is called “lexical aspect.”
38 There has been some debate about whether Aristotle is here providing a “tense test,” where one can invariably tell if an activity is complete if the perfect form of the verb holds whenever the present form holds. Though I do not think this has any bearing on my own argument, I doubt whether Aristotle intends his point about the present and perfect verbs to be used as a “test” for marking off complete form incomplete activities. But Aristotle does clearly think that this linguistic phenomenon illustrates and supports the distinction that he has in mind.
actions, there is at each moment a complete instance of that activity, whereas for incomplete ones there never is.

Because of the differences between English and Ancient Greek, it is difficult to capture Aristotle’s point by translating his perfects. But his idea seems to be roughly this: if you say “I am building a house,” that implies that you have not yet built that house. But if you say “I am living,” that does not imply that you have not yet lived; it rather implies that you have lived (some). Incompleteness is built into the idea of “building a house” but it is not built into the idea of “living.” And though it is not, as I said, possible to directly capture Aristotle’s point by translating his perfects, the following two linguistic features of English do probably track the distinction in question. First, while it is possible to say intelligibly that someone was building a house but did not build a house, it is not possible to say intelligibly that someone was living but did not live.39 And second, while it makes sense to ask whether someone has completed building a house, it does not make sense to ask whether someone has completed living.40

And so Meta Θ 6 augments the picture from Physics II 2: both give reasons for thinking that end of certain incomplete activities is something beyond them, but Meta Θ 6 explains that not all activities are like this, as some activities are themselves ends. And so we have a picture on which certain activities (like shoemaking or housebuilding) are by nature means to ends, while other activities (like seeing and living) are not. But is there reason to think Aristotle would be relying on this distinction in his ethical works, in particular the Nicomachean Ethics? There is, and I give some reasons for thinking so in the next section.

39 Cf. Anscombe (2000, 39). 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.
40 Or, at the very least, it is not natural to ask whether someone has completed living. Cf. Makin (2006, 142), who makes a similar point with the word “finish” used as an auxiliary verb.
3.5 The Distinction at Play in *NE* X 4

As we discussed before, at the beginning of the *NE* Aristotle says that there is a distinction among ends: “some are activities and some are certain erga beyond the activities” (I 1, 1094a4-5) and he goes on to explain that while the end of the horseriding-art is an action (riding a horse), the end of housebuilding-art is a product (a house). In doing so Aristotle would certainly seem to be relying on the distinction between complete and incomplete activities. But there are further reasons to think Aristotle employs the distinction in the *NE*. First, Aristotle applies his thoughts to the case of living and being-happy (εὐδαιμονεῖν) in *Meta. Θ* 6, thereby indicating that he considers his distinctions to apply to topics that form part of the subject matter of ethics.\(^{41}\) And second, Aristotle makes clear use of the distinction between incomplete and complete activities in both of his discussions of pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics* (VII 11-14 and X 1-5).\(^ {42}\)

In the second of these discussions, Aristotle at *NE* X 4 begins by reminding us that “seeing seems to be complete at any time, since there is no need for anything else to complete its form by coming to be at a later time” (*NE* X 4, 1174a14-16). That is, seeing is a complete activity along the lines of *Meta* Θ 6 (and, as we saw, it was his first example in that passage). He then says that pleasure is like seeing, and explains why pleasure is not an incomplete activity, a kinēsis. In the course of his explanation, he writes:

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\(^{41}\) In fact, Burnyeat (2008, 273) has given reasons for thinking that the “Kinēsis-Energeia” passage itself originally came from an ethical work. Here it is also worth noting that Aristotle in the *NE* does seem to assume that the practical philosopher should make use of the information available from other disciplines, though only to the degree of precision necessary for his work.

\(^{42}\) In the first discussion of pleasure, the distinction is assumed in *NE* VII 11-12. In the second discussion of pleasure, the distinction is found in *NE* X 3 as well as *NE* X 4. This first discussion of pleasure also forms part of the *EE* as it has come down to us in our manuscript tradition.
For every kinesis <takes place> in time and is for the sake of some end; for example, in the case of the housebuilding-art, <the kinesis of housebuilding> is complete when it accomplishes what it aims at. It is complete, therefore, only in a whole time or at this <final> moment [ἀποκατεστάφη τῷ χρόνῳ ἢ τούτῳ]. Moreover, each kinesis is incomplete during the kinēseis that are its parts, i.e., during the time it goes on; and it consists of kinēseis that are different in form from the whole <process> and from one another. (NE X 4, 1174a19-23)

Aristotle begins by noting that every kinesis takes time, and is for the sake of an end. He then gives housebuilding as an example of a kinesis: it takes time simply because it is not an end but a means to an end. This becomes clear, Aristotle seems to think, when we observe that the activity of housebuilding is itself complete only when it achieves what it aims at: a house. So long as the activity is ongoing, it is not complete but requires some further step to be made complete. The fact that it requires this further step shows that a kinesis must take time.43 However, even though every kinesis must take time, not every complete activity must. This is because some complete activities (like living or thinking) need not involve any change whatsoever, that is, no “steps.” In fact, Aristotle thinks that God’s activity of living and thinking involves no change and consequently takes no time, but itself is eternally timeless.44

Aristotle also thinks that from this two further facts follow about the nature of a kinesis. First, the different parts of a kinesis are also different from one another: e.g., the parts of housebuilding are laying a foundation, building walls, constructing a roof, etc.45 Second, each of them is also different from the whole kinesis: e.g. laying a foundation or raising a wall are activities of their own distinctive kind, while building a whole house is an activity of a different

43 He later says, “A kinesis must take time, but being pleased need not; for what is present in an instant is a whole” (NE X 4, 1174b7-9). Because the kinesis requires the further step, it can never be present in an instant.
44 In his earlier discussion, he said, “God always enjoys one simple pleasure. For there is an energeia not only of kinesis but of what has no kinesis, and indeed there is pleasure in rest more than in change” (NE VII 14, 1154b26). Cf. De Caelo I 9, 279a16–22; Metaphysics Α 7, 1072b28.
45 In other kinēseis, the parts may not be so easily distinguished: for example, in “slimming” (Meta. Θ 6). But I still think that one can distinguish them. For example, if you are slimming someone from 200 lbs to 150 lbs (the healthy weight), you could distinguish slimming from 200lbs to 175lbs and from 175lbs to 150 lbs.
kind from either, just because it includes them as parts.\textsuperscript{46} This is why Aristotle thinks that if we look at any part of a kinēsis, we will find that it is incomplete (1174a22-23). From Aristotle’s remarks, it is also clear that what unifies all the different parts of a kinēsis is the end. Thus, what unifies laying a foundation, constructing a roof, building a wall, etc. into the activity of housebuilding is the house, qua end and organizing principle.

These thoughts nicely dovetail with remarks we considered in \textit{Metaphysics} Θ 6. There Aristotle says that if an activity has a limit, it is not an end but “belongs to the class of means to an end” (1048b18). When an activity has a limit, there is a certain “not yet” built in. And where there is a not yet, there is a before and after, and therefore time (cf. \textit{Ph} VI 11, 219a22-23). \textit{NE} X 4’s remarks on the composition of a kinēsis also shed some light on why Aristotle thinks the present and the perfect cannot hold at the same time in the case of kinēseis. For if you correctly say, “X is building a house,” it must be the case that X is engaged in only some part of the activity of housebuilding, either laying a foundation, or building a roof, or whatever. X cannot be engaged in the completed activity of housebuilding at any time while he is still building. Thus, if X is still building the house, he has not yet built it. However, if you correctly say, “X is seeing,” X has in fact seen. X is engaged in a complete activity of seeing at each moment of the activity. There is no further step needed for the activity, the seeing in question, to be complete (though X can of course continue to engage in seeing).

I began this section by mentioning reasons for thinking that Aristotle in his ethical works subscribes to the distinction between complete and incomplete activities, and our discussion of \textit{NE} X 4, which lines up so nicely with \textit{Metaphysics} Θ 6, amounts to strong evidence by itself that

\textsuperscript{46} Cf. “No coming-to-be is of the same kind as its end, for example, no <activity of> housebuilding is of the same kind as a house” (\textit{NE} VII 11, 1152b13-14), and “coming-to-be is for the sake of the end” (\textit{Meta} Θ 6, 1050a8-9). Though Aristotle writes this sentence while reporting a view that he ultimately disagrees with, he seems to agree with this particular statement in his response since he argues that pleasure is not a coming-to-be.
Aristotle in the *NE* subscribes to the distinction between complete and incomplete activities, and consequently that he takes activities like seeing to be ends and activities like housebuilding not to be ends but means to ends.

### 3.6 Metaphysics Θ 8: Ergon and Energeia

I mentioned earlier that Aristotle in *Metaphysics* Θ 8 says: “the ergon is an end” (1050a21). How should we here understand the term “ergon”? On the basis of what we have recently seen in *Meta* Θ 6, *MM* II 12 and *NE* X 4, one might reasonably suppose that while the ergon of the eye is seeing, the ergon of the housebuilding-art is a house. This is because these passages presuppose that while some activities (like seeing) are ends, some (like housebuilding) are not ends, but “means to an end” (1048b19). And from *Magna Moralia* II 12 and *NE* X 4 we saw that the end to which housebuilding is directed is a house.

It may be disconcerting, then, to note that Aristotle immediately follows his remark that “the ergon is an end” (1050a21) with

The energia is the ergon. Therefore, even the word “energeia” is derived from “ergon” and points to fulfillment. (1050a21-22)

On the face of it, these lines seem to support the Lear-Aquinas account of what an ergon is on which the ergon of X is always the “proper activity” of the X and the end of the X. Ross and Makin also translate “ergon” here as “action” and “functioning” respectively. But is this right?

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47 This is, of course, quite apart from the earlier passages we considered in chapter 2.
48 τὸ γὰρ ἐργὸν τέλος, ἢ δὲ ἐνέργεια τὸ ἐργὸν, διὸ καὶ τούδομα ἐνέργεια λέγεται κατὰ τὸ ἐργὸν καὶ συντείνει πρός τὴν ἐντελέχειαν. Here I follow the traditional interpretation of these lines, *pace* Broadie (2010).
A look at the context shows that Aristotle immediately qualifies and explains the claim that “the activity is the ergon” (1050a21-22). He writes:

While in some cases the employment is the last thing [ἔσχατον] (for example, of vision, seeing, and nothing different beyond this results from vision), and from others something <else> comes to be (for example, from the housebuilding-art there comes to be a house beyond the activity of housebuilding), nevertheless in the former cases <the energeia> is an end, and in the latter cases <the energeia> is more an end than the <mere> capacity. For the act of housebuilding is in the thing that is being built and comes to be—and is—at the same time as the house. (1050a24-29)

Here Aristotle assumes that the end will be sequentially last (ἔσχατον, 1050a24), understanding this as what comes last in the relevant series of for-the-sake-of relations, as he does in Physics II 2 and Eudemian Ethics II 1. On the basis of this, he identifies the end of vision to be an activity (“seeing,” 1050a24) and then implicitly identifies the end of the housebuilding-art to be not an activity but a product (“a house,” 1050a26). Once coupled with his earlier claim that “the ergon is an end” (1050a21), the passage suggests that while the ergon of vision is seeing, the ergon of the housebuilding-art is a house—and this is of course in accord with what we have seen in Chapter 2.

But isn’t this in tension with the claim that “the activity is the ergon”? It is, and this is why Aristotle qualifies that remark by saying that while in the case of vision the activity is the end, in the case of the housebuilding-art the activity is only “more an end” than the mere capacity (1050a28). Because “the ergon is an end” (1050a21) this suggests that housebuilding is,

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50 It’s also worth noting that the overstatement is more palatable because energeia seems to have been a recently coined word in Aristotle’s day, perhaps by Aristotle himself. Cf. Beere (2009). The meaning of the word could not have rigidly meant anything like “activity” or Aristotle could not have written in Ph III 2: “Take for instance the buildable: the energeia of the buildable as buildable is the process of building. For the energeia must either be this or the house” (201b8-11; my emphasis). Here I should also note that it is also possible that when Aristotle wrote, “the energeia is the ergon” at Meta Θ 8 he had in mind only complete energeia.

51 ἐπεὶ δ’ ἐστὶ τῶν μὲν ἑσχατον ἢ χρήσις (οἶνον ὀψεως ἢ ὀρασις, καὶ οὐθὲν γίγνεται παρὰ ταύτην ἔτερον ἀπὸ τῆς ὀψεως), ἀπ’ ἑνίων δὲ γίγνεται τι (οἶνον ἀπὸ τῆς ὀικοδομικῆς οἰκία παρὰ τὴν οἰκοδόμησιν), δέμος οὐθὲν ἤττον ἑνθα μὲν τέλος, ἐνθα δὲ μᾶλλον τέλος τῆς δυνάμεως ἐστί· ἢ γὰρ οἰκοδόμησις ἐν τῷ οἰκοδομουμένῳ, καὶ ἂμα γίγνεται καὶ ἐστι τῇ οἰκίᾳ.

as it were, more the ergon of housebuilding-art than the mere capacity, and this would give some truth to the overstatement “the energeia is the ergon” (1050a21-22).  

Aristotle also shows that he takes a house to be the end of the housebuilding-art by the way in which he justifies his claim that housebuilding is more an end than the mere capacity. His justification (cf. “gar” at 1050a28) is that housebuilding is more closely related to a house than it is to the housebuilding-art. He gives three reasons. First, in the case of the housebuilding-art, the energeia is not in the builder but in the thing built, the house (1050a28-29; cf. Physics III 3, 202a13ff). Second, the house and the activity of housebuilding both come to be at the same time (1050a29), and this is because housebuilding is the very same activity as the coming-to-be of a house (Physics III 3, 202a13-21). And third, the housebuilding and the house “are” at the same time (1050a29). This may sound odd because a house only exists when housebuilding has ceased, which makes it seem that they cannot both exist at the same time. But Aristotle presumably means that both housebuilding and a house complete (or rather “finish”) their processes of coming-to-be (and in this way “are”) at the same last moment, just as we read in NE X 4, 1174a21.

53 This would also allow there to be truth in his earlier overstatement “the energeia is the end” (1050a9). And given the context of this passage in Meta Θ, it is understandable for Aristotle to momentarily make the overstatement “the ergon is the end, and the energeia is the ergon” (1050a21-22). This is because the claim occurs in the course of Aristotle’s argument that in the case of perishable things energeia is prior in being (and form) to capacity. Following Beere (2009, 312-313), the basic argumentative structure here seem to be

\[(P1) \text{ If } X \text{ is posterior in coming-to-be to } Y, \text{ then } X \text{ is prior in being to } Y \]
\[(P2) \text{ If } Y \text{ is for the sake of } X, \text{ then } X \text{ is posterior in coming-to-be to } Y. \]
\[(C) \text{ If } Y \text{ is for the sake of } X, \text{ then } X \text{ is prior in being to } Y. \]

In order to show that energeia is prior to capacity in the case of the housebuilding-art, all Aristotle needs is for the housebuilding-art to be for the sake of housebuilding—and it is. This is because, as Aristotle himself indicates, housebuilding partakes of the nature of an end, though it is not itself an end.

54 Aristotle is here drawing on work that he has established in Ph III 3.

55 This sidesteps the difficulties raised in Burnyeat, et al. (1984, 143-144). This also avoids the metaphysical extravagance of the account of Broadie (2010) on which the completed housebuilding exists in the completed house, and continues to exist so long as the house exists. Broadie’s view seems to conflict with Aristotle’s claim that “housebuilding is the energeia of the buildable, as buildable. For the energeia must either be this or the house. But
Aristotle then generalizes his remarks to all cases of incomplete energeia. Still drawing on his work in *Physics* III 3, he says that in the cases of incomplete energeia (e.g. housebuilding), the energeia is in the thing being changed or produced (e.g. a house), though in cases of complete energeia (e.g. seeing), the energeia is in the agent (e.g. the one seeing):

So in all cases where what comes to be is something different beyond the employment, in these the energeia is in what is being made (for example, the housebuilding is in what is being built, and the weaving is in what is being woven, and likewise too in other cases, and generally the change is in what is being changed); while in all cases where there is no *other ergon* beyond the energeia, the energeia is in them (for example, seeing in the one seeing and active understanding in the one actively understanding and life in the soul, which is why happiness is too, for it is a certain kind of life).\(^56\)

(1050a30-b2; emphasis added)

Notice how Aristotle describes the cases of complete activities as those “cases where there is not some *other ergon* beyond the activity” (1050a34).\(^57\) Both Makin and Ross translate “ergon” here as “product,” though they earlier translated the word as “functioning” and “act” respectively. They of course take the word to be ambiguous between these two meanings. However, on the interpretation that I am advancing, it would be natural to take the word to have the same meaning and to express the same unified concept in both cases. Here are two reasons why. First, Aristotle earlier identified a house as the end of the housebuilding-art, and this is what he here is calling the “ergon” beyond the activity. Since Aristotle also identified the ergon as an end (1050a21), this suggests that while the ergon of vision is seeing, the ergon of the housebuilding-art is a house. Second, there is also Aristotle’s use of the word “other” (*ἄλλος*). Because he describes the product as some “*other ergon* beyond the activity,” he seems to imply that the activity can (at

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\(^56\) ὅσων µὲν οὖν ἐπερὸν τὰ ἔστι παρὰ τὴν χρήσιν τὸ γεγομένον, τούτων µὲν ἡ ἐνέργεια ἐν τῷ ποιομένῳ ἐστὶν (ὄν ἢ τοιοῦτος ἐν τῷ οἰκοδομημένῳ καὶ ἡ ὁράσις ἐν τῷ ὄρασιμόνῳ, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων, καὶ ἰδίως ἡ κίνησις ἐν τῷ κινομένῳ) ὅσων δὲ µὴ ἔστιν ἄλλο τι ἔργον παρὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν, ἐν αὐτοῖς ὑπάρχει ἡ ἐνέργεια (ὄν ἢ ὁράσις ἐν τῷ ὁρόντι καὶ ἡ θεωρία ἐν τῷ θεωροῦντι καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, διὸ καὶ ἡ εὐδαιμονία· ζωὴ γὰρ ποιά τις ἐστιν).

\(^57\) ὅσων δὲ µὴ ἔστιν ἄλλο τι ἔργον παρὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν.
least in some cases) be an ergon. This is probably because the energeia in the case of vision just
is the ergon, but it may also be because housebuilding, as we noted, seems to be more an ergon
than the housebuilding-art but less an ergon than the house.

3.7 Unlimited and Limited Activities: Some Objections

In *Metaphysics* Θ 6 Aristotle claims that while complete activities (like seeing, living or
performing on the flute) need not stop precisely because they are ends, incomplete activities (like
housebuilding or shoemaking) must stop precisely because they are means to ends. This requires
some clarification. To supply this, I will address six possible objections to Aristotle’s claims.
The first three address reasons to think that unlimited activities must come to a stop, and the
second three address reasons to think that limited activities might not need to stop.

In dealing with these objections, I expect that we will better understand how Aristotle
thinks of activities as ends. One point to bear in mind as we proceed is that when Aristotle
makes these claims about complete or incomplete activities, he is making claims about what
follows from the natures of these specific activities themselves. His claim, for example, is that
there is nothing about living, qua living, that requires it to stop at it, while there is something
about housebuilding, qua housebuilding, that does require it to stop. Aristotle does not always
use the “qua” locution, but he seems to always have it in mind, and he does use it when he is
being explicit.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{58}\) When we say that something holds of an X, qua X, we would seem to be making either an “in itself” predication
or a predication that is directly derivable from in itself predications.
The first objection is simply that it does not seem physically possible for someone to see, live or play the kithara forever. In response, Aristotle would point out that if it is impossible to perform these activities forever, that is due not the nature of the activities themselves, but to the material preconditions for the activities. Take the case of living. It is because bodily organs break down that living things are impeded in their activities and eventually die. It is not because the activity of living itself (because of its essential nature) must come to a stop. That this is Aristotle’s view is also clear if we consider two other doctrines that he maintains. First, if a body is not required for certain activity of living, as in the case of God, the prime mover standing outside the physical world and causing movements in it while itself being pure energeia, then the living will indeed go on forever (cf. Meta Λ 7 [esp. 1072b30] and 9). And second, if the body itself is imperishable, as in the case of the stars, sun, moon, and planets that are moved by souls embodied in these entities, then the living will also go on forever. These explanations apply to the case of living, but I take similar ones to hold for any other complete activity.

The second objection is that it does not even seem desirable for certain complete activities to go on forever. If you were organizing a party, for example, you presumably would not want to have the flautist keep on performing. In response, Aristotle would agree that insofar as an unlimited activity is ordered to a further end (in this case, perhaps, the certain

59Aristotle thinks that the heavenly bodies are composed out of a sort of matter (namely, ether) that is not perishable, and only subject to locomotion. And so, it is not outlandish to suppose that Aristotle would think that if humans could have imperishable bodies, then their activity of living would go on forever. Cf. De Anima I 4, 408b21-24: “If an old man could procure an eye of the right kind, he would see just as well as a young man. Hence old age must be due to an affection and state not of soul as such but of that in which the soul resides, just as is the case in intoxication and disease” (Hicks [1907] with alterations).

60For example, a flute-player may need to stop performing in order to sleep or rest, but such stopping is not required by the performing itself. If there were a being that did not need to sleep or rest, it could keep performing forever.

61Cf. Allen (2007, 240): “ALLEN: Look at it this way. If a man sings a lovely song it is beautiful. If he keeps singing, one begins to get a headache. AGATION: True ALLEN: And if he definitely won’t stop singing, eventually you want to stuff socks down his throat. AGATION: Yes. Very true.” A similar but different objection may run as follows. The kitharist may put a stop to his performance because it might otherwise impede his goal of living well. In response to this objection, Aristotle would say that this “living well” is not an end that the kitharist has, qua kitharist.
pleasure that the party affords) there does seem to be an end that gives the unlimited activity a limit. Nevertheless, he would still maintain that these ends are imposed externally and are not internal to the flautist’s art itself. Here it will help to consider some lines from Politics I 9:

As the doctoring-art is for health in an unlimited way, and each of the other arts is for its end in an unlimited way because they aim at accomplishing their ends to the utmost (but they are for the means not in an unlimited way: in all of them the end is a limit), so, too, in this wealth-getting-art there is no limit for its end: its end is wealth in that form, that is, the possession of money…” (Politics I 9, 1257b25-30; ROT with alterations).

Aristotle is here trying to explain why a certain art of wealth-getting has the end of unlimited wealth. To do so, he explains that each art aims at its respective end in an unlimited way. That is, there is nothing about each art, qua the art that it is, that limits the pursuit of the end of that art. For example, there is nothing about the housebuilding-art, qua housebuilding-art, that limits how many houses may be built. However, Aristotle does think that there is a limit to the means, and this limit is provided by the end: thus, each episode of housebuilding must come to a stop when the house is finished. This of course lines up with what we saw in Metaphysics Θ 6, 1048b18-22, where housebuilding is given as an example of a means to an end, its end being a house.

In Politics I 9 Aristotle speaks of “each art,” and so he must think that just as the housebuilding-art aims at a house in an unlimited way, so the flautist’s art aims at the performance in an unlimited way. Nevertheless, the housebuilding-art and the flautist’s art may be subordinated to more “architectonic” arts (as Aristotle calls them)—perhaps, city-planning or

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62 ὡσπερ γὰρ ἡ ἰατρικὴ τοῦ ὑγαίνειν εἰς ἅπαντον ἐστι, καὶ ἐκάστῃ τῶν τεχνῶν τοῦ τέλους εἰς ἅπαντον (ὅτι μάλιστα γὰρ ἐκεῖνον βούλονται ποιεῖν), τῶν δὲ πρὸς τὸ τέλος οὐκ εἰς ἅπαντον (πέρας γὰρ τὸ τέλος πάσαις), οὗτος καὶ ταύτης τῆς χρηματιστικῆς οὐκ ἔστι τοῦ τέλους πέρας, τέλος δὲ ὁ τοιοῦτος πλοῦτος καὶ χρημάτων κτήσις. Incidentally, it is worth noting that Aristotle here identifies the end of the wealth-getting as wealth, that of the doctoring art to be health, and so we have yet another piece of evidence that the ends of these arts are not their proper activities.

63 This is the one concerned with exchange, and not a part of household management (as is clear from the rest of Pol I 9).

64 Lear (2004, 201) seems unaware of this when she comments: “After all, when a carpenter makes a house his final end qua carpenter, he does not set about building as many houses as possible.” I discuss this in chapter 6.
party-organizing, respectively—and these will put limits to the ends.\(^6^5\) Aristotle gives us a well-known example of such subordination in \(NE\) I 1: the bridle-making-art (the end of which is a bridle) is subordinated to the horse-riding-art (the end of which is horse-riding), which is in turn subordinated to the general’s art (the end of which is victory).\(^6^6\) And so even though Aristotle would think that there is nothing about horse-riding itself that makes it stop, it nevertheless will stop insofar as it is ordered to the further end of victory.\(^6^7\)

The third objection runs as follows. Take the case of the flautist’s art: because the flautist will always be performing a piece of music on the flute, it would seem that the performance will always come to a stop just where the piece of music says it should. In reply, I think that one must note two things. First, while most pieces of music do stipulate a stopping point, there very well could be a piece that does not stipulate a stopping point, and here they could effect this most easily by stipulating that the piece should become somehow cyclic. Second, just in virtue of performing on the flute, it is not required that one play a non-cyclic piece. Consequently, there is no reason why a flautist’s performance, as such, must come to a stop. However, this brings up an important point: because certain complete activities can acquire a stopping point not from their nature but from their particular object, as the flautist’s performance may from the piece of music, on such an occasion its genuine completeness does seem to be in a way compromised—it

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5 Of course, the political art, which is the most architectonic (cf. \(NE\) I 2), will ultimately set limits to the ends of all the other arts.

6 As we will later see, Aristotle thinks that the end of living is subordinated to the end of living well. Consequently, the end of living well may determine to what extent living should be pursued. Aristotle and Plato both think that there are reasons why it would not be desirable for the vicious person to go on living. However, it is desirable for the good person. A thought like this also explains why the virtuous person, according to Aristotle, would choose a fine and heroic death. He chooses living for the sake of living well.

7 Of course, there might also be a material necessity why the activity of horseriding must stop. The horse and the rider will need to eat and sleep, etc.
partially takes on the nature of incompleteness. It would seem like, if the activity is to remain fully complete, its object should not require it to stop.\(^68\)

The fourth objection comes from observing that a housebuilder may very well treat housebuilding as an end, perhaps because he enjoys it. This might make it seem like the attitude of the housebuilder can render housebuilding an end in the same way that performing on the kithara is an end. In response, Aristotle must clarify that, strictly speaking, it is the art itself that has the end. As we noted earlier, Aristotle considers it more accurate to speak of the “the end of the art” than “the end of the artisan,” and this is because what allows the artisan to act as an artisan is simply his possession of the relevant art (\textit{Ph} II 3, 195b22).\(^69\) Something (living or non-living) can have an end simply in virtue of what it is, where this is not a psychological matter. For example, Aristotle thinks that, even though many people treat money as an end, it is not an end but is “useful for the sake of something else” (\textit{NE} I 5, 1096b8). Thus, there is no direct route back from people treating money as an end to the conclusion that money is an end. And similarly, there is no route back from an artisan treating his proper activity as an end to the conclusion that the end of the art is the proper activity. Whether the activity of an art is an end is not directly determined by what any individual artisans take themselves to be doing while engaging in the activity of the art.

\(^68\) An alternative interpretation runs as follows. While it is true that each specific piece a flautist may play has an inherent end, viz. the end of the piece as set in the composition being played. But Aristotle would maintain that these ends are imposed externally and are not internal to the flute-player’s art itself: the performer can keep on playing by beginning a new piece after a short stop (that stop being part of the longer, ongoing activity of performing on the flute in which he or she is continuously engage.) I think this alternative conception cannot be quite right, though, because I do not think there can be a good reason to consider the short stop between performances to be part of the continuous activity of performing. For what part of the flautist’s art is being exercised during such a stop? It seems to me none.

\(^69\) This is also clear from the fact that Aristotle says that if the art were in the wood, it would produce the same results by nature that it now does through human artifice (\textit{Ph} II 8, 199b28-29). Also, Aristotle says that the art itself “does not deliberate,” and by this he seems to be emphasizing that in order to have an end, it is not directly dependent on one’s psychological capacities. Cf. Sedley (2007, 173-181). Thus, natural things as well as arts can have ends.
A fifth objection might be made if we assume that housebuilding is merely the realization of a skill. For if we assume this, it would make sense to say that someone is doing a “bit of housebuilding,” where this is not an incomplete activity. And if we can think of it as the exercise of a skill, then it would seem possible for housebuilding to go on forever. Here the problem is not, as it was in the previous objection, that we are making the end of housebuilding dependent on the psychology of the builder, but that there seems to be a sensible way of thinking of housebuilding as just the exercise or realization of a skill. (This, on the most charitable reading, is probably what a number of interpreters have been thinking.)

In response to this, Aristotle would note that, while the housebuilding is a realization of the housebuilding-art, it is an incomplete realization; the full realization is the house. Consequently, the full realization of the housebuilding-art does not occur in the generative process that is housebuilding but can only occur in a completed house, just as the full realization of a natural form of human does not occur in the process of generation, but in the complete human. Here we should note that “house” is contained in the definition of “housebuilding,” while the opposite does not hold: “housebuilding” is not contained in the definition of a “house.” In fact, housebuilding is identified as a process of generation (“coming-to-be,” γένεσις), in particular, as the coming-to-be of a house, and any process of coming-to-be is not an end since it has only partially realized its form. To appreciate this, we must again note that in order to understand what housebuilding or the housebuilding-art is, we must understand them as being for the sake of a house. And housebuilding, just as any generative process, is for the sake of the complete being that is undergoing generation. Thus, he writes:

[W]ith housebuilding it is rather that these things happen because the form of the house is such as it is, than that the house is such as it is because it comes to be in this way. For generation is for the sake of being (ousias) rather than being (ousia) for the sake of generation (Parts of Animals I 1, 640aff).
The house serves as a limit at which housebuilding must stop since it is always the case that “being is the limit of coming-to-be” (Ph VI 10). For this reason, it is not possible for housebuilding to go on without limit. If anything is to be an activity of housebuilding, it must have the completed house as its end and limit. This should not be surprising because the housebuilding-art, according to Aristotle, just is the form of the house without the matter as present in the soul. Because this is so, the exercise of this art will always be ordered to a house.

The sixth difficulty arises when we consider that, though living and living well (that is, virtuously) are said to be complete activities, some virtuous activities would seem to be constituted by incomplete activities, namely activities of art, like healing or housebuilding. For example, a virtuous person who is also a housebuilder, having seen that a family’s house was destroyed in a hurricane, decides to build them a new one, performing his generous act virtuously. And so it looks like the same act is both complete and incomplete. To solve this puzzle, I think that Aristotle would in fact want to say that, while these activities are in a way one, their being is not the same. Aristotle employs this strategy in his analysis of processes (kinēseis) in Physics III 3. He argues that even though learning and teaching are the same activity, their being not the same. For what it is to learn is different from what it is to teach. Similarly, he explains, the uphill and the downhill are one, though their definition or being is not the same (202a20). Apply this to the puzzle above: we can say that, even if housebuilding and an instance of acting virtuously may coincide, their being is different. For what it is to build a house is not the same as what it is to act virtuously. However, the act of generosity and the act of virtue do in a way have the same being. For what it is to act virtuously is contained in what it

70 “Coming-to-be is for the sake of the end” (Meta 1050a7-9).
is to act generously as a genus is in a species—since generosity is a specific kind of virtue.\textsuperscript{72} And insofar as an instance of generosity is ordered to some external result (cf. \textit{NE} X7, 1177b2-4), this activity of living does partake of incompleteness, even though is not merely an incomplete activity.

3.8 The Two Accounts Revisited

Let us now reconsider the two accounts that we discussed earlier: the “proper activity as end” account (Aquinas and Lear) and the “end-directed activity” one (Irwin). Lear and Aquinas thought that the ergon of something was the end of that thing, and also that the end of the housebuilder was housebuilding. However, we have seen reasons to think that incomplete activities (like housebuilding and shoemaking) are not the sorts of things that are such as to be ends; rather, they can only be intelligibly understood as means to ends.\textsuperscript{73} Nevertheless, \textit{Metaphysics} Θ 8 allows us to retain the truth in this account, and to see why one might be led to it. For one thing, Aristotle does think that seeing and living and performing on the flute are ends. But he also thinks that housebuilding, though it is not an end, nevertheless partakes of the nature of an end, and is thus \textit{more} an end than the mere capacity (1050a27-28).\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} One might also think that Aristotle would consider “housebuilding” as a means to the end of acting generously. If this is so, then there is good reason to think that, while the virtuous agent chooses acting virtuously for its own sake, he does not choose housebuilding for its own sake (cf. \textit{NE} VII 9, 1150a35ff). Cf. Charles (1986, 130-131).

\textsuperscript{73} It is also worth noting that Aristotle never mentions “choiceworthiness” when he explicates what an ergon is. This is because, as we have see, he thinks that activities, by nature, can have ends. In fairness to Lear, she elsewhere (2004, 35) says that she does not think that the ends of crafts depend on the desires of their practitioners.

\textsuperscript{74} And so, in contrast to Aquinas’ suggestion that the activity is always the primary case of the end, it is the house that is the primary case of the end, and housebuilding is partakes of the nature of an end because in ordered series of for-the-sake-of relations it is closer to the house than is the housebuilding-art.
Irwin’s account, on the other hand, maintains that the ergon of something is the end-directed activity that is proper to it when the end is something “external” to the activity. Our discussion has shown that Aristotle does indeed mark out some activities, like housebuilding and shoemaking, as end-directed, and this is because they have an end that gives them an internal reason to stop. However, he also marks out some, like living and seeing, as ends, and these have no reason to stop (Meta Θ 6, 1048b18-22). Yet our discussion has also uncovered reasons why one might be led to a view like Irwin’s. For even though activities like living, seeing or “performing on the flute” are by nature ends and thus have no internally given limit, they are nevertheless naturally subordinated to further ends that give them a limit. When there is an externally given end and limit, they may be legitimately considered end-directed activities. But even though this is so, seeing and the flautist’s performance are not end-directed activities in the way that housebuilding is an end-directed activity.

3.9 Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Activities

Assuming that the distinction between complete and incomplete activities does carve nature at its joints, then when Aristotle draws this distinction he would seem to be making an advance over Plato. This is because not only does Plato never indicate that he recognizes such a distinction, but also because he clearly implies that he considers certain activities, which Aristotle would consider complete, like living and thinking, to necessarily involve change. Thus, at Sophist 248e7-249b1 Theaetetus and the Visitor find themselves in a tricky position because, on the one hand, they want to maintain that God is “changeless,” but on the other hand, they want to attribute thought and life to God and they assume that whatever has life and thought
must change. This is also perhaps one reason why Plato in the *Timaeus* makes the Forms the primary instances of being in his ontology, God (e.g. the Demiurge) being given an ontological position subordinate to the Forms insofar as he must look to them and use them as a model when he creates. Aristotle, on the other hand, makes God the primary instance of being, and he can do so because he thinks that life and thinking are complete activities, and therefore need not imply change. Thus, according to Aristotle, life, thought and changelessness may be all attributed to God.

For our purposes, we should notice two things that result because Plato does not recognize the distinction between complete and incomplete activities. First, as we saw in chapter one, Plato and Aristotle give different accounts of what an ergon is, and Aristotle’s account seemed to be superior to Plato’s insofar as it as able to pick out a house, as opposed to housebuilding, as the ergon of the housebuilding-art. But in order to subscribe to Aristotle’s account, one must acknowledge that some activities are ends and therefore not kînēseis, changes. Because Plato seems to think that all activities are changes, it does not look like he can call an activity an end, and thus cannot give Aristotle’s account of what an ergon is. Second, because Plato does not think that the best things in the universe, viz. the Forms, admit of activity, he thinks of their good as consisting in the robust quality “Goodness.” Aristotle however, thinks that the best thing in the universe, viz. God, is essentially an activity, and he thinks of God’s goodness as consisting in that very activity. Since both Plato and Aristotle appear to take the first principles of the universe as standards against which the rest of the universe is measured, both subscribing to a strong ideal of “divine-likeness,”75 this influences how they think about “the best good” of humans. Plato would seem to think that it consists in a certain quality, while Aristotle that it consists in a certain activity. This appears to make a difference to how they

75 See Sedley (1999).
construct their ergon arguments. The conclusion of Plato’s argument is that “the just person is happy,” that is, the just person possesses a certain quality “happiness” (Rep I, 354a4). The conclusion of Aristotle’s argument, however, is that “the human good turns out to be an activity of the soul on the basis of virtue, and if more than one, on the basis of the best and most end-like, and moreover in an end-like [i.e. complete] life” (I 7, 1098a16-18), and as I understand it, Aristotle uses the concept of an ergon to determine that the human good is a complete activity at the very start of the ergon argument. Thus, Plato uses the concept of an ergon in order to determine what it is to be happy, while Aristotle uses the concept of an ergon in order to determine what happiness is, where this is conceived of as the best accomplishment of a human.

3.10 Shoemaking as Eudaimonia: The Position of Barney

In light of the various results we have arrived at in this chapter, we should consider an interpretation like Barney’s on which, for some people, the excellent performance of an incomplete activity (like housebuilding or shoemaking) can count as a low-grade version of eudaimonia. She writes:

Aristotle is committed to allowing that a range of ways of life may attain the good in different degrees, ordered by the degree to which they express rational activity. Within its limitations, shoemaking must constitute a realization of the human function and the human good for those who can aspire to no better.77

Barney focuses on the idea of rational activity, and suggests that shoemaking can constitute a low-grade form of eudaimonia because it expresses rational activity. This is an appealingly

76 The very last conclusion of the argument is that injustice is not more profitable than justice (Rep I, 354a8-9).
egalitarian thought, but there are reasons to doubt it is Aristotle’s. First, he makes it clear that, while living and eudaimonia occur in the agent, housebuilding occurs in the house and shoemaking in the shoe (Meta Θ 8, cf. Physics III 2). Thus, it does not seem that shoemaking can be a low-grade form of eudaimonia since shoemaking and eudaimonia are to be found in different places. Second, Aristotle thinks that eudaimonia and living are both ends and complete activities, while housebuilding and shoemaking are not ends and not complete activities. Thus, while living and eudaimonia in principle need not stop, each instance of housebuilding and shoemaking must in principle stop.

Aristotle thinks that in order for an activity like shoemaking or housebuilding to count as a kind of living well, they need to be the same in being. But, first, Aristotle seems to think that the nature of housebuilding itself does not even require that it occur by means of rational agency at all for he explains that if the shipbuilding-art was in the wood it would produce ships by nature just as it now does by art (Ph II 8, 199b28-29). Second, Aristotle thinks that when we get precise about what the cause is of a house, it is not so much the builder as the art that the builder possesses (Ph II 3, 195b22).

3.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen reasons why Aristotle would think that the recovered concept of an ergon would carve nature at its joints, and why he considers the ergon of an X to be “the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, has being.” This is because he thinks that some activities (the complete ones) are ends but some (the incomplete ones) are not. Once we appreciate this, we can see that the concept of an ergon is a more powerful normative concept
than that of a proper activity or function. This is precisely because the concept of an ergon tracks this normative distinction between complete and incomplete activities. For though speaking of “the function of an X” may well imply that X is for the sake of its function, it doesn’t reveal whether that function is the end for the sake of which X exists. The concept of an ergon, however, does reveal this.

In the next chapter we will begin analyzing the NE ergon argument in earnest. But before we do so, it will help to remind ourselves of some salient points established in the foregoing discussion. First, an ergon is an end, and therefore something complete—whether an activity or a product. Second, both living and eudaimonia are complete activities—which is to say, they are not intrinsically means to ends, and there is no internal reason why they must stop. And third, because living and being-happy (εὖδαμονεῖν) are complete activities, they are both found in the agent, the soul. Fourth, crafts aim at their objects in an unlimited way, even though a limit may imposed externally. Failing to observe these points can lead one into trouble. We already saw that this was so in the case of Barney’s interpretation, but there are broader consequences as well.

Here it is worth noting that because Aristotle says that the human good is never chosen for the sake of something else, he would thereby indicate that the human good cannot be an incomplete activity since an incomplete activity is always for the sake of an end distinct from itself. But from the way that most, if not all, scholars reconstruct the ergon argument, there is nothing in the argument that ensures that the highest good will be a complete activity. For, as we will see in the next chapter, both Barney and Lawrence reconstruct the ergon argument so that the fundamental premise looks like this “for anything with a proper activity, its “good, that is, the

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78 Whether the soul can be the subject of such activities or whether the subject must be the agent, to whose soul these activities belong (cf. DA I 4, 408b1ff.) is a question that falls outside the scope of our present discussion.
well” consists in performing that activity well.” The problem here is that all one needs to achieve one’s good is to perform one’s proper activity well—no matter whether that activity is complete or incomplete. Thus, the good of a housebuilder is simply housebuilding well. Thus, though both Lawrence and Barney understand “the good that is the well” somewhat differently (as we will discuss), they both think that the relevant sort of good can consist in the excellent performance of an incomplete activity.

As we turn in subsequent chapters to examine in detail Aristotle’s ergon argument, we will see how bearing in mind my conclusions in this chapter leads to a much more satisfactory understanding of what, according to Aristotle, the human good is, and what exactly are its good-making features.
The Rationale of the Ergon Argument (Section A)

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we look closely at Section A of the ergon argument and attempt to determine what claim Aristotle makes there. So let us consider again the lead-up to Section A. In *NE* I 1-2 Aristotle explains that we are setting out to determine the best thing accomplishable in action (cf. τέλος τῶν πρακτῶν, 1094a18-19; ἀκρότατον τῶν πρακτῶν ἀγαθῶν, 1095a16, cf. 1097a21-2). In *NE* I 2 he explains that if something is to be “the good in the sense of the best <good>” (τὰ γαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον, 1094a22) three conditions must hold: [i] it must be an end accomplishable in action that is desired on account of itself, [ii] everything else is desired on account of it, and [iii] it is not desired for the sake of something else. Such a good he dubs “the human good” (*NE* I 2, 1094b7). In *NE* I 4 Aristotle says that the many and the wise agree that the name of this best good is “eudaimonia” (“happiness”) and that “being happy” (εὐδαιμονεῖν) consists in “living well” and “doing well.” After considering more closely the opinions of the many (*NE* I 5) and the wise (*NE* I 6), Aristotle in *NE* I 7 gives his own account of what this best good is, and he does so by means of the ergon argument.

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1 This last criterion seems to be introduced in order to avoid the possibility of a loop. For the first two criteria do not rule out the possibility that eudaimonia, though desired on account of itself and everything is desired for the sake of it, is still desired for the sake of goods that are in turn desired for the sake of it.
He begins by commenting that while it is generally agreed that eudaimonia is the best good, we still need more clarity on what this best good is (1097b22-24). His suggestion is that this will come about if we grasped the ergon of a human (1097b24-25), and he explains:

[Section A] For, 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, the well seems to be [found] in its ergon [ἐν τῷ ἐργῷ δοκεῖ τάγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ], the same would seem to be true for a human, if he has an ergon. (NE I 7, 1097b25-28)

These lines are introduced as an explanation for why (cf. γάρ, 1097b24) one might think that grasping the ergon of a human would provide clarity on what “the best good” is; these lines supply what we might think of as the Rationale for the ergon argument.² A condition, then, on any acceptable interpretation of the claim of Section A will be that it give the right sort of explanation or rationale. First, when combined with the other premises in the ergon argument, the key explanatory term for defining the human good should only be “the best good achievable by humans in action.” Second and relatedly, given what we have concluded about activities in Chapter 2—that an incomplete activity (e.g. housebuilding) could never be the best good because it is essentially ordered to its end (e.g. a house)—the claim of Section A must also ensure that if the best good is an activity, it is a complete activity.

In order to be perfectly clear about how the ergon argument works, it may be helpful to say that the definiendum in the argument is “the human good,” which Aristotle has identified as “the best thing achievable by humans in action.” The definiens in the argument occurs in the conclusion: “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, and moreover in an end-like [i.e. complete] life” (I 7 1098a16-18). All the various premises that occur within the ergon

² I take the term “rationale” from Lawrence (2009).
argument constitute the explanation for why “the human good” should be defined in the way that it is. The most important of these premises is what I above called the Rationale and it is contained in Section A.

What, then, is the claim of Section A? Briefly, I take it to be this:

[Claim of Section A:] If anything has an ergon and an action, the good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment (τὰ γαθὸν καὶ τὸ εὖ) is found in the ergon.

Like many others, I take τὸ εὖ of an X to be X’s ergon accomplished well (cf. NE I 7, 1098a12). 3 But, of course, unlike many others, I do not think an ergon is always an activity. Indeed, I think that the recovered concept of an ergon—explained in the previous two chapters—should lead us to understand τὸ εὖ, which I earlier translated as “the well,” to mean something like “the excellent accomplishment,” where this can be either an excellent activity or an excellent product. Later I will suggest that though we should understand “τὸ εὖ” of an X as the excellent accomplishment of an X, we should also understand it as the proprietary good for an X. I will also propose that the excellent accomplishment is found “in” the ergon in the way that something specific can be in something more general (cf. Physics IV 3, 210a18). Consequently, Section A of the ergon argument locates the right class or genus within which to find eudaimonia, that is, the best thing accomplishable by humans in action. For just as a sculptor’s excellent accomplishment will be in his ergon (which is a sculpture), so will his best accomplishment. And just as a human’s excellent accomplishment will be in his ergon (which is an activity of the part of the soul having reason), so will his best accomplishment, that is, the human good.

As we will see, how we interpret the ergon argument largely turns on how we interpret Section A, and how we interpret Section A largely turns on how we understand “τὰ γαθὸν καὶ τὸ

3 Cf. Lawrence (2009, 215), who rephrase Section A as “Where the X is something with a function, the X-an good, i.e. the good of an x, consists in doing its function successfully or well.”
εὖ” (1097b27), cautiously rendered in my initial translation as “the good, that is, the well.” And, as we will see, how we interpret this phrase largely turns on how we interpret “τὸ εὖ”: “the well.” I discuss popular translations of “τὸ εὖ,” and how the three major interpretations “τὸ εὖ”—as “goodness,” “flourishing” or “functioning successfully” lead to different ways of reading Section A and the ergon argument as a whole. In arguing for my own view, I suggest that we should understand “τὸ εὖ” as “the excellent accomplishment,” and in light of this I develop an interpretation both of Section A and of the ergon argument as a whole. I explain how my reading can accommodate the truth found in rival interpretations. And after discussing the further complication of what Aristotle means by saying “the well” is in the ergon, I schematize the various possible interpretations of Section A. I close by discussing how, even if one adopts my interpretation of Section A, there is still a further interpretive of how the final two additions to Aristotle’s definition are supposed to follow from the premises of the argument.

4.2 Preliminary remark on the phrase “the good, that is, the well”

We should consider first the καὶ in “τἀγαθὸν καὶ τὸ εὖ” (“the good, that is, the well,” 1097b27) since this explains why “τὸ εὖ” (“the well”) is so important. Now καὶ here is clearly a conjunction (not an adverb), and most scholars would appear to understand καὶ to be conjoining appositionally related terms.\(^1\) Crisp, for example, translates “καὶ” by a dash: “the good—the doing well.”\(^4\) The thought behind this seems right. Aristotle is not discussing two different kinds of good (“τἀγαθὸν” and “τὸ εὖ”), and the apposition between these two terms is strongly

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\(^{4}\) For this use of καὶ, see Denniston (1996, 291[5]).
suggested by the structure of the ergon argument itself: when Aristotle finds what “τὸ εὖ” of a human is, he directly, though provisionally, concludes that this is the human good.

Many scholars also think that besides conjoining appositionally related terms, the καὶ at 1097b27 has epexegetic (that is, explanatory) force. Irwin, for example, translates “καὶ” by “i.e.”: “the good, i.e., the [doing] well.” The thought behind this also seems correct. Aristotle uses the phrase “the good” in more than one way (cf. NE I 6, 1096a23-28, 30-24; 1096b13-14), and sometimes he uses “καὶ” to clarify what sense of “the good” he has in mind. This happens not long before the ergon argument, in NE I 2, where Aristotle speaks of “τὰ γαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἀριστὸν,” aptly translated by Irwin as “the good, that is to say, the best good” (1094a22). If the καὶ in “τὰ γαθὸν καὶ τὸ εὖ” does have epexegetic force, then of course quite a lot turns on how we understand “τὸ εὖ.”

4.3 Translating “τὸ εὖ”

To appreciate how “τὸ εὖ” in Section A has been interpreted, it will first help to consider two translations: “the well” and “the doing well.” The first is of course very literal, and it is similar to the translation that Ross gives. It is probably also a preferred translation for those

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5 Indeed, it seems to have both heightening force (Smyth [1920] 1984, §2869a) and corrective force (§2870). Irwin (1999), Crisp (2000), Lawrence (2009), Barney (2008), Glassen (1957), Rowe (2002), etc. by their translations that they interpret the phrase this way.

6 Ross translates τὸ εὖ as “the ‘well.’” Those who use his translation might have a few different rationales in mind. First, they might be thinking that ‘τὸ’ is here being used in place of quotation marks (Smyth, §1153g) so that Aristotle is speaking of the word ‘εὖ’. Or second, they might be thinking that τὸ εὖ is a non-idiomatic expression in Greek so that the quotation marks around English ‘well’ rightly convey that εὖ is being used nonstandardly. Or third, they might find “the well” the best translation, but put quotation marks around ‘well’ in order to apologize for using the English word non-idiomatically. None of these seem to me good reasons. The third seems more a reason to put quotation marks around “the well” rather than “well.” But even so, it is unclear to the reader whether the Greek is nonstandard, or merely the English. The second is no good reason because ‘τὸ εὖ’ simply is not non-standard Greek (cf. LSJ ‘εὖ’, III). The first reason has been recommended to me by more than one scholar, and it
interpreters who think that when Aristotle was speaking of “τὰ γοϋθὸν καὶ τὸ εὖ” of a thing, he is speaking of that thing’s goodness or virtue. They presumably understand “τὸ εὖ,” when filled in with the elided Greek, to be “τὸ εὖ ἔχον,” which would signify the good condition of a thing.

The translation of τὸ εὖ as “the doing well,” however, has been more popular recently, and it occurs, for example, in Rowe’s translation:

[Rowe: Section A] For just as for a flute-player, or a sculptor, or any expert, and generally for all those who have some characteristic function or activity, the good—their doing well—seems to reside in the function [ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ δοκεῖ τάγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ], so too would it seem to be for a human being, if indeed there is some function that belongs to him. (1097b24-28; emphasis added)  

As we will later discuss, if one translates “τὸ εὖ” as “the doing well,” one still has to decide whether to understand this as “the flourishing” or as “the functioning successfully.” But why have scholars gone in for this translation in the first place? The main reason seems to be that they think something’s “εὖ” is that thing’s ergon accomplished well. Lawrence, for example, glosses “τὸ εὖ” as “good functioning.” Though I do not think that “τὸ εὖ” means “excellent ergon” (much less “good functioning”), I think Lawrence has some reason for his gloss since the phrase here does refer to that thing’s ergon accomplished well. For example, later in the ergon argument, Aristotle uses the phrase to refer to the kitharist’s ergon accomplished well (1098a12), and he does so in a way that suggests that if something has an ergon and an action, its τὸ εὖ will be its ergon accomplished well. The flow of the ergon argument also suggests that Aristotle has some plausibility since our use of the word ‘εὖ’ does seem to depend on the ergon of the thing we are discussing. However, as we will see, it seems most likely that when Aristotle uses “τὸ εὖ” in Section A it refers to an ergon excellently accomplished.

7 This is, for example, how Aristotle appears to use the phrase at 1021b15.  
8 Rowe (2002, ad loc). Bartlett and Collins (2011, ad loc.) have “the good and the doing of something well.” Crisp (2000, ad loc.) has “the good—the doing well.” Irwin (1999, ad loc.) has “the good and the [doing] well.” Sachs (2002, ad loc.) has “the good and the doing it well.”
9 For example, Lawrence (2001, 449) summarizes the principle of section A as “In the case of things that have some definite function and action the good and the well rest in the function.” He then explains it this way: “By saying that if X has a function, its good as an X rests in its function, Aristotle presumably means that its good—the ‘X-an good’—consists in good functioning.”

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means to identify τὸ εὖ of a human as his ergon accomplished well—“an activity of the soul on the basis of virtue” (1098a16-17). Since scholars also assume that something’s ergon is its proper activity, they naturally suppose that “τὸ εὖ” means something like “the doing well,” where the implied Greek would be something like “τὸ εὖ πράττειν.” Later we will discuss how the recovered concept of an ergon should change our understanding of “τὸ εὖ,” but before then, we will consider the ways interpreters have understood the phrase.

4.4 Three interpretations: “τὸ εὖ” as Virtue, Flourishing or Success

Consider the predicament that most interpreters have been in. Aristotle begins the NE by saying that he is attempting to determine the best of all things accomplishable in action. He says that everyone agrees that the name of this best good is “eudaimonia,” and that “living well” and “doing well” are the same as “being happy” (1095a19-20). Then when Aristotle begins to give his own account of what this best thing is, he says it will help to consider the ergon of man. His explanation? For hundreds of years scholars have been hearing this: if something has a proper activity and action, that thing’s “the good, that is, the well” is in the proper activity. But it is clear that that the best good accomplishable by a sculptor, qua sculptor, is not a certain activity of sculpting but a certain sculpture. And so scholars have had to make sense of Aristotle’s claim in some other way.

Three broad interpretative approaches have arisen, and we will discuss them in the next sections. Each turns on an interpretation of “τὸ εὖ” that is crucially different than “the excellent accomplishment” for something. The first is to think that something’s εὖ is that thing’s goodness (or virtue). On this reading, Section A would be saying that the goodness of something is always
relative to its ergon. The second is to think that “the well” signifies “the doing well,” where this is understood as “the flourishing,” or “the faring well.” On this reading, Section A would be articulating some connection between something’s flourishing and that thing’s ergon accomplished well. The third is to think that the well signifies “the doing well,” where this is understood as “the functioning successfully.” On this reading, Section A would be articulating some connection between something’s success and that thing’s ergon accomplished well.

I do not think any of these interpretations, as they have been so far articulated, are fully correct. Apart from their individual shortcomings, which we will discuss, they all run up against the same problem. None allows Aristotle’s argument to employ the key explanatory middle term: “the best good accomplishable in action by a human being.” They instead employ a different key explanatory middle term—an X’s virtue, flourishing, or success—but on their readings it still remains an open question whether a human’s virtue, flourishing, or success is the best thing accomplishable by a human. This is a serious problem, and we will do well to start with a scholar who seems to have cottoned on to it (at least to some extent) early on in the recent history of philosophical analysis of Aristotle’s argument.

4.5 “τὸ ἔ̱ό” as Virtue (or “Goodness”)

Glassen (1957) claimed that the NE ergon argument is fallacious because it equivocates over the notion of “the good.” He says that while in the premises of the argument Aristotle only mentions “the goodness of man” in the sense of a human’s virtue, Aristotle in the conclusion
claims to have determined “the good of man” in the sense of the final end of a human’s actions.\textsuperscript{10} But, Glassen notes, since “the good of man” occurs nowhere in the premises of the argument, it cannot occur in the conclusion. While Glassen thinks that Section A does not supply a premise of the ergon argument, he takes it to supply the argument’s rationale. Because he understands τὸ εὖ of something to be that thing’s “goodness” (i.e. virtue),\textsuperscript{11} the claim of Section A amounts to this: the goodness of an anything with an ergon is determined by its ergon.\textsuperscript{12} The claim is not implausible: if you want to know what makes a good sculptor, you’ll need to know what a sculptor characteristically does. Glassen also reconstructs the argument as follows:

1. The function of man is activity of soul implying a rational principle.
2. The function of a good man is activity of soul [implying a rational principle] in accordance with excellence
3. Therefore, the good of man is activity of soul [implying a rational principle] in accordance with excellence.\textsuperscript{13}

So reconstructed, the ergon argument is invalid. Glassen is right that claims 1 and 2 do not entail 3. From premises that mention only the goodness (i.e. virtue) of a human, one cannot draw a conclusion about the final good of human action (i.e. the best accomplishable thing in action). How, then, could Aristotle have come up with this argument? Glassen suggests that Aristotle simply confuses these two different types of ‘good’; and given Glassen’s reconstruction, this seems the only possible explanation.

\textsuperscript{10} Glassen (1957, 320).
\textsuperscript{11} It seems to me that Glassen (and Gomez-Lobo) may very well have been encouraged in this view by Ross’s translation of τὸ εὖ as “the ‘well’.”
\textsuperscript{12} Glassen (1957, 322) explains: “The confidence of Aristotle’s assertion [in Section A] would be justified only if ‘t’agathon’ were the use as a noun of the ‘agathos’ that might qualify ‘flute-player,’ ”sculptor,” and the rest: for that the good, in this sense resides in the function could be questioned only by someone who doubted whether a flute-player was a good flute-player or not had anything to do with his function of playing the flute—and surely no one would doubt this.”
\textsuperscript{13} Glassen (1957, 320). The brackets are those of Glassen himself.
Now I think Glassen deserves credit for correctly identifying the goal of the ergon argument: to determine the final end of human action (which I take to be another way of speaking of the best good accomplishable by humans in action). However, I believe his interpretation of Section A and of the argument as a whole is flawed. Consider these three problems. First, as Glassen realizes, for his interpretation to be plausible, he needs some explanation for how Aristotle could have made such a terrible argument. Yet Glassen’s suggestion—that Aristotle confuses “goodness in the sense of virtue” and “the good in the sense of the best accomplishment” is highly doubtful. This is because both before (I 5, 1095b31-1096a1) and after (I 8, 1098b30-1099a7) the ergon argument, Aristotle seems alive to the distinction, and clearly faults those who do not observe it (1098b31-33). Second, the suggestion that “τὸ ἔὖ” means “goodness” in the sense of “virtue” is also doubtful. This is because, as we mentioned earlier, later in the ergon argument Aristotle uses τὸ ἔὖ seemingly in the same way as he did earlier, but the second time he clearly uses it to refer to an good/excellent performance on the kithara (1098a12), not to the mere goodness of either the performance or the kitharist. Third, even if we grant Glassen’s explanation that Aristotle confuses two types of goods, that explanation only goes so far. It does not make sense of the fact that Aristotle adds two further criteria to his account of the human good: that it be “on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue” and “in an end-like [i.e. complete] life.”

To appreciate Glassen’s central insight, we should contrast his interpretation with that of Gomez-Lobo. On the one hand, Gomez-Lobo understands Section A quite similarly to

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14 Here I should note that Lawrence (2009, 192-4) also says that he agrees with Glassen. But it is not obvious that he really does. This is because Lawrence seems to equate the final end of human actions with the good of a human in the sense of the ergon of a human, while Glassen does not obviously make this equation. In any case, I do not make this equation, and I distinguish the goods accomplishable by a human in a way that Lawrence does not.
15 Glassen (1957, 322).
16 Gomez-Lobo (1989) does not cite Glassen, and it is possible that he arrived at his interpretation independently.
Glassen. He thinks the passage says: “For any x, if x has an ergon y, then x will be a good x, if and only if x produces good instances of y.”17 The basic idea here seems to be that if something has an ergon, the goodness of that thing will be determined by its ergon. On the other hand, unlike Glassen, Gomez-Lobo does not consider Aristotle’s argument to be fallacious, and also unlike Glassen, he uses the claim of Section A as a premise in his reconstruction:

1. For any x, if x has an ergon y, then x will be a good x, if and only if x produces good instances of y. [=the claim of Section A]
2. The ergon of man is activity with reason.
3. A human being will be a good human being if and only if he produces good instances of activity with reason.18

So reconstructed, the argument is indeed valid. However, it is simply not Aristotle’s argument. As Glassen rightly observed, the conclusion of Aristotle’s argument is an account of the human good (“an activity of the soul on the basis of virtue…,” 1098a16-17), where this is the best thing accomplishable in action by a human—the “final goal of man’s actions.”19 But the notion of a

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17 Gomez-Lobo (1989, 173) articulates the claim of Section A this way: “the good and ‘well’ for things that have a function, i.e. the truth of a positive evaluative proposition about them, depends on the quality of the function.” This is similar to Glassen’s interpretation even though Glassen does not speak in terms of “evaluative propositions” but the properties that would make those propositions true. Gomez-Lobo does, however, reject another interpretation that I also reject. This is that Section A claims “the good of any being…consists in exercising its characteristic activity or ergon” (172). In NE I 7 Aristotle clearly makes a distinction between the ergon of a human and that of a good human, and judges the latter to be the human good. It is also worth noting that Gomez-Lobo, even though he here uses the word “function” to communicate the concept of an ergon, sometimes seems to have in mind what I have called the recovered concept of an ergon. Consider, for example, these lines at 173: “If we keep in mind that ergon also means ‘work’ in the sense of the product of a technē or a craft, it will become clear that what he means is that a positive judgment about a flute-player or a sculptor is the result of a positive evaluation of the actual musical performance or of the statue itself, respectively.” Nevertheless, he does not really seem to be working with the recovered concept of an ergon for two reasons. First, he says that the word “also” means product, whereas in my account there are not two meanings, but one unified meaning. Second, Gomez-Lobo elsewhere indicates that he understands the ergon of something to be an activity when he speaks of an “agent x who performs an ergon” at 175 and “a good performer of an ergon” at 176. Since one cannot “perform” a statue or a shoe, he seems to be thinking of an ergon as an activity.

18 Gomez-Lobo (1989, 182)

19 Glassen (1957, 320).
human good is not even present in Gomez-Lobo’s reconstruction, and so the reconstruction is not plausible.\textsuperscript{20}

We have, then, found good reason to think that if we are going to attribute to Aristotle a valid argument and if we are going to assume that the ergon argument attempts to determine the best good accomplishable in action, then we cannot understand Aristotle in Section A to be speaking of the goodness or virtue of a thing when he mentions “the good, that is, the well” (\textit{τὰ γαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἔὖ}, 1097b27). On, then, to other interpretations.

4.6 “\textit{τὸ ἔὖ}” as “the Doing Well” and the Two Ways with the Datives

The problems with taking \textit{τὸ ἔὖ} as virtue may have reasonably led interpreters to think that \textit{τὸ ἔὐ} is better understood as “the doing well.” However, as we mentioned earlier, “the doing well” can be more determinately understood either as “the flourishing” or as “the functioning successfully.” Those who understand the phrase as “the flourishing” would naturally also understand it to indicate the functioning successfully of the thing that is flourishing. However, those who understand the phrase as “the functioning successfully” need not understand it to indicate “the flourishing” of the thing functioning successfully—for even if a knife functions successfully, it is not plausible to say that it is flourishing as knife.

This particular debate in large part comes down to how we translate the datives in the phrase: “\textit{for a sculptor, flautist, and everything with an ergon and an action}, the good that is the

\textsuperscript{20} I have set out the argument exactly as Gomez-Lobo himself does. But Gomez-Lobo (1989, 173) perhaps has some further step in mind because he incorrectly thinks that, according to Aristotle, “the good for man is to be a good man, i.e. a high quality individual of the human species…” If this is so, perhaps Gomez-Lobo would want the ergon argument to conclude with something like: “The good for man is to be such as to produce good instances of the activity of reason.” But as we earlier noted, Aristotle explicitly denies virtue alone is sufficient for happiness (cf. \textit{NE} I 5, 1095b32 and \textit{NE} I 8, 1098b31-1099a7).
well is found in the ergon…” The datives, here italicized and indicated by the preposition “for,” can be understood either as datives of interest or datives of relation. Any interpreter who thinks that the good for an X is not under discussion in Section A (e.g. Lawrence) should take them as merely datives of relation on which reading they would amount to: “in the case of sculptor, flautist, <etc.>.” But an interpreter who understand the flourishing or the good for an X to be under discussion, would naturally take them as datives of interest, with the result that they would amount to: “in the interest of a sculptor, flautist, <etc.>.” Either way, the datives can be translated as “for a sculptor, flautist, <etc.>,” and perhaps should be in order to preserve the ambiguity of the Greek text. We will return to this issue in due course.

4.7 “τὸ εὖ” as “Flourishing”

In this section we consider interpretations of Section A where “τὸ εὖ” is understood as “the flourishing of an X” or similarly “the faring well of an X,” or even more generally, the good for an X. One might suppose that these seem to be quite different notions—for example, “flourishing” might seem much better than mere “farin well”—but so far as I can see, interpreters have used the terms “farin well” and “flourishing” synonymously, and for the purposes of this section I will follow their lead. (However, as I will argue later, there are reasons for thinking that “the good for an X” need not be an activity, and so we shouldn’t identify the

21 Lawrence (2009, 210-211) is the first to focus on the question of how to interpret the datives, arguing that we can either take them as datives of advantage and datives of respect. Though I agree with his basic point, I also think that there are good reasons to label these datives differently. Smyth considers the dative of interest to comprise dative of advantage as well as the dative of the possessor and other datives. Smyth explains the dative of the possessor by saying: “The person for whom a thing exists is put in the dative with etc., when he is regarded as interested in its possession” (§1476). What Lawrence calls the dative of respect is more accurately called the dative of relation, which “may be used of a person to whose case the statement of the predicate is limited” (§1495).
good for an X as the flourishing of an X since doing so would make it the case that the good for an X must always be activity, which it is not.

But on all the readings we are about to discuss, Section A is intended to draw a connection between a thing’s ergon and the good for it, where the basic principle in question is: “The good for X (or the flourishing of an X) is X’s ergon accomplished well.” (I will call this the GF [Good-For]-principle.) Of course, because they think that an ergon is a function, they articulate the principle differently: thus, Reeve writes, “if φing is the function of an F, the good for an F is φing well.”

The view (in some form or other) is widespread, perhaps going back as far as Aquinas, who thinks that section A of the ergon argument discusses “hoc quod est bene ei”—which seems to mean “what is good for a thing,” its “well-being.”

But how exactly should we understand “the good for an X”? Here some clarification is necessary. Though medicine, education, food etc. are good for a human, there seems to be a clear sense in which they are not the good of a human. Such things enable us to become healthy and educated, and thereby promote the good for a human, but do not directly constitute it.

Scholars have not always been clear on this, but the most plausible version of the “flourishing” reading is surely that Aristotle in Section A is not discussing everything that might be good for an X, but rather the good for an X.

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22 Reeve (1992, 124, cf. 128). And Barney (2008, 312): “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.”

23 For example, Joachim (1962, 49) writes, “the good or well-being of anything which has a work (or function) depends upon its doing that work well (1097b26-27).” Pakaluk (2005, 84) writes that in the ergon argument “[Aristotle] is presupposing that the good for a thing simply is its achieving its function well.” This interpretation of the argument has inspired contemporary philosophers: e.g. Murphy (1999) and Kraut (2003).

24 Sententia libri Ethicorum, I 10. 2 in Busa (1980). Cf. the translation in Litzinger (1963 [1993]). Aquinas seems to be paraphrasing “τὸ ἔό,” which (if the Leonine reconstruction is correct) Aquinas read as simply “bene.” It is also worth noting that it also may be possible to read Aquinas in such a way that his interpretation closely resembles that of Lawrence.

25 E.g. Kenny (1965-6, 96) and Irwin (1999, 183). For discussion of this point, see Lawrence (2009, 209-211).
Now the GF-principle: “The good for an X is X’s ergon accomplished well” has not gone unquestioned. Wilkes, for instance, gives what she takes to be a counterexample: “what the good sheepdog does and what it is good for the sheepdog to do have no necessary correlation.”\textsuperscript{26}

Kenny\textsuperscript{27} and Irwin\textsuperscript{28} respond to such worries by emphasizing that Aristotle is thinking of the good for an X, \textit{qua} X. They both want to defend the claim that the good for a sculptor, \textit{qua} sculptor, is to sculpt well, and presumably they would also want to defend claim that the good for a sheepdog, \textit{qua} sheepdog, is to herd sheep well. Whiting, however, takes the Wilkes-style counter-example to pose a serious problem for the GF-principle, and so she argues that the principle does not hold for accidental kinds (sheepdogs, sculptors, carpenters) but only for essential, biological kinds: e.g. dolphins, horses, and humans.\textsuperscript{29} But this comes at a cost. Because the only plausible place to find the GF-principle in the ergon argument is Section A, Whiting’s interpretation would seem to rule out the very examples Aristotle uses there: “the flautist, the sculptor and every artisan” (1097b25-26).\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{26} Wilkes (1980, 346). Here she is assuming that the good sheepdog accomplishes its ergon well. She goes on: “A study of man’s ergon, then, can tell us what it is to be a good man, once we have discovered just what activities are indeed characteristic of mankind. But it is far from clear how this gets us any closer to the good for man—how indeed, the superb functioning of any ergon bearing creature is relevant to what that creatures greatest good is” (343). In her criticism, she takes herself to be following Glassen (1957, 319-322). However, as Lawrence (2009) notes and as we already discussed, Glassen is accusing of Aristotle of a different fallacy: moving from a premise about the goodness of man (i.e. being a good man) to a conclusion about the good of man (i.e. the best thing accomplishable by man). Though I will not thoroughly discuss it here, Ackrill (1973, 20) poses yet a different challenge to Aristotle’s argument, though it is very similar to that of Wilkes: “it is not self-evident that the best thing for a man is to be the best possible man.”

\textsuperscript{27} Kenny (1965-1966, 96).

\textsuperscript{28} Irwin (1999, 183) writes, “In this passage [Section A] Aristotle appeals to the function of F to identify what is good for F…What is good for Pheidias, insofar as he is a sculptor is the sculpting activity. It does not follow that what is good for Pheidias is sculpting activity.”

\textsuperscript{29} Whiting (1988, 36) would seem to be led to this view by thinking of the example of prostitutes. Is the proper functioning of a prostitute the faring well of a prostitute? Surely not. On this question see Chapter sub-section 5.7 (“Is the Ergon Normative?”).

\textsuperscript{30} Whiting (1988) does not say where she takes the principle to be found, but Section A is certainly the only plausible place to find such a principle. A useful summary of the positions of Wilkes, Whiting and Kenny is provided by Lawrence (2009, 201-209).
Barney, in a recent article, appears to build on the thoughts of Whiting, Kenny and Irwin, and articulates a somewhat different version of the GF-principle, paraphrasing the claim of section A this way:

[Barney: Claim of Section A] If an $x$ qua $x$ has as its function to $\Phi$, then the good of an $x$ qua $x$—its flourishing as an $x$—consists in $\Phi$-ing well.\(^{31}\)

In the case of the sculptor, she explains, “to flourish as a sculptor just is to excel in one’s artistic activity.”\(^{32}\) On the one hand, (like Kenny and Irwin) she emphasizes the ‘qua’ locution. On the other hand, (unlike Kenny and Irwin, but like Whiting) she thinks the principle only holds for essential, biological kinds since she thinks that only essential kinds can flourish. But (unlike Whiting) she does not want to exclude artisans since they are the prime examples in Section A. This leads her to the extraordinary claim that, on Aristotle’s view, to flourish as a sculptor (or as any artisan) is to flourish as a human being, and this requires her to claim that certain people are somehow sculptors or other artisans by nature, and that being an artisan is part of their essence.\(^{33}\)

For these natural artisans, excellent artisanal activities (excellent shoemaking, excellent housebuilding, etc.) will count as low-grade versions of eudaimonia. And since Barney aligns the notion of flourishing she finds in Section A with Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia, which he explicitly restricts to humans and gods (I 9, 1099b32–1100a3; X 8 1178b24–8), she understands the claim of Section A as applying only to humans. She locates the restriction of the claim in

\(^{31}\) Barney (2008, 312). Two comments are here in order. First, Barney thinks that there is another possible, but weaker interpretation of Section A: “If an $x$ qua $x$ has as its function to $\Phi$, then a good $x$ qua $x$ is one which $\Phi$s well.” She opts for the stronger reading, quoted above, and assumes that the weaker reading is contained in it. Second, she also does not seem to realize that one might want to read the passage along the lines that Lawrence (2006; 2009) does where “τὸ ἔος” is understood not as “the faring well” but as “the functioning successfully.”

\(^{32}\) Barney (2008, 312) with the first emphasis added.

\(^{33}\) Barney (2008, 313) says that it seems to follow from her interpretation of Aristotle that “Aristotelian functions can belong to their bearers only essentially, not under per accidens descriptions. (That is, Simon can have a function qua shoemaker only if it is also Simon’s function simpliciter—qua Simon, or qua human being.)” Note that it is not enough for her argument that the exercising of a craft requires exercising of reason. For acting well as a hit man also requires the exercising of reason but she thinks (2009, 312n.39) that “being a hit man” cannot be part of the essence of human in the way that “being a shoemaker” can.
Aristotle’s use of the phrase “καὶ πρᾶξις” (1097b26) because she thinks that only humans are capable of “πρᾶξις” (“action”).

Barney does not spell out the structure of the ergon argument, but her interpretation of Section A suggests that it ought to be reconstructed as follows:

P1: 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. [=the claim of Section A: “The Rationale”]
P2: A human being has an ergon. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33.]
C1: Therefore, the good of a human being, qua human—his or her flourishing as a human—consists in is the human ergon well accomplished. [from P1 and P2]
P3: The function of a human is living with the part of the soul having reason
C2: So, the human good, i.e. the good of a human, consists in living (with the part of the soul having reason) successfully or well. [from C1 and P3]
P4: To function well is to function on the basis of virtue.
C3: So, the good of a human being, qua human—its flourishing as a human, consists in living (with the part of the soul having reason) on the basis of virtue. [from P4 and C2]

So reconstructed, the argument is valid. But I do not take it to be sound (because I think the first premise is false) and I do not take it to be the right sort of argument for Aristotle’s purposes.

Two comments are worth making right away. First, I focus on Barney’s reading in rest of this section because hers seems to be the most developed of the “flourishing” readings of Section A (and of the ergon argument as a whole), but I’ll also make some remarks that apply more broadly. Second, I believe if we adopt the recovered concept of an ergon, which we discussed

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34 Barney (2008, 311n.36). Her interpretation of πρᾶξις is similar to the one I advanced in Chapter 2 but not the same. For, as I explained, Aristotle in the NE allows for the possibility that some animals (namely, tame ones) are capable of πρᾶξις because they are capable of obeying reason to some degree.

35 I have in fact only seen one reconstruction of the ergon argument that is clearly a “good for” or “flourishing” interpretation, and this is Pakaluk’s (2005, 80):

1. A good human being, that is, someone who has the virtues, carries out the human function well.
2. For something to carry out its function well is for it to attain what is good for it.
3. Thus, a good human being attains what is good for him.

Pakaluk’s second premise does commit him to thinking that for a shoemaker to carry out its function well is for the shoemaker to attain what is good for him. But I do not consider Pakaluk’s reading in detail, and this for three reasons. First, I think that many of my criticisms of Barney’s argument also apply to Pakaluk’s. Second, Pakaluk, unlike Barney and Irwin, locates the ergon-welfare principle in Section D: 1098a7-12, but he does not say how it is
at length in previous chapters, then Barney’s version of the GF-principle—“X’s flourishing is X’s ergon accomplished well”—has problems. A well-made sculpture is the sculptor’s ergon accomplished well, but a well-made sculpture is not the “flourishing” or “faring well” of a sculptor. There is, however, a way of salvaging the GF-principle, and we will consider it later on.

Central to Barney’s interpretation is the claim that excellent artisanal activities (shoemaking, housebuilding, etc.) can sometimes count as low-grade versions of eudaimonia. In the last chapter we noted two problems for this claim: first, Aristotle locates eudaimonia in the soul but housebuilding in the house, and second, he identifies eudaimonia as a complete activity but housebuilding as an incomplete activity. We should also note that Aristotle appears to deny that both artisans and ‘banausic’ artisans are happy: “But if the guardians are not happy, who is? Surely not the artisans [οἱ γε τεχνῖται] or the multitude of vulgar artisans [τὸ πλῆθος τὸ τῶν βαναύσων]” (Politics II 5, 1264b22-24). Barney attempts to diffuse such passages by denying “an identity of the technical and the banausic,” but that does not go far enough since here Aristotle denies happiness to both banausic artisans and artisans in general. Aristotle also explicitly makes the claim of Section A with respect to every artisan (1097b26).

But now let us look at Barney’s interpretation of Section A in its own terms. Consider the case of what I will call the Sisyphean Sculptor. A sculptor spends his whole life sculpting well—thus, he is flourishing as a sculptor, according to Barney. However, every time that the sculptor is about to finish a sculpture, someone comes along and destroys it. This happens

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supposed to be found there, and I cannot see how it would be. Third, Pakaluk’s reconstruction clearly does not arrive the actual conclusion of the ergon argument, which is the definition of the human good (1098a16-18).
36 There is a ‘flourishing’ reading of Section A that wouldn’t be immediately falsified by the recovered concept of an ergon. For if one heard “is in” (1097b27-28) as “depends on,” the claim of Section A would be “The faring well of anything with an work and an action depends on that thing’s work.” But the interpretation of “is in” as “depends on” is not attractive, as we will see later.
37 Barney (2008, 314)
through his entire life. Does it seem plausible to say that this person is flourishing as a sculptor? It seems not. Yet this is what Barney is committed to saying precisely by identifying the flourishing of a sculptor as his sculpting, which is an incomplete activity. But suppose she wanted to say that we should always think of the sculpting well as requiring that a sculpture be made. Even so revised, the account leads to implausible results, and to see this, we need only consider a slight variant on Sisyphean Sculptor. A sculptor spends his whole life sculpting well, but just after he completes each sculpture, someone comes along and destroys it. Here the sculptor does succeed in making a sculpture, but he is clearly not “flourishing” as sculptor. As we will see when we discuss my own interpretation, I think she and others may be right in supposing that Aristotle in the ergon argument is discussing the good for an X. However, by restricting this to an activity, Barney and others are misconstruing this good for an X. As we will later see, Aristotle seems to consider the good for a sculptor to be the sculpture.

But now let us set aside the problems we have so far considered, granting to Barney her interpretation Section A. We should now ask: is the argument that results from her interpretation the right sort of argument for Aristotle’s purposes? It does not seem so. Even if this argument establishes that “an activity of living of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue” is a human’s flourishing as a human, it does not follow that this activity is the best thing accomplishable in action by a human—which is the only characterization that Aristotle has given of the human good. Why? Consider the case of the sculptor. Even if sculpting well is a sculptor’s flourishing as a sculptor, it does not follow that this is the best good accomplishable by a sculptor.

One can articulate this same point in another way. Given Aristotle’s distinction between complete and incomplete activities and given his characterization of the human good as the best
good, then any argument that defines the human good as an activity will need to ensure that this is a complete activity. Barney’s reconstruction does not do this. For all her reconstruction says, the human good could have turned out to be an incomplete activity. In fact, as we saw, certain paradigmatic incomplete activities can, according to Barney, be considered low-grade versions of eudaimonia.

I now make a few remarks about the notion of “flourishing” more generally. Interpreters and contemporary neo-Aristotelians alike seem to think that this is a notion that is central to Aristotle’s ethics and his understanding of eudaimonia. Barney, as we saw, equates it with eudaimonia and considers it pivotal to the ergon argument. But there is reason to be cautious. Perhaps surprisingly, it is doubtful that our concept of flourishing straightforwardly maps onto anything in Aristotle. Though one might initially think “τὸ ἔθιμα” or “eudaimonia” could be understood as “flourishing,” this is unlikely. As we will see, elsewhere in other key passages of the NE “τὸ ἔθιμα” does not mean “flourishing” or even “the doing well.” As for “eudaimonia,” it seems to have a quite different extension from “flourishing.” First, our concept of “flourishing” applies primarily to biological organisms (thus, Barney speaks of a horse’s “flourishing”38), but Aristotle explicitly denies that animals other than man can have a share in eudaimonia (NE X 8, 1178b24-28). And second, because our concept of flourishing is intimately tied to notions of maturation and growth, it seems inappropriate to say that something that does not change flourishes. But, according to Aristotle, God does not change (Meta. A 9, 1072a25, 1074b26), and yet he is “above all other beings blessed and happy” (NE X 8, 1178b9), being himself the primary instance of eudaimonia.

38 Barney (2008, 301).
4.8 “τὸ εὖ” as “Functioning Successfully”

Though the majority of interpretations presuppose that some notion of “the good for an X” is at play in Section A of the ergon argument, there are exceptions. Gavin Lawrence, whom we discuss in this section, thinks that when Aristotle speaks of “the well” (“τὸ εὖ”) in Section A, he is speaking of “the functioning successfully,” where this need not bring in any notion of “the good for an X.” As for the datives in Section A, Lawrence understands them to be datives of relation, not datives of interest. Here is how he formulates the claim of Section A:

[Lawrence: Claim of Section A] 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.40

Some words of explanation are in order. First, when Lawrence speaks of “the X-an good,” he means to express the idea that in the case of each thing with an ergon, there is some good analogous to what Aristotle calls “the human good” in the case of humans (cf. 1094b7, 1098a16). Second, he understands “the X-an good” to be the same as what Aristotle calls “the good of an X” (NE I 7, 1097a18-22) where this is “the end of an X”: e.g. “the good of a knife—the knife-an good—is its end, cutting.”41 This yields the following three equivalences for any “functional thing” X. (And in this section, X always refers to a ‘functional’ thing.)

the X-an good = the good of an X = the end of an X

39 Lorenz (2005) also does not think that the good for an X (in the sense of the non-instrumentally beneficial good for an X) is what is under discussion in the ergon argument.
41 Lawrence (2009, 214).
Lawrence understands the claim of Section A to require two further equivalences. First, he says the X-an good “consists in” the functioning successfully of an X, and by this he means that it just is the functioning successfully of an X.\(^{42}\) Second, when Lawrence speaks of “doing its function successfully or well” he intends to convey that “well” and “successfully” are equivalent.\(^{43}\) We thus get:

\[\text{the X-an good} = \text{the functioning successfully of an X} = \text{the functioning well of an X}\]

But why should we think that these last equivalences hold?

Here it is helpful to see how Lawrence reformulates the principle of Section A and applies it to the case of a knife: “In types of functional thing, their good—their end and organizing principle—is constituted by their function: actually cutting well is the good of—or success (\textit{to eu}) in—the knife.”\(^{44}\) Here Lawrence again makes clear that he equates “the good of an X” with “the end of an X.” He also intends to equate “the end of an X” with “the function of an X,” and I take him to be saying as much when he says that the end of a thing is “constituted by” its function. This is clear later when Lawrence speaks of “the notion of X’s function or end.”\(^{45}\) And so we get:

\[\text{the end of an X} = \text{the function of an X}\]

And in the last passage there are two more equivalences implicit in the phrase “the good of—or success (\textit{to eu}) in—the knife.” By his parenthesis, Lawrence implies that “\(\tau\circ\varepsilon\) of an X is the

\(^{42}\) Lawrence (2009, 192) also clearly equates “is” and “consists in” in a diagram of the account of the human good, where we read “is/consists in”\(^{43}\) Lawrence (2009, 192) also clearly equates “well” and “successfully” when he speaks of “R-ing well/successfully.”\(^{44}\) Lawrence (2009, 215).\(^{45}\) Lawrence (2009, 216). This is because he takes there to be a single notion (“the notion”) of something’s “function or end.”
success of an X. And by his use of dashes, he implies that the good of an X is equivalent to the
success of an X. This gives us:

the good of an X = the success of an X = an X’s τὸ ἔὖ

All together Lawrence seems to be committed to (at least) seven equivalences for any “functional
thing” X:

the X-an good = the good of an X = the end of an X = the function of an X =
τὸ ἔὖ of an X = the success of an X =
the functioning successfully of an X = the functioning well of an X

To understand why Lawrence thinks these equivalences to make sense, two remarks may help.
First, Lawrence assumes that the success of an X is the same as the functioning successfully of
an X. He offers no argument for this, but it is required by his other equivalences, and he perhaps
affirms it directly in yet another reformulation of Section A’s claim: “with [functional items]
their good or success lies in their functioning successfully.”

Second, in order for his account
to work, Lawrence must equate an X’s functioning with an X’s functioning well (τὸ ἔὖ). How
does he do this? He first understands functioning well as functioning successfully, and then
understands functioning “successfully” as functioning “correctly”—apparently on the
assumption that functioning incorrectly is not really functioning. For our present purposes,
though, I am going to set this last issue aside, and return to it in the next chapter.

46 Lawrence (2009, 216). Earlier Lawrence claimed that the good of an X “consists in” functioning successfully (215).
48 Lawrence (2009, 216) speaks of “our proper functioning, our acting correctly and successfully.” He also equates
the end of an X with “fullest possible actualization of an X” (215).
49 Here I should clarify that while I do think there is some threshold below which the incorrect activity of an X will
no longer count as an activity of an X. For example, if a performance on the flute is bad enough, it will no longer
count as a performance on the flute. However, this threshold seems to be rather low, and thus many bad
performances will still count as performances.
Lawrence does not spell out the structure of the ergon argument, but his interpretation of
Section A suggests that it ought to be reconstructed as follows.

**P1:** Where the X is something with a function, the X-an good, i.e. the good of an X, consists in doing its function successfully or well. [=the claim of Section A: “The Rationale”]

**P2:** A human being has an ergon. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33.]

**C1:** Therefore, the human good, i.e. the good of a human being consists in the human ergon accomplished successfully or well. [from P2 and P3]

**P3:** The function of a human is living with the part of the soul having reason

**C2:** So, the human good, i.e. the good of a human, consists in living (with the part of the soul having reason) successfully or well. [from C1 and P3]

**P4:** To function well is to function on the basis of virtue.

**C3:** So, the human good, i.e. the good of a human, consists in living (with the part of the soul having reason) on the basis of virtue. [from P4 and C2]

So reconstructed, the argument is valid. But I do not believe it is sound (because I believe the first premise is false), and I do not believe that it gives us the right sort of argument for Aristotle’s purposes.

I begin by discussing how Lawrence thinks of “the end of an X.” First, Lawrence (like Lear and Aquinas) thinks both that the ergon of an X is the proper functioning of an X and that the ergon of an X is the end of an X. In the previous chapter I explained why Aristotle thinks that productive activities cannot be ends. In particular, Aristotle thinks that the proper functioning of a housebuilder cannot be the end of a housebuilder, and this is because the he thinks that the activity of housebuilding is by nature a means to an end—its end being a house. Consequently, the proper functioning of a housebuilder is not the end of a housebuilder. I also think that Lawrence should have realized this. For when he explains what he has in mind by “the end of an X,” he cites NE 1097a18-22, where Aristotle clearly identifies the end of the housebuilding-art as a house (1097a20).\(^{50}\)

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\(^{50}\) Aristotle perhaps even considers the case where the productive activity is successfully achieving its end—e.g. “health” (γίανσις)—but at EE II 1 Aristotle says: “health is the ergon of the doctoring-art and not the activity of
Second, as I explained in chapter 2, I take the language of “the end of something” to be vague. For something can have more than one end. For example, the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, *qua housebuilding-art*, exists is a house, but the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, *qua thing accomplishable in action*, exists is eudaimonia. I believe it is because Lawrence articulates no such a distinction that he is led to equate the human ergon (which is the end of a human, qua human) with the human good (which is the end of all things accomplishable in action). There are, I believe, a number of reasons to resist this equation, and we will discuss them in what follows and also when we come to section D of the ergon argument (1098a8-11), where Aristotle explains that virtue enables an ergon to be accomplished well.

But for the moment, let us set aside these two difficulties and consider, in Lawrence’s own terms, the notion of “success” that he detects in Section A. As we noted above, Lawrence holds to the following equivalences:

\[ \tau \, \varepsilon \, \upsilon \, of \, an \, X = \text{the success of an X} = \text{the functioning successfully of an X} \]

Since the success of an X is equivalent to the functioning successfully of an X, Lawrence must think that the two would never come apart. Yet there are reasons to think that they can. Consider the case of the housebuilder. According to Lawrence, \( \tau \, \varepsilon \, \upsilon \) of a housebuilder is his building successfully. However, it makes perfect sense to say: Though John was *successfully* building a house, he did not *succeed* in building a house.\(^5\) Or perhaps more strikingly: Though John was *successfully* building a house, he was not *successful* in building a house. Both sentences are well-formed and meaningful, and they give us good reason to suppose that there is

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healing or doctoring” (1219a15-16). Also, in *Metaphysics* Θ 6, “healing” is given as an example of an incomplete activity.

\(^5\) Otherwise put, just because you were building a house successfully it does not follow that you successfully built a house.
at least some notion of success that can be pried apart from the notion of functioning successfully. Of course, we might naturally wonder what happened that prevented John from completing the house. (Did he get sick? Did he run out of money?) Nevertheless, it remains a perfectly intelligible possibility that John was successfully building a house (by laying the foundation, say, or raising a wall), even though he did not succeed in building that house.

Why exactly is this? When we speak of someone “successfully building a house,” the adverb “successfully” modifies an activity that is by nature incomplete. As we saw in chapter 3, the reason it is incomplete is because there is a certain “not yet” intrinsic to it. For so long as the activity of housebuilding is going on, it has not yet succeeded in accomplishing the end for the sake of which it exists: a house. Once the house is accomplished, the activity of housebuilding stops. Thus, at any moment when one could say that so-and-so was building a house successfully, there will always be a certain lack of success intrinsic to that activity.

Why doesn’t Lawrence seem to see this? Part of the reason may be that Lawrence generally eschews discussing cases of incomplete activities.52 Instead, when explaining his interpretation of Section A, Lawrence focuses on cases of complete activities: seeing, living, etc. Yet in the case of complete activities, the notions of “functioning successfully” and of “success” do not come apart. For example, it does not make sense to say: John was living successfully but did not succeed in living. Nor does it make sense to say: John was cutting successfully but did not succeed in cutting. And so I suspect that it is because he does not closely attend to the cases of incomplete activities (housebuilding, sculpting, etc.) that he considers the principle that he finds in Section A true, much less “self-evident.”53

52 Though, to his credit, he does mention the case of sculpting at (2009, 198).
53 Lawrence (2009, 216).
In response to my argument, one might very well want to stipulate that in any case of “functioning successfully” the end is always achieved.\textsuperscript{54} One might stipulate that, for example, whenever someone is building a house successfully, he always succeeds in building that house. However, there are serious problems for this sort of move. If we remember that “successfully” is introduced as a gloss on “ἐὖ” (1097b27), which literally means “well,” the stipulation looks unjustifiable. For it is makes perfect sense to say that someone was building a house well, but did not succeed in building a house. Second, one could understand the stipulation in more than one way: either whenever someone is housebuilding successfully they always succeed in building a house, or whenever someone is housebuilding successfully, a house is being successfully built. But in the latter case, it still remains true that one could engage in building a house successfully without succeeding in building a house. And in the former case, there remains the rather implausible result that one could never engage in building a house successfully without succeeding in building a house. Thus, if someone comes along just as the house is about to be completed and destroys the house, then in such a case the housebuilder was never building a house successfully. And third, even if we grant the stipulation, it still remains that housebuilding and a house are different entities, just as every coming-to-be is different in kind from its end (\textit{NE VII 11}, 1152b13-14). But if both a house and its coming-to-be are necessary for success to be achieved, why locate success in the coming-to-be of a house instead of in the end that is the house?

We should now set aside the problems we have so far considered, ignoring the question of whether the claim that Lawrence detects in Section A is true or false. But we can now ask: is this the right sort of argument for Aristotle’s purposes? It does not seem so. The simplest and

\textsuperscript{54} Lawrence (2009, 218) takes the first steps in making this sort of response when he writes, “of course with producings, whether they are successful or not depends at least in part on whether they result (or tend to result) in good products.”
strongest reason for rejecting Lawrence’s interpretation is one that we saw before. Even if “an activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue” is somehow the success (in the sense of the successful functioning) of a human being, it remains an open question whether this activity is the best thing that a human can accomplish. Why? Consider the case of the sculptor. Even if sculpting well is somehow the ‘success’ of a sculptor, it still is not the best thing that a sculptor can accomplish. The best thing accomplishable by a sculptor is a certain well-crafted sculpture. This is because, as Aristotle clearly affirms at NE I 1, when an activity has an end beyond itself, that end is by nature better than the activity that produced it. An excellent sculpture, then, is always better than an excellent activity of sculpting. Consequently, if Aristotle were employing the principle that Lawrence say he is, the premises of the ergon argument would not allow him to conclude anything about what is the best good accomplishable by a human being. But, as we have been noting, the ergon argument is offered as an attempt to get clearer on the human good—which is identified merely as the best good accomplishable by human beings in action. In the lead-up to NE I 7, Aristotle does not describe the human good as “functioning successfully” or the “success” of a human, but only as the best of all things accomplishable by humans in action.

Just as we did when discussing Barney, we can articulate this problem in a different way. Given Aristotle’s distinction between complete and incomplete activities and given his characterization of the human good as the best good, then an argument that determines what the human good is will need to ensure that it turns out to be a complete activity. But Lawrence’s reconstruction does not do this. For all his reconstruction says, the human good could have turned out to be an incomplete activity. For the sculptor’s good and success, according to Lawrence, is an incomplete activity: sculpting well. And so, if it were to have turned out that the
success of a human was eliminating the suffering of other living things, Lawrence could have no principled reason (on the basis of his interpretation of the argument) to be surprised by this. Nevertheless, given Aristotle’s theory, eliminating suffering could not be the best thing achievable by a human being. For besides the fact that you could engage in eliminating the suffering of others without that suffering ever being eliminated, Aristotle clearly thinks that the suffering having been eliminated is a better accomplishment than merely having been engaged in the activity of eliminating suffering.

4.9 Back to “τὸ εὖ”

In order to present my own interpretation of Section A, we need to revisit the question of how to understand and translate “τὸ εὖ.” Though I agree with the majority of interpreters that “τὸ εὖ” of something (at least in the ergon argument) is that thing’s ergon accomplished well, I do not agree that something’s ergon must always be its proper activity. And if we suppose that an ergon is in some cases an activity and in other cases a product, we should understand “τὸ εὖ” accordingly. On this reading, something’s “εὖ” will in some cases be a well-performed activity and in others a well-made product. For example, the sculptor’s “εὖ” will be his well-made sculpture. And so the phrase “τὸ εὖ” at 1097b27 in Section A will mean something like “the well accomplished thing” or “the excellent accomplishment,”55 where the elided Greek would perhaps be “τὸ εὖ πρακτόν” or “τὸ εὖ πραχθέν.” I should also add that this reading easily accommodates all the evidence for the “doing well” interpretation. For while τὸ εὖ of an X

55 Either is inevitably somewhat of an overtranslation given the minimal character of the Greek, and sometimes (for the purpose of clarity) I continue to use “the well” in what follows.
might sometimes refer to a “doing well” (a kitharist’s excellent performance or a human’s excellent activity of living) that is not what τὸ ἔὖ means. Yet I want to be clear that I do not take Aristotle to be assuming that “the excellent accomplishment” of a thing somehow just means the ergon accomplished well. Rather the claim of Section A makes a highly plausible, yet substantive claim about what sort of thing the excellent accomplishment of each thing with an ergon would seem to be: namely, the ergon accomplished well.

I think we should give serious consideration to the reading of τὸ ἔὖ as “the excellent accomplishment” merely on the basis of the evidence that we considered in the last two chapters, but there are textual reasons as well. Consider the next two uses of τὸ ἔὖ in the NE. The first comes in NE II 4, where Aristotle notes a key difference between art and virtue: “[T]he things that come about by art have the well [τὸ ἔὖ] in themselves. And so it suffices for them to come to be of a certain quality” (1105a27-28). Here Aristotle indicates that in the case of art, τὸ ἔὖ is found in what comes to be by that art: the product or activity, as the case may be. Second, there is NE II 6, where Aristotle uses “τὸ ἔὖ” while arguing for the “doctrine of the mean.” He writes:

Every expertise [ἐπιστήμη] accomplishes its ergon well by focusing on the mean, and making the erga conform to that. This is why people regularly comment that it is not possible to add anything to or take anything away from good erga [τοῖς ἔὐ ἔχουσιν ἔργοις], since excess or deficiency ruins a good accomplishment [τὸ ἔὖ], while the mean preserves it. And good artisans [τεχνίται], we say, work with an eye to this. (NE II 6, 1106b8-14)

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56 This interpretation of τὸ ἔὖ seems to be confirmed by Aspasius, who in his commentary fills out Aristotle’s τὸ ἔὖ of NE I 7, 1097b27 as τὸ ἔὖ προσλαμβάνον (17. 21), which he takes to apply equally to activities and products. (However, I am not sure how to translate this phrase.) To be clear, I am not suggesting that “τὸ ἔὖ” is ambiguous between the two meanings as the English ‘bank’ can be ambiguous between a financial institution and the border of a body of water. Rather I am agreeing with Aspasius that, just as ergon is not ambiguous between an activity and a product, “τὸ ἔὖ” is not ambiguous between an excellent activity and an excellent product: rather, it comprises both by being more general, namely, by meaning “the well [−]” where this can refer either something well performed or something well made.

57 ἐὰν δὴ πᾶσα ἐπιστήμη οὐτω τὸ ἔργον ἔὐ ἐπιτελεῖ, πρὸς τὸ μέσον βλέπουσα καὶ εἰς τὸ τότε ἔγονα τὰ ἔργα (ὅθεν εἰσεῖς ἐπιλέγειν τοῖς ἔὐ ἔχουσιν ἔργοις ὅτι οὔτ’ ἀφελέν ἐστιν οὔτε προσθεῖναι, ὡς τῆς μὲν ὑπερβολῆς καὶ τῆς ἐλλείψεως φθειροῦσης τὸ ἔυ, τῆς δὲ μεσότητος συνούσης, οἱ δ’ ἁγαθοὶ τεχνίται, ὡς λέγομεν, πρὸς τούτο βλέποντες ἔργαζονται).
This passage is especially relevant for us because both its topic and its language connects back to the ergon argument. *NE* II 6 develops the notion of virtue first introduced in *NE* I 7. In both passages Aristotle assumes the virtue of an artisan is analogous to the virtue of a human, and he also assumes that the virtue of an artisan is what allows him to accomplish his ergon well.

When he speaks of the artisan’s ergon in the second sentence of the passage above, he must be thinking not, in the case of the sculptor, of the sculptor’s *sculpting*, but of his *sculpture*. This is the sort of thing that one cannot “add anything to or take anything away from” (1106b10-11). Interpreters understand this, and that is why most translate “ergon” here as “product.” Nevertheless, the context shows this translation cannot be completely right. Why? Aristotle speaks of “*every* expertise” (1106b8), and we know that some expertises do not issue in products. For example, the kitharist’s art is an expertise, but the ergon of the kitharist is an activity, his performance on the kithara (κιθαρίζειν, 1098a12). Thus, at *NE* II 6 Aristotle seems to think that while the ergon of the kitharist is his performance, the ergon of a sculptor is his sculpture—and similarly that τὸ εὖ of a kitharist is his excellent performance and the τὸ εὖ of a sculptor is his excellent sculpture. Consequently, this passage seems to constitute yet further evidence that the unified concept of an ergon is present in the *NE*. Now consider how Aristotle uses “τὸ εὖ.” In the second sentence of this passage, “τὸ εὖ” (1106b12) seems to be a sort of shorthand for “τὸ εὖ ἔχον ἔργον” (“the [artisan’s] excellent ergon” 1106b10). This lines up with the way he uses the phrase in the ergon argument at 1098a12, where τὸ εὖ is equivalent to τὸ εὖ κιθαρίζειν—the kitharist’s ergon accomplished well.58 Since the passage from *NE* II 6 seems to presuppose the recovered concept of an ergon, “τὸ εὖ” must mean something like “the excellent accomplishment,” where this can refer either to an excellent activity or to an excellent product.

For while τὸ εὖ of a kitharist is his excellent performance and τὸ εὖ of a sculptor is his excellent

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58 The anonymous paraphraser (in Heylbut [1889]) glosses “τὸ εὖ” as “τὸ εὖ κιθαρίζειν” (14.10)
sculpture. And this way to understand τὸ εὖ is, of course, how we are proposing to understand it in section A of the ergon argument. When Aristotle speaks of “the good, that is, the well” ("τὰ γάθον καὶ τὸ εὖ") he is speaking of “the good, that is, the excellent accomplishment.”

4.10 The Claim of Section A

Supposing that Aristotle in NE I 7 uses “ἔργον” to express what I have called the recovered concept of an ergon, and supposing that he intends “τὸ εὖ” to be understood as something like “τὸ εὖ πραχθέν,” a natural translation of which would be “the excellent accomplishment,” the most plausible interpretation of the basic claim of Section A would seem to be this:

[Baker: Claim of Section A] If anything has an ergon and an action, the excellent accomplishment of that thing (as such) is in its ergon.

The language of “is in” may seem obscure, and more than one interpretation is perhaps possible. Yet I take the most defensible to be this: the excellent accomplishment is in the ergon as something specific is in something more general. This reading seems natural, and Aristotle explicitly countenances this use of the word “ἐν” at Physics IV 3, where in explaining the way something may be in a place he also says that one thing may be in another “as man is in animal, and in general a species in a genus” (210a17-18). (For further discussion of how “ἐν” should be interpreted here, see below.) If this is correct, then the claim of Section A amounts to something like this:
This seems to me a very reasonable claim. The excellent accomplishment for a sculptor does seem to be an excellent sculpture, and the excellent accomplishment for a flautist does seem to be an excellent performance on the flute.

Yet I hasten to add two clarificatory remarks. First, when Aristotle uses the phrase “τὸ εὖ” in the ergon argument, I do not think it means “excellent ergon,” but (as I have said) something less determinate, something like “excellent accomplishment.” Aristotle does not utter a tautology when he says that if something has an ergon and an action, its τὸ εὖ is its ergon accomplished well, but he seems to expect ready assent. The excellent accomplishment (τὸ εὖ) of a sculptor is, naturally enough, an excellent sculpture. Second, when Aristotle speaks of the excellent accomplishment of a sculptor, he is clearly thinking of the excellent accomplishment of a sculptor, qua sculptor. For a sculptor might also be a bridle maker, and he will certainly be a human, but the excellent accomplishment of a sculptor, qua sculptor, will not be an excellent bridle or a virtuous activity of living but an excellent sculpture.

Yet why should Aristotle think the claim of Section A, so understood, will be helpful in understanding the human good? Remember again how the ergon argument is introduced. It is offered as an attempt to get clearer on the “best thing” (τὸ ἄριστον), by which he means the best thing “accomplishable by a human being in action” (πρακτὸν ἄνθρωπῳ, 1096b34). And so it makes perfect sense for Aristotle to say that in the case of anything with an ergon and an action, the excellent accomplishment is found in the ergon. Just as the excellent accomplishment of a sculptor will be a certain sculpture, so the excellent accomplishment of a human being will be a certain activity of living. And just as the best accomplishment of a sculptor will be a certain excellent sculpture, so the best accomplishment of a human being will be a certain excellent
activity of living. I take this to be the basic idea that Aristotle means to convey in Section A, though as we’ll see, there are some important complications.

4.11 The Premises and Conclusions of the Ergon Argument of NE 1 7

This interpretation of Section A puts us in a position to understand how the ergon argument works as a whole. Aristotle begins by assuming that the human good is the best of all things accomplishable in action by a human being. Then, on the assumption that the best accomplishment will be found wherever the excellent accomplishment is found, he explains that the excellent accomplishment of a human will be found in the general class (or kind) of the human ergon, if a human has an ergon (1097b25-28). He determines that a human has an ergon (1097b28-33), and that this is an activity of the part of the soul having reason (1097b33-1098a7). He then explains that to accomplish something well/excellently is to accomplish it on the basis of virtue (1098a7-12), and this leads him to provisionally identify the human good as “activity of [the rational part] of the soul on the basis of virtue” (1098a16-17). Then, as I understand it, Aristotle gives two further criteria that this excellent accomplishment must meet if it is to be the best accomplishment of a human being: “if there are more virtues than one, it must be on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue” (1098a17-18) and it must occur “in a teleion [i.e. complete] life” (1098a18).

Below I list the premises and conclusions of the ergon argument in roughly the order in which they are found in the text. To make the overall structure clear, I omit sub-arguments (the arguments that a human has ergon [1097b28-33] and the argument that the human ergon is an activity of the part of the soul having reason [1097b33-1098a4]) as well some informative details
(what Aristotle means by “part of the soul having reason” [1098a4-7]). After each premise I indicate in parentheses the sections of the text on which it is based. I have also supplied implicit premises (P5 and P6) and conclusions (C1, C2 and C3). These are not explicitly stated in the text of the argument for different reasons. I believe Aristotle does not state C1, C2 and C3 because he considers them to be obvious from the flow of the argument. He does not state P5 because he has articulated his understanding of what it is to be “teleion” earlier in NE I 7 at 1097a15-1097b5. He does not state P6 for similar reasons, though he does partially articulate the premise just after the conclusion of the argument at 1098a18-20.

**P0:** The human good is the best accomplishment of a human (1097b22-23).

**P1:** For anything has an ergon and an action, the excellent accomplishment of that thing is its ergon excellently accomplished (1097b25-28 [“The Rationale”]).

**P2:** A human being has an ergon. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33.]

**C1:** Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is the human ergon excellently accomplished. [from P1 and P2]

**P3:** The ergon of a human being is an activity of the part of the soul having reason (1098a7-8). [From sub-argument in 1097b33-1098a4.]

**C2:** Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is an activity of the part of the soul having reason, accomplished excellently. [from C1 and P3]

**P4:** If an ergon is accomplished excellently, it is accomplished on the basis of virtue/excellence (1098a15; cf. 1098a8-12).

**C3:** Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is an activity of the part of the soul having reason, on the basis of virtue (1098a16-17). [from C2 and P4]

**P5:** Activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason, is better if it is accomplished on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue, when there are more virtues than one (cf. 1097a28-30).

**P6:** Activity on the basis of virtue of the part of the human soul having reason, is better if it occurs in a teleion life (1098a18-20; cf. 1097a28-20).

**C4:** Therefore, “the human good turns out to be activity of <the rational part of human> the soul on the basis of virtue, and if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue, and moreover in a teleion life” (1098a16-18). [from P0, C3, P5, P6]
Right now we are primarily focusing on the argument through C3. Later (in chapter 6) we will discuss P6, P7, and C4 in more detail since there is more than one way of interpreting these that is still compatible with the general picture that I have in mind. But I should begin by noting that the single most attractive feature of my reconstruction is that it allows the ergon argument to be what Aristotle offers it as: an attempt to determine what is the best thing accomplishable in action by a human. This requires us to include P0 (“The human good is the best accomplishment of a human being”) as a premise in the argument.\(^5^9\) It also requires that we interpret Section A as we do, which gives us P1. And of course, our use of P0 and our interpretation of Section A make sense only because we are working with the recovered concept of an ergon.

A few advantages of my reconstruction are worth pointing out. First, none of the premises of the ergon argument on its own requires that the best good not be a product (and thus external good). This is attractive because just after the ergon argument, Aristotle evaluates the account of the best good that he has given by comparing it with the common reputable beliefs (that is, endoxa) of others and he says, “Our account is also correct in saying that some sort of actions and activities are the end; for in that way the end turns out [\(\gamma\iota\nu\varepsilon\tau\alpha\iota\)] to be a good of the soul, not an external good” (I 7, 1098b18-20). This is notable because Aristotle seems to assume that it merely “turns out” from his argument that the best good is not an external good, and this would seem to require that no premise explicitly states that the good for anything with an ergon is always some sort of an activity. But on the way that Lawrence, Barney and indeed most, if not all, interpreters understand the first premise, this is assumed from the very beginning.

Second, the conclusion of the ergon argument seems to include a specification of the human good that includes the last two criteria: “on the basis of the best virtue” and “in a

\(^{5^9}\) I list this premise as “P0” in order to allow for an easy comparison between the premises of my reconstruction and the premises of the reconstructions that I give on behalf of Barney and Lawrence.
complete life.” But on traditional ways of reconstructing the argument it has been hard to see how such a specification connects to the premises of the argument, and for this reason many people speak as though the definition of the human good was merely “an activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue.” As I will discuss in chapter 6, there are some ways of defending the traditional readings of the argument, but on my interpretation there is a clear explanation. Because we include P0, it makes sense for Aristotle to include these criteria insofar as they help to specify the best thing accomplishable in action. Somewhat relatedly, it is also worth noting that on the way I have reconstructed Aristotle’s argument his concluding account need not be definitive. There may be yet more requirements that must be met if even this is to be the best good, and this is as it should be. For just after the ergon argument Aristotle says that this account is only provisional; it is an outline that must be filled in (1098a20-22).

And third, my interpretation can allow there to be truth in opposing views. For example, one can with Lawrence, maintain that τὸ εὖ of an X is the success of an X at least so long, of course, as one does not equate the success of an X with the functioning successfully of an X. As we have seen, in the case of incomplete activities, some notion of success does come apart from functioning successfully—since someone could have been successfully building a house without ever succeeding in building a house. But if we understand the success of a housebuilder as the excellent house, we can agree that τὸ εὖ of an X is the success of an X. Can we, though, agree with Barney and others that Aristotle is discussing the good for an X in the ergon argument? In the next section I discuss this very question.

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60 Roche (1988, 182-184), for example, thinks they do not follow. Few people have discussed how exactly the criteria are supposed to follow. In fact, many interpreters articulate the conclusion of the ergon argument as “an activity of the soul on the basis of virtue,” thereby leaving out the two final criteria. I discuss this thoroughly in chapter 6.

61 Nevertheless, “success” does not seem to me an acceptable rendering of τὸ εὖ because we also need this good to link up to the idea of the best thing accomplishable in action. Also, if one thinks that there is room for a distinction between τὸ εὖ of a human and τὸ ἄριστον of a human, then we will want to identify the human good as the best success of a human, but this seems a little awkward in English.
4.12 The Excellent Accomplishment of a Human and the Good for a Human

Lawrence maintains that the good under discussion in the ergon argument is the success of an X, where this does not involve any notion of the good for that X. Consequently he understands the datives in Section A to be datives of relation, not datives of interest. Given how we have interpreted Section A, how should we take the datives? For all I have so far said, I believe that I could take the datives in either way. I could, like Lawrence, take them to be merely datives of relation, in which case the claim would be:

[First Claim]  *In the case of* anything with an ergon and an action, the good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment will be found in the ergon. [Claim of Section A with datives of relation]

Alternatively, I could, presumably like Barney (though she does not talk about the datives), take them to be datives of interest (as well as datives of relation), in which case the claim would be:

[Second Claim] The good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment *for* anything with an ergon and an action will be found in the ergon. [Claim of Section A with datives of interest.]

The *first claim* Aristotle would consider to be obviously true, and he must be making this claim if his argument is to give a definition of the best good achievable by humans in action. But is Aristotle also making the *second claim*? In order to answer this we will need to determine (1)
whether Aristotle would consider the claim to be true and (2) whether he has good reason to be making this claim in the ergon argument.

At first glance, the second claim may seem rather implausible. For when a doctor creates excellent health in a patient, that health (which is the ergon of the doctor) is most obviously a good not for the doctor, but for the patient. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that Aristotle would consider the second claim to be true. Evidence for this comes at NE IX 7 in his discussion of benefactors and beneficiaries. There he explains why benefactors love beneficiaries more than the beneficiaries love them. In doing so, he disagrees with the common view that the case of benefactors and beneficiaries is just like the case of creditors and debtors, where the creditor loves the debtor because he wants to be repaid. He notes that the cases are dissimilar because benefactors love their beneficiaries, even when the beneficiaries are not useful (χρήσιμοι) to them. “The same,” he says, “is true of artisans”:

…for each <artisan> is fond of his own proper ergon more that it would be fond of him if it acquired a soul. 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. This, then, is what the case of the benefactor resembles; here the beneficiary is his ergon, and hence he likes him more than the ergon likes whoever brought it about. The reason for this is that being is choiceworthy and lovable for all, and we are insofar as we are actualized, since we are insofar as we live and act. Now, in a way, the ergon is the one who accomplishes that ergon in his actualization; hence the one who accomplishes the ergon is fond of his ergon, because he loves his own being. This is natural, since what he is potentially is what the ergon reveals in actualization. (NE IX 7, 1167b34-1168a12-13) 62

Aristotle here makes several claims that are relevant to our present discussion. He thinks that artisans do not have an indifferent relationship to what they bring about. Each artisan loves (στέργει) his or her ergon, and Aristotle does not think that artisans are confused in doing so, and

62 πᾶς γὰρ τὸ οἰκεῖον ἑργὸν ἀγαπᾷ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγαπηθεὶς ἀν ὑπὸ τοῦ ἑργοῦ ἐμψὺχου γενομένου· μᾶλιστα δὴ ἱσχυρὸ τοῦτο περὶ τῶν ποιητῶν συμβαίνει· ὑπεραγαπῶσι γὰρ οὔτοι τὰ οἰκεῖα ποιήματα, στέργοντες ὀσπερ τέκνα τοιοῦτο δὴ ὕποκε καὶ τὸ τὸν εἰσφερομένον· τὸ γὰρ εἰ δεπονυθὸς ἑργὸν ἔστιν αὐτῶν· τοῦτο δὴ ἀγαπῶσι μᾶλλον ἢ τὸ ἑργὸν τὸν ποιήσαντα· τοῦτο δὴ άφθον ὅτι ἐφίτα πάσιν αἱρετῶν καὶ φυλητῶν, ἐσμὲν δὲ ἐνεργεία (τῷ ζῆν γὰρ καὶ πράττειν), ἐνεργεία δέ ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἑργὸν ἐστὶν ποι· στέργει δὴ τὸ ἑργὸν, διότι καὶ τὸ ἐστι· τοῦτο δὲ ἰσχικόν· ὅ γὰρ ἐστιν ἑναντίον, τοῦτο ἐνεργεία τὸ ἑργὸν μηνύει.
he even gives a deep, metaphysical explanation for why they do so. Being (τὸ εἶναι), he says, is lovable and choiceworthy for every sort of thing (that is, to every sort of thing that is capable of love), and each thing attains such being insofar as it is actualized (that is, insofar as it is *in energeia*).\(^{63}\) In the case of a human being, such actualization is an activity of living,\(^{64}\) but in the case of an artisan, such actualization is the ergon that they bring about.\(^{65}\) Aristotle also seems to think that being is choiceworthy and lovable to all because it is *good* for all.\(^{66}\) So we seem to have a picture on which the being of an X is the good for that X, which is to say, the central good that an X gets for itself, where this will be in some cases an activity (a human’s living) but in others a product (a poet’s poem). There would, then, appear to be an intelligible sense in which the excellent health brought about by the doctor in the patient is the good for the doctor.

Of course, there are many interpretations of the ergon argument and Section A in particular where the good for an X *is* under discussion. Barney’s interpretation is one of these: she thinks that Aristotle is claiming that that the flourishing of an X is the functioning well of that X. Yet in discussing her view we have already seen reasons to think the flourishing of an X comes apart from the functioning well of an X. This is because even though the *Sisyphean Sculptor* may engage in sculpting well his whole life, he is not flourishing as a sculptor since all his sculptures are destroyed just before he is about to finish them. But one could agree with Barney that the good for an X *is* under discussion in the ergon argument, but also correct

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\(^{63}\) This is one of the occasions where one really must switch over to “actuality” and its cognates as a translation of ἑνέργεια. However, I do not think that this is a different concept than the one that we encountered in the first lines of the *NE* and in the ergon argument itself.

\(^{64}\) Compare Aristotle’s claim that a human being “is a starting point and begetter of actions just as he is of children” (*NE* III 5, 1113b18–19; cf. VI 2, 1139b5), and his claim that for a living things to live is to be (*De An* II 2).

\(^{65}\) It is perhaps worth noting that Aristotle is thinking of the product as made by the producer. Thus the good for the sculptor is the sculpture (or sculptures) made by him.

\(^{66}\) Something can be lovable to an X either because it is useful to an X, pleasant to an X or good for an X (*NE* VIII, 2). When Aristotle says that being is loveable to all, he is surely not assuming that it would be loveable on account of its usefulness (as being is an end, but something useful is not) or pleasure (as loving something on account of its pleasure would seem to be loved on account of an accident, but the being of a thing does not seem to be an accident).
Barney’s account in an important way. Aristotle, we have seen, apparently thinks that the good for an X is going to be found in its ergon, where this is not an activity in many cases. But now, on behalf of Barney, we can ask: is there no sense in which housebuilding is good for a housebuilder? I do not think that this necessarily follows from what we have been saying, and it may very well be that the process of housebuilding is in a way good for a housebuilder, but this would only because it is the coming-to-be of a house. The good for a housebuilder would still seem to be the house or houses made by the housebuilder. The source of value is the house, the end aimed at, and not the activity of housebuilding.

There is, then, reason to think that Aristotle would consider the second claim—the one that results from adopting the datives of interest—to be true. In the case of artisans who produce a product, the good for the artisan is their product or products: for example, the good for a sculptor is his excellent sculpture or sculptures. Consequently, it is defensible to suppose that while the flourishing of an X is not strictly speaking under discussion in Section A, the good for an X is under discussion. Aristotle does seem to think that the ergon fulfills the nature or being of, and brings satisfaction thereby to, the kind of agent that accomplishes that ergon. If he is drawing on this idea in Section A, he would then be discussing not only the specific good that each thing that has an ergon and action aims at producing (and produces if all goes well) but also the proprietary good of that thing—the good for that thing, as such.

However, one could seriously object to thinking that the second claim is true and that Aristotle thinks it is true. For example, we have been rather comfortably speaking of “the good for an X,” where this is “intrinsically and non-instrumentally beneficial to, or good for, X,” but Lawrence doubts whether such a notion has any “intelligible sense.”67 His central worry is that the very notions of “good for” or “beneficial for” seems to imply that what is beneficial always

67 Lawrence (2009, 213).
promotes some further good—thus, medicine is beneficial insofar as it promotes health. If this is the case, then the human good, which is the highest good, could not possibly be good for a human. I will give two responses (but I should clearly say that my mind is not completely made up on this issue). First, it does not seem to strain our concepts to speak of something that is “intrinsically and non-instrumentally beneficial to, or good for, X.” For if there is a good the possession or existence of which makes that X better off, then that good is surely a good for an X. And if among the goods for an X there is a good that is the end of them, then surely it would seem to be the good for an X. There are also several passages where Aristotle suggests that Aristotle acknowledges there is something non-instrumentally good for an X, and in the passage that we just considered from NE IX 7, he notes that the ergon of an artisan is loved by the artisan not because it is useful to the artisan, but presumably because it is good for it.

Second, while the English phrase “beneficial for” may imply some notion of instrumentality, the Ancient Greek word “ophelimon” (often translated “beneficial” or “advantageous”) did not

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68 Here is the line that Lawrence thinks may be problematic for his position: “And so the good person must be a self-lover, since he will both help [οὐφηξεῖσθαι] himself and benefit others by doing fine actions” (NE IX 8, 1169a12-13). One could add to it Aristotle’s disagreement with the claim of the Delian inscription: “what is most just is finest, healthy is most beneficial [λόγου τοῦ ὑγίαν], but it is most pleasant to win our heart’s desire” (NE I 8, 1099a27-28). Instead, Aristotle says, “all these features [that is, fineness, beneficialness, and pleasure] are found in the best activities” (NE I 8, 1099a29).

69 Lawrence also argues that it is not plausible that Aristotle would use datives of interest in making the claim of Section A since, he claims, Plato seems to make no room for the idea of a “non-instrumental good for something” in Republic 1. Socrates argues that the doctor, insofar as he is a doctor, does not seek his own benefit but that of the patient. His rationale for this is that the doctoring-art is the doctor insofar as he is a doctor, and that any art, insofar as it is teleion (complete/perfect) as an art, cannot be benefited in any way (342c4-6). I have two responses. First, Socrates’s claim might just mean that there is no good needed beyond the inherent good aimed at by an art—e.g. no need for money in addition to having brought about the health of the patient or having ruled well. Second, later on in the Republic Socrates goes so far as to say that if a carpenter is sick and bed-ridden, “His life will be no use to him if he cannot achieve his work [εργόν]” (407a1-2). The implication seems to be that it is the achievement of the work that gives meaning and value to the carpenter’s life, and not in some instrumental way. Third, there are even textual reasons for thinking that Plato has intuitions that support the key idea that Aristotle conveys in his discussion of beneficiares and benefactors. Plato writes, “Those who have made <money> love it twice as much as anyone else. For just as poets love their poems and fathers their children, so those who have made money take their money seriously both as something they have made themselves and—just as other people do—because it is useful” (Republic I, 330c; Reeve [2004] with alterations). Thus, Plato seems to acknowledge that the reason a maker loves what he has made need not at all be because what he has made is useful to him. Rather he loves it just because it is his work.
always imply instrumentality. That is why the Stoics could clearly identify the good and the beneficial (ophelimon). Nevertheless, in support of Lawrence’s intuition, I offer *Protrepticus* B 44, where Aristotle (or some Aristotelian) claims: “It is not at all strange then if <contemplation> is neither useful [χρησίμη] nor advantageous [ὀφέλιμος] for we call it not advantageous [ὀφέλιμον] but good and it should not be chosen for the sake of anything else, but for itself.”

We have so far seen reasons to think that Aristotle would consider both the first and the second claims to be true, but now we should address a different question: does Aristotle have good reason to be making both claims in Section A? I have already said that Aristotle must be making the first claim—since he needs to be giving a definition of the human good, qua best thing achievable in action—and so the real question is: does Aristotle have reason to be making the second claim as well?

There seems to me only one key reason for thinking that Aristotle is making the second claim. Aristotle both considers the human good to be the central object of concern for practical wisdom (phronesis), and yet he also claims that practical wisdom concerns “things that are good and bad for a human being” (*NE* VI 5, 1140b5-6). Since the Nicomachean Ethics itself is a work of practical philosophy, directly contributing to the perfection of practical reason and thus the acquisition of practical wisdom, it seems like the ergon argument should determine the best good for a human being.

However, there seem to be two reasons against thinking Aristotle is making the second claim, though these reasons are of unequal strength. First, if like Lawrence you think that “πρᾶξις” (“action”) in “ἐργον τι και πρᾶξις” means “proper activity,” then the claim of Section A will include in its scope artifacts and bodily organs, but the notion of “the good for an X” may

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70 I mostly follow the text and translation of Düring (1961). The key difference is that unlike Düring I supply “contemplation” instead of “wisdom” in the first line.
71 Cf. *NE* IX, 8, 1169a7: “Every understanding [*nous*] chooses what is best for itself.”
not seem to make sense when it is applied to bodily organs or artifacts. (Aristotle implies as much, at least about artifacts, at NE VIII 2, when he says that it would be ridiculous to wish good to something inanimate like wine since the most you can do is to wish it to be preserved so that you can drink it [1155b29-31].) To extricate ourselves from this difficulty, though, all we need to do is to interpret πρᾶξις in a more restrictive way. One can do this either by agreeing with Barney who restricts action to fully developed adult humans, or one can do this by agreeing with my earlier proposal that restricts action to adult humans, older children and tame animals. The second reason is that Aristotle appears to think that the claim of Section A demands ready assent, but it does not seem like he could reasonably expect this if he were making the second claim.

Even if it is true that the best good for a sculptor is his excellent sculpture or sculptures, that requires some argument, and is not nearly as obvious as the claim that the best good achievable by a sculptor will be a certain excellent sculpture.

I leave for another occasion the task of giving more definitive answer to whether Aristotle does make the second claim in Section A. Nevertheless, I believe we have made progress in articulating some of the key complications and difficulties for those who would answer that he does and for those who would answer that he does not.

4.13 How the Well “is in” the Ergon

We saw earlier that Lawrence collapses the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well, or as he would put it, the functioning of an X and the functioning well of an

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72 It is worth noting that we speak of things (e.g. water) being bad for certain artifacts (e.g. computers), but Aristotle could plausibly account for this by saying that this is an extended use of the phrase “good for.”
X. He does so by understanding ‘functioning well’ as ‘functioning successfully’ and ‘functioning successfully’ as ‘functioning correctly’ or ‘actually functioning’—apparently on the assumption that functioning incorrectly is not really functioning. A thought like this is shared by a number of interpreters and is perhaps present in Plato, and we will discuss this in detail when we come to Section D of the ergon argument in Chapter 4. But now I want to note that at least part of the reason Lawrence holds this view is because he seems to understand Section A to be claiming that, for whatever has an ergon, “the good that is the well” seems to consist in the ergon (ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ δοκεῖ τἀγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τῷ εὖ). This is a not uncommon way of reading Aristotle’s claim that the well (τὸ εὖ) is “in” the ergon. The interpretation goes back perhaps as far as Aquinas, who seems to equate the ergon and the well in his paraphrase of section A as: “When a thing has a proper activity, the good of the thing and its being well-off consist in [consistit in] that activity.” A little later he adds: “If man has some characteristic activity, his final good must consist in this,” thereby equating the human good with the ergon of man.  

73 Here, though, is one reason to think this is false. It also seems perfectly intelligible to say that you successfully built a house but did not build it well. A mediocre house it is still a house.

74 This seems to follow from a number of comments that Lawrence makes. First, in his diagram of the claim of the ergon argument, he writes “is/consists in” by which he seems to affirm that “is” and “consists in” are equivalent. Second, notice how he summarizes the principle of Section A: “with <functional items> their good or success lies in their function, in their actually functioning successfully” (2009, 216). Here he places “in their function” in apposition with “in their actually functioning successfully,” and elsewhere he says that, for X, the “X-an good… consists in doing its function successfully or well” (215). Third, he says that X’s success is “a matter of its function, of its x-ing” (197) but then he says that it is “a matter of its x-ing successfully” (197).

75 “Cuiuslibet enim rei habentis propriam operationem, bonum suum et hoc quod bene est ei consistit in eius operatione,” Sententia libri Ethicorum, 1. 10. 2 in Busa (1980). However, there seems to be some conflicting evidence over whether Aquinas really does equate the ergon and the well because he also says that in the ergon argument, Aristotle first “inquires into the genus <of happiness>.”

76 “Si igitur hominis est aliqua operatio propria, necesse est quod in eius operatione propria consistat finale bonum ipsius,” Sententia libri Ethicorum, 1. 10. 2 in Busa (1980).

77 This way of thinking also seems to be present in many who discuss the ergon argument at a more general level. Kraut (2010), for example, characterizes the ergon argument as one in which “Aristotle argues that we have a function, that our happiness consists in fulfilling it.” Cf. Kraut (1989, 313) and (1979, 467). The view is not often stated as explicitly as it is in Kraut, but a number of scholars seem to subscribe to it because they equate the ergon with the ergon executed well. For example, Whiting (1988, 46n.6) claims: “what it is to be an F (or the function of an F) and what it is to be a good F (or the function of a good F) are the same.” Lear (2004, 43) writes, “The function
Some interpreters, however, take issue with this reading of “is in the ergon” (1097b26-27). Irwin, for example, after claiming that “is in” can either mean “consists in” or “depends on,” also claims: “Since Aristotle takes good performance, not mere performance of the function to be necessary for doing well, ‘depends on’ seems to be needed here.” Now I agree with Irwin’s reason for thinking that the “consists in” reading is unacceptable: Aristotle does not here collapse the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. However, I do not think we should go with “depends on” either. For while Aristotle clearly does think that the human good depends on the human ergon, he also thinks that the human good depends on lots of things, most of which are inessential to it. For example, the human good depends on wealth not because wealth is or even forms part of the human good, but rather because it is precondition for the human good. Consequently, if all Aristotle is claiming in Section A is that the human good “depends on” the human ergon, then he has not thereby given us sufficient reason for identifying the human good, even provisionally, with the human ergon accomplished well. In short, “depends on” renders the claim of Section A much too weak.

But is there some other way to understand how “the good, that is, the well” seems to be in the ergon”? Earlier I suggested there was. We can understand Section A as claiming that the excellent accomplishment is in (“ἐν”) the ergon just as something specific is in something else more general. This interpretation forms a sort of middle path between “consists in” and “depends on.” On the one hand, (like “consists in”) it identifies the human ergon as the right class or category within which the human good is found, and it explains why Aristotle would

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78 Irwin (1999, 183). Cf. Gottlieb (2009), though she is not clear on what she takes the “good” in question to be.
provisionally identify the human good with the human ergon excellently accomplished. On the other hand, (like “depends on”) it does not make the mistake of collapsing the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. There are also textual reasons to favor this reading. Aristotle explicitly countenances this use of “ἐν” at Physics IV 3, where he says, “one thing may be in another…just as man is in animal and in general a species is in a genus” (210a17-18). In fact, among all the uses of “ἐν” that Physics IV 3 lists, this is the only one that makes sense in Section A. Aristotle’s language in section D (1098a7-16) of the ergon argument also supports this. For he says that the ergon of an X and that of an excellent X are the same “τὸ ἐν γένει” (in genus/kind), this implies that an excellent ergon (e.g. an excellent house) and an ordinary ergon (e.g. an ordinary house) both fall under the more general class or category of an ergon (e.g. a house). We will discuss these issues in more detail when we come to Section D of the ergon argument, but I here note that the issue of how to understand Section A’s “ἐν” is an issue that cuts across various interpretations of “ergon” and of “τὸ εὑρ.”, and this has the result that there are many different formally possible interpretations of Section A.

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79 When Aristotle explains this sense of “in” by adding “as a species is in a genus,” he does not seem to be restricting this use of “in” to the relationship of species to genus (note the “as”). Thus, there is the possibility of the same sense of “in” being used when we say an individual is “in” a species (e.g. of Flipper being “in” the species dolphin), which is not a case of a species being “in” a genus.

80 The relevant passage from Ph IV 3 runs as follows. (I have added numbers for ease of reference.) “The next step we must take is to see in how many ways one thing is said to be in another. [1] In one way, as a finger is in a hand, and generally a part in a whole. [2] In another way, as a whole is in its parts; for there is no whole over and above the parts. [3] Again, as man is in animal, and in general a species in a genus. [4] Again as the genus is in the species, and in general a part of the species in it definition. [5] Again, as health is in the hot and the cold, and in general the form in the matter. [6] Again, as the affairs of Greece are in the King, and generally events are in their primary motive agent. [7] Again, as a thing is in its good, and generally in its end, i.e. in that for the sake of which. [8] And most properly of all, as something is in a vessel, and generally in a place” (210a14-24). If we consider these various uses as candidates for how Aristotle uses the word in NE 1.7, it seems like we can immediately dismiss [1], [2] [6] and [8]. We should also reject [4] because the human ergon is on a higher level of generality than that ergon performed well. We should reject [5] because this would render Aristotle’s claim unintelligible: the ‘ergon executed well’ cannot be combined with the ergon to form a composite. And we should reject [7] since this would get the relation of good to ergon exactly backwards. The remaining alternative is [3], and this is supported by the language and context of the ergon argument itself.

81 Of course, I do not think that “γένος” is being used in any very strict or scientific sense (cf. the use of “γένος” at Meta Δ 14).
4.14 Schematizing the Various Interpretations

Given the two interpretations of the datives, the three interpretations of “ἐργον τι και πρᾶξις,” the four possible interpretations for “τὸ εὖ,” the three interpretations for “δοκεῖ εἶναι ἐν” and the two interpretations for “τὸ ἔργο,” there end up being quite a few possible readings of Section A. Below I list schematically the different interpretative options of key phrases in the passage, which one can for the most part mix and match with one another. There do not end up being 144 possible different reading of Section A because some interpretations of a key phrase require one to interpret another key phrase in a certain way. For example, if one understands “τὸ εὖ” as “the functioning successfully of an X” one must understand the datives as datives of relation. For if one combined “the functioning successfully of an X” with the datives of interest, that would amount to interpreting “τὸ εὖ” as “the flourishing of an X.” The table below attempts to organize the various interpretation of Section A focusing on the five key elements of the main claim. Scholars in advancing their interpretations have not always noted the ambiguities of the text, and so in an effort to complete the table I have had to speculate a bit about how they themselves would categorize their own interpretations.
4.15 Distinguishing different goods

As is already clear, I think there is good reason to distinguish the ergon of an X from the ergon of an X accomplished well—since the latter is in the former as a species is in a genus. However, I also think that the ergon is a good of sorts, and this leads me to distinguish the good that is the ergon from “the good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment” (1097b27).

(1) the good\(_{\text{ergon}}\) = the good that is the ergon (NE I 7, 1097a18)
(2) the good\(_{\text{well}}\) = “the good, that is, the excellent accomplishment” (NE I 7, 1097b27)
And as I noted earlier I also think there is reason to distinguish “the excellent accomplishment” of a human from “the human good,” which is the best thing accomplishable in action by a human.

(3) the good$_{\text{best}}$ = “the good, that is, the best good” (NE I 2, 1094a22)

In this chapter, I will just say enough to distinguish these goods from one another. With respect to the good$_{\text{ergon}}$, we should observe that in NE I Aristotle states that a thing’s good is its end (I 1, 1094a2-4), and in EE II 1 he says that “the ergon of each [thing] is its end” (1219a8). Because he holds both claims, Aristotle identifies a house as the ergon of the housebuilding-art (EE II 1, 1219a14; NE V 5, 1133a7-10) but he also identifies a house as the good of the housebuilding-art (NE I 7, 1097a20). A house is the ergon and the good of the housebuilding-art because it is the end for the sake of which the housebuilding-art, qua housebuilding-art, exists.

The good$_{\text{well}}$ is “the good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment” (τάγαθον και τὸ εὖ, NE I 7, 1097b27) and this is the ergon executed well, that is, excellently. This is not exactly the same as the good$_{\text{ergon}}$. I take Aristotle to make this clear halfway through the ergon argument (at 1098a11-12), when he distinguishes the ergon of the kitharist (his performance) from the τὸ εὖ (the excellent performance). The kitharist, he explains, accomplishes the performance on the kithara (κιθαριζειν), but it is the excellent kitharist who accomplishes the excellent performance (τὸ εὖ)—though the performances are the same “in kind/genus” (“τὸ γένετ”). The ergon, Aristotle explains, is accomplished well by means of virtue (1098a15), and so the excellent kitharist is distinguished from the mere kitharist by his possession of virtue. (Later, at NE VI 5, 1140b21-22, Aristotle makes it clear that one can possess an art while not at the same time possessing the virtue proper to that art.) This distinction between the ergon and τὸ εὖ in turn
explains why Aristotle does not say in section A that the “the good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment” is the ergon. Instead, he says that “the good in the sense of the excellent accomplishment” is in the ergon. By this, as I have suggested, he means that it is something like a subset: “the excellent accomplishment” (τὸ ἔξο) is an ergon of a certain quality, namely one accomplished well. We will discuss this more in Chapter 4.

The third type of good is “the good in the sense of the best” (τἀγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον, NE I 2, 1094a22) by which Aristotle means the best thing accomplishable by humans in action. This is something that is desired always for its own sake, never the for the sake of something else, and that for the sake of which everything else is desired. Everyone, Aristotle says, calls this “eudaimonia” (NE I 4, 1095a18). It is clear that the human good is not the good that is the human ergon because Aristotle preliminarily identifies the best good as “the excellent accomplishment” of a human (“an activity of [the rational part of] the soul on the basis of virtue,” NE I 7, 1098a16-17), and we assume that in the ergon argument Aristotle does not collapse the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. However, after this preliminary identification, Aristotle seems to add two further criteria that at least appear to set “the best accomplishment” apart from the mere “excellent accomplishment”: for the activity that is the human good must be in on the basis of the best virtue, if there are more virtues than one, and it must occur over a complete life (NE I 7, 1098a17-18). Only such a thing, he thinks, could be the “end of all things accomplishable in action” (NE I 7, 1097a23-24).

Now on the interpretation I have just put forward, not only are the good_{ergon} and the good_{well} not identical, but neither are the good_{well} and the good_{best}. On this view, the two criteria that Aristotle adds at the end of the ergon argument (1098a16-20) do not follow merely from the

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82 When Aristotle speaks of the good_{best} he does so only with respect to humans. But it seems like he could also do this with respect to (at least some) artisans as well.
idea of there being an excellent human ergon and that ergon being an activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue. Instead, they serve to narrow in on which excellent accomplishment is the best accomplishment. I will call this the additional criteria view.

There is, however, another view that one might reasonably hold about the criteria, while at the same time affirming that the goodwell and the goodbest are strictly identical. The two further criteria are not meant to set the best accomplishment of a human apart from the excellent accomplishment of a human. Instead, they are implicit in what Aristotle specifies as a human’s excellent accomplishment: an activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue. I will call this the implicit criteria view. There is more than one way in which this view might be spelled out. On one natural spelling out, the final two criteria could be understood as follows. When Aristotle says that “if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of best and most *teleion* virtue” (1098a17-18) he is merely spelling out what he has in mind by “on the basis of virtue” (1098a17). And when he says that the activity must be “in a complete life,” he is merely spelling out what he has in mind by the sort of “life” (1098a3 and 1098a13) that is “an activity of the soul on the basis of reason or not without reason” (1098a7-8).

We will discuss this particular issue at length in Chapter 6. But for now, I just want to note that there are these two ways of thinking about how the two criteria at 1098a17-18 relate to the rest of the ergon argument—even when we accept that τὸ ἐργὸν of an X is “the excellent accomplishment” of an X and that the ergon argument should be reconstructed in roughly the way that I have.
4.16 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have offered a thorough interpretation of the rationale of the ergon argument, as found in Section A. We have argued for a number of theses. First, Aristotle in Section A must be using the recovered concept of an ergon. Second, the good under discussion there is the excellent accomplishment for an X. Third, it is defensible to suppose that, according to Aristotle, the excellent accomplishment for an X is also the good for an X. Fourth, the excellent accomplish of an X is “in” the ergon of an X as a species is in a genus. And fifth, I have argued that my reconstruction of the ergon argument alone allows the argument to employ the correct key explanatory middle term—the best accomplishment of a human being—to define the human good. In the next chapter we move to that section of the argument where Aristotle attaches the addition “on the basis of virtue” to “activity of the rational part of the soul,” and we will discuss to what extent Aristotle thinks that we should distinguish the ergon and the ergon accomplished well.
5 Aristotle on Ergon and Virtue (Section D)

5.1 Introduction

We now turn to Section D of the ergon argument, where Aristotle introduces the notion of virtue. It links up to the previous sections of the argument in the following way. In Section A, as I understand it, Aristotle explains that just as the excellent accomplishment (τὸ εὖ) of a sculptor will be found in his ergon, which is a sculpture, so the excellent accomplishment of a human being will be found in his ergon, if he has one. In Section B, Aristotle argues that there is a human ergon, and in Section C, he argues that this is activity of the part of the human soul that has reason. In Section D, he explains that the excellent accomplishment (τὸ εὖ) of an X is its ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue. The text of Section D runs as follows:

[Section D] We say that the ergon of an X, e.g. a kitharist, and that of an excellent X, e.g. an excellent kitharist, are the same in kind [τῷ γένει] and that this holds unqualifiedly in every case, the superiority “on the basis of virtue” being added to the ergon. For the ergon of a kitharist is the performance [κιθαρίζειν] but that of an excellent kitharist is the excellent performance [τὸ εὖ]. (NE I 7, 1098a8-12)

tὸ δ’ αὐτὸ φαμεν ἔργον εἶναι τῷ γένει
tοῦ δὲ καὶ τοῦδε σπουδαίου, ὁσπέρ κιθαρίστου καὶ σπουδαίου
κιθαρίστου, καὶ ἀπλῶς ὅτι τούτ’ ἐπὶ πάντων, προστιθεμένης
τις κατὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν ὑπεροχὴς πρὸς τὸ ἔργον· κιθαρίστου
μὲν γὰρ κιθαρίζειν, σπουδαίου δὲ τὸ εὖ

What exactly is Aristotle claiming here? It seems clear to me that the ergon of the kitharist is
performing on the kithara, and that the ergon of the excellent kitharist differs from that of the mere kitharist, but not in kind. Both are performances on the kithara, but the ergon of the excellent kitharist is performing on the kithara well—that is, in a superior way—and he does this on the basis of virtue. Aristotle then generalizes this claim, saying that it holds for all other (relevant) cases of having an ergon. The claim that is essential for the development of his argument, though, is the claim that for an ergon to be accomplished well is for it to be accomplished on the basis of virtue. This gives us the following premise from our reconstruction in Chapter 4:

**P4:** For an ergon to be accomplished well/excellently is for it to be accomplished on the basis of virtue/excellence.

With this premise (repeated at *NE* I 7, 1098a15), the previously given premises, as well as the assumption that the human good is the best (and thus excellent) accomplishment of a human, he arrives at his preliminary definition\(^1\) of the human good:

*[Prelim. Def.]* The human good turns out to be activity of the <rational part of the human> soul on the basis of virtue (1098a16-17).

Despite what I take to be the rather clear way in which Section D works in relation to the rest of the ergon argument, it has served as a focal point of disagreement among scholars because they disagree over how Aristotle thinks of the relationship between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well.

On the one hand, some suppose that Aristotle simply identifies what it is to be an ergon

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\(^1\) Or rather, he arrives at his preliminary “definitional sketch.” See my discussion at the beginning of the next chapter.
and what it is to be an ergon accomplished well (that is, the excellent ergon), and thus what it is to be that ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue. On the other hand, there are some who do not think Aristotle identifies the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. Gomez-Lobo is one of these, and he thinks that Aristotle’s definition of the human ergon is purely descriptive and thus normatively neutral. He understands the definition to include explicitly within its scope both virtuous and vicious activity, in consequence of which he considers the ergon itself to be no more closely related to the virtuous ergon than to the vicious ergon.

In what follows, I will try to steer between these two positions. On the one hand, I will argue that Aristotle’s description of the human ergon is not normatively neutral since he thinks that in order to understand the nature of a thing, we must look to cases that have not been corrupted (Pol I 5, 1254a35), and further, that the human ergon is a good sort of thing. On the other hand, I will argue that Aristotle does not identify what it is to be an ergon and what it is to be an ergon accomplished well. Instead, both the virtuous ergon of an X and the vicious ergon of an X count as genuine instances of the ergon of an X; and so when Aristotle adds the superiority of being “on the basis of virtue” to the human ergon, he does so not to clarify what the human ergon is but to narrow in on what the human good is. To argue for this position and to help us appreciate Aristotle’s theory more generally, I look at several passages both in Plato and in Aristotle that illuminate how Aristotle thinks of the relationship between the human ergon and the human ergon accomplished well—that is to say, the human ergon accomplished on the basis

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2 Cf. Whiting (1988, 46): “what it is to be an F (or the function of an F) and what it is to be a good F (or the function of a good F) are the same.”

3 Cf. C. Natali (2010, 317) who finds in section D this claim: “man’s ergon is an activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue.” Kraut (2010): “Aristotle asks what the ergon… of a human being is, and argues that it consists in activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue (1097b22-1098a20).” Reeve (2009, 516): “[T]he human function or nature is rational activity expressing virtue.” Lear (2004, 44) claims that “virtuous functioning is a thing’s ultimate end.” Those (like Lawrence [2009] and Barney [2008]) who think that Aristotle in Section A claims that “the well” consists in the ergon, also make this assumption.

of virtue.

5.2 Ergon and Virtue in Plato’s Republic

Scholars have long rightly supposed that Plato’s ergon argument in Republic I is precursor to Aristotle’s own, but they have also supposed that Aristotle and Plato understand the key terms in their respective arguments similarly.\(^5\) We have already seen that this is not quite right with respect to the term “ergon,” but it is also not right with respect to the term “virtue.” Plato, unlike Aristotle, thinks of something’s virtue as its power to accomplish its proper ergon, and this leads him to collapse the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue.

However, there is some similarity since both Plato and Aristotle assume that an ergon is accomplished well by means of virtue and badly by means of vice. It is clear that Aristotle makes this assumption in Section D, and Plato makes this assumption, for example, when he has Socrates ask Thrasymachus in Republic I, 353b14-c1: “Could eyes accomplish their ergon well if they lacked their proper virtue but had the vice instead?”\(^6\) Yet notice how this exchange develops:

THRASYMACHUS: How could they? For don’t you mean if they had blindness instead of sight?  
SOCRATES: Whatever their virtue is. You see I am not now asking about that, but about whether it is by means of their own proper virtue that each thing accomplishes its ergon well and by means of vice badly.\(^7\)  

(Rep. I, 353c2-5)


\(^6\) ἄρ’ ἂν ποτε ὀμματα τὸ αὐτῶν ἔργον καλῶς ἀπεργάσαιντο μὴ ἔχοντα τὴν αὐτῶν οἰκείαν ἀρετήν, ἄλλ’ ἀντὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς κακιάν:

\(^7\) Καὶ πῶς ἂν: ἐρήμη τυφλότητα γὰρ ἰσος λέγεις ἀντὶ τῆς ὅψεως. Ἦτις, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, αὐτῶν ἡ ἀρετή· οὐ γάρ ποι τοῦτο ἔρωτό, ἄλλ’ εἰ τῇ οἰκείᾳ μὲν ἀρετῇ τὸ αὐτῶν ἔργον εὐ ἐργάσεται τὰ ἐργαζόμενα, κακία δὲ κακός.
This passage has been correctly used to note how both Aristotle and Plato think it is acceptable
to sometimes speak of the virtue of an X without at the same time giving a substantive account of
what that virtue is.⁸ (In the example above, Socrates supposes it is acceptable to speak of the
virtue of the eye without at the same time giving a substantive account of what that virtue is).
However, the passage also suggests that Plato and Aristotle differ in the way that they think
about virtue. Notice that Thrasymachus proposes to identify the virtue of the eye as its sight,
which is the eye’s power to accomplish its ergon. Similarly, he identifies the vice of the eye as
blindness, which is the lack of that power.⁹ Socrates shows no discomfort at these identifications
(he only says he is not currently considering what the virtue of the eye might be), and he earlier
perhaps implicitly endorsed a similar view when he asked (I, 342a1-3): Does an art “need a
virtue in the way that the eye needs sight or the ear needs hearing?”¹⁰ This suggests that the
virtue of the eye is sight and the virtue of the ear is hearing. Thus, the power to accomplish the
ergon (this power being sight) is equated with the power to accomplish the ergon well (this
power being the virtue of the eye), and consequently the ergon is equated with the ergon
accomplished well.

This way of thinking about virtue leads Plato to make correlative comments about the
virtue and vice of a human. He claims that “injustice”—which is the vice of a human—“will
make <a human> incapable of acting because of inner faction and not being of one mind with
himself” (Rep. I, 352a4-8).¹¹ The vice of a human, then, seems to be the lack of the power to
accomplish the human ergon—assuming, of course, that “acting” is understood to be (or to be a

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⁹ Gottlieb (2009, 69) notes the difference between Aristotle’s view of virtue and what she calls the Thrasymachean
view. I go beyond her by arguing, on the basis of this passage and others, that Plato himself seems to agree with the
‘Thrasymachean’ view.
¹⁰ ὅτι προσδεῖται τινος ἀρετῆς—ὡσπερ ὑφαλμοὶ ὄψεως καὶ ὁτα ἀκοῆς
¹¹ ἀδύνατον αὐτὸν πράττειν ποιήσει στασιάζοντα καὶ οὐχ ὁμονοοῦντα αὐτὸν ἑαυτῷ,
key part of) the human ergon, as it seems to be. A little later Socrates addresses the fact that some unjust men have acted, and he explains that this is because “there must have been some sort of justice in them… <for> it was this that enabled them to do what they did” (Rep. I, 352c4-6). He clarifies: “Those who are wholly bad and completely unjust are also completely incapable of acting” (Rep. I, 352c7-d1; my emphasis). If we assume that the ergon of humans is acting and living (cf. I, 353d4-6), two things follow. First, the vice of a human, assumed to be injustice, prevents him from achieving his ergon, while the virtue of a human, assumed to be justice, enables him to achieve his ergon. Second, one can possess some justice and some injustice at the same time. This is because in order for an unjust person to act, he must have some justice in himself. Both of these seem to be natural consequences of equating a thing’s power to accomplish its ergon with that thing’s proper virtue, which is its power to accomplish that ergon well.

There is also reason to think that Socrates makes this equation—and the corresponding equation between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well—throughout the Republic. Earlier we saw that when Socrates and Glaucon found their ideal city in Book II, they institute what we called the “one ergon” principle. According to this principle, each artisan will be assigned to just one ergon: e.g., a shoemaker will make a shoe, and will not also make bread or a house, etc. Later in Book IV, when Socrates and Glaucon are searching for justice in the city they have just created, they determine that justice simply is the “one ergon” principle: doing one’s own (433b3-4). After noting that justice in the city and in the soul will look the same, and after noting that there are three different parts to the city and the soul (the reasoning part, the spirited part and the

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12 Plato characterizes the human ergon as involving “taking care of things, ruling, deliberating, etc.” (353d4-6), and so he seems to have something like “human action” in mind as the human ergon, even though ends up identifying it as “living” (353d9-10).
13 οἱ ήι παμπόνηροι καὶ τελέως άδικοι τελέως εἰσί καὶ πράττειν άδινατοι
appetitive part) they determine that justice is each of the three parts doing its own (οἰκειοπραγία, 434c8). Since justice is the central virtue expounded in the Republic, it is remarkable that Plato does not describe it as each accomplishing its ergon well or doing its own well. He says that it is each doing its own, that is, accomplishing its respective ergon. The reason for this is that Plato seems to be assuming, as he does in Rep. I, that to accomplish the ergon well simply is to accomplish it without qualification, while to accomplish the ergon badly is not to accomplish it without qualification.

Why did Plato arrive at this understanding of virtue? There is probably more than one reason. Some cases of badness suggest this kind of analysis. In the case of “seeing” or “hearing,” which are Plato’s prime examples in the ergon argument (Rep. I, 353b4-8), one might very reasonably think that when we see badly, we are simply failing to see, and when we are hearing badly, we are simply failing to hear (maybe in hearing or seeing badly you register some colors and some sounds but only in a blurred and indefinitely way). Another reason comes from the way that Plato in the ergon argument defines “the ergon of each thing” as “what it alone can accomplish [ἀπεργάζηται] or what it can accomplish better than anything else” (Rep. I, 353a10-11). Consider how he explicates “better than anything else” with the example of “pruning (a vine)”:

SOCRATES: […] couldn’t you use a dagger, a carving-knife, or lots of other things for pruning a vine?
THRASYMACHUS: Certainly.
SOCRATES: But nothing could do a better job at this than a pruning-knife designed for the purpose?
THRASYMACHUS: That’s true.
SOCRATES: Shall we take pruning to be its ergon, then?
THRASYMACHUS: Yes. (353a; Reeve [2004] with alterations)

Notice that Plato here identifies pruning as the ergon first, and then asks what accomplishes this best. He lists as options a dagger, a carving-knife, and pruning-knife, and then identifies a
pruning-knife as what accomplishes pruning best. Though Socrates stops there, one could very naturally extend the reasoning to the class of pruning knives themselves. Since the excellent pruning-knife will prune best (as opposed to the bad or the mediocre pruning knife), it would make sense for Plato, given his definition of ergon, to think that it is the excellent pruning knife that has the ergon of pruning. Nevertheless, since Plato must also think that the ergon of the excellent pruning knife is excellent pruning, Plato would naturally want to identify pruning (the ergon) with excellent pruning (the excellent ergon).

There may also have been metaphysical reasons for the identification. As is well known, Plato in the *Republic* distinguishes those things-that-are from those things-that-are-and-are-not. The things-that-are belong to the intelligible world (where there exist forms and numbers), while the things-that-are-and-are-not belong to the sensible world (where there exist particular trees, animals, artifacts, etc.). On at least one not implausible interpretation, Plato thinks that the things in the sensible world are-and-are-not because they do not fully instantiate the predicates that hold of them—or phrased slightly differently, they do not instantiate the predicates at all, but only “resemble” and “participate in” them. On the strong reading I have in mind, this not only holds for predicates like “beautiful” and “just” but also predicates like “man” or “ox.” Such a metaphysical picture can pretty easily suggest an ethical picture. For something in the perceptible world will be bad and defective just to the extent that it fails to resemble its respective divine form, and it will be good just to the extent that it does resemble its respective divine form. What it is to be unqualifiedly good X is the same as what it is to be an unqualified

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14 I am, of course, assuming the traditional, “predicational” reading of “is” and “is not.”
15 Plato says that things in the perceptible world “resemble” (cf. 472d1), “approximate” (cf. 472c1) and “participate in” (cf. 472c2) their respective natures, and he also gives us reason to think that perceptible objects can never fully instantiate any ideal (cf. 473a1-b1). Here I am relying on the work of Schwab (2013, 112-120).
16 For a defense of this position, see Schwab (2013, 122-128).

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X—and the unqualified X would be one that is disposed to accomplish the ergon of X without qualification, that is, completely and in no way defectively.

This metaphysical explanation is also suggested by Plato’s discussion of art in Republic X and in particular his description of the “three couches”: the couch painted by the painter, the couch made by the couch-maker, and the form of the couch made by the god. Here the form of the couch appears to be the standard both for what a couch is and for what an excellent couch is. Consequently, the form of the couch (which is the couch without qualification) is equivalent to the form of an excellent couch. In support of this, here are three considerations. First, there cannot be the form of a couch but also the form of a good couch. This is because there is only one form for each kind of thing: for, as Plato famously explains, if there were two forms of couch, there would need to be yet a third form that would explain why the first two are in fact couches (Rep. X 597c3-9). The second reason is that Plato says the form of the couch is created by a god and is itself divine, and throughout the Republic divinity has been the uniform standard of excellence. Third, this interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Plato seems to equate being an artisan with being an excellent artisan when he claims that arts cannot have proper virtues (Rep. I, 342a3) since each art is correct “so long as it is really and truly the craft that it is” (Rep. I, 342b6). Now in the discussion of the three couches, Socrates remarks that he usually posits “some particular form in connection with each set of things to which we apply the same name” (Rep. X, 596a6-8). If we take him seriously, which not everyone does, then we should think that there is a form for human being. In this case as well, then, the forms themselves are the standard. What it is to be human and what it is to be a good or virtuous human will be the same.

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17 And since a couch is the ergon of the couch-maker, this would then give reason for thinking that Plato equates the ergon and the excellent ergon.
18 Aristotle, for example, at NE I 6, 1096a34-b2 appears to think that that Plato posited a form of human being, though he may be thinking of the Timaeus or Parmenides instead of the Republic.
A human in the perceptible world will be a good human simply to the extent that he or she more closely resembles or participates in the form of a human being. The same would presumably go for the human ergon. A human ergon will be good just to the extent that it is an unqualified human ergon.

5.3 Virtue in Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* Ergon Argument

In the ergon argument of the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle makes a few comments that may suggest that he holds a view like the one we detected in Plato’s *Republic*. After Aristotle has already identified the ergon of the soul as life-activity (*EE* II 1, 1219a24), he writes: “since it is necessary that the ergon of the soul and of its virtue be one and the same [ἐν καὶ τώτῳ], the ergon of its virtue will be an excellent life-activity” (*EE* II 1, 1219a25-27). What does Aristotle mean by “one and the same”? Though a Platonic reading of these lines (according to which the ergon of the soul is exactly the same as the ergon of the virtue of the soul) may be tempting, remarks just a few lines earlier suggest a different interpretation:

We say that the ergon of a thing is also <the ergon> of the excellence, although not in the same way: for example, a shoe is the ergon of the shoemaking-art and the activity of shoemaking. So if there is such a thing as the virtue of shoemaking and an excellent shoemaker, their ergon will be an excellent shoe, and the same holds in other cases.19 (*EE* II 1, 1219a19-23)

Aristotle notes that though the same ergon belongs to a thing and to its excellence, it does not belong to both “in the same way” (*EE* II 1, 1219a20), and he explains that while the ergon of the

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19 τούτων δὲ τούτων τὸν τρόπον διωρισμένων, λέγομεν ὅτι τὸ ἔργον τοῦ πρᾶγματος καὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς, ἄλλ᾽ οὐχ ὠσαύτως, οἷς σκυτοτομικῆς καὶ σκυτεύσεως ὑπόδημα: εἰ δὴ τῆς ἐστίν ἀρετῆς σκυτωτῆς καὶ σκυτεύσεως, τὸ ἔργον ἐστὶ σπουδαίων ὑπόδημα. τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων. This text does not include Susemihl’s emendation of “ταύτῃ” before “τὸ ἔργον” in line 1219a19 because the line can make grammatical sense so long as we take καὶ (1219a20) adverbially and only “τῆς ἀρετῆς” predicatively.
shoemaking-art is a shoe, that of the virtue of the shoemaking-art (if there is such a virtue\textsuperscript{20}) is an excellent shoe. Thus, he does not claim that the ergon of the shoemaking-art is an excellent shoe. Aristotle also countenances the possibility of there being a virtue of the shoemaking-art, and by so doing, he distances himself from Plato, who, as we saw, maintains that an art is in no need of virtue (Rep. I, 342a3), and indeed could not have a virtue since excellence is already built into the art itself (Rep. I, 342b6). Thus, while Plato thinks that being an excellent artisan is a matter of simply being an artisan to the maximum extent possible for perceptible beings, Aristotle leaves room for artisans who fully deserve to be called artisans, but who are nevertheless not excellent.

But what exactly does Aristotle have in mind in the EE when he says that the same ergon belongs to a thing and to its excellence, though not in the same way (II 1, 1219a19-20)? He seems to mean that that they are the same in genus (γένος), though not in species (εἶδος). Elsewhere Aristotle gives us resources to distinguish different ways in which something can be the same as something else, and two of these are “same in genus (γένος)” and “same in species (εἶδος)” (see Meta. Δ 6 and 9). For example, a horse and a man are the same in genus (animal), they are not the same in species; however, two humans are both the same in genus (animal) and the same in species (human being). The immediate context in EE II 1 suggests that this is what Aristotle has in mind because after using the principle in question to define eudaimonia as “activity of teleion life on the basis of teleion virtue” (EE II 1, 1219a38-39), Aristotle says that there is good reason to think that he has given its correct “genus and definition” (EE II 1, 1219a40). The idea would seem to be that activity of “life” (or “teleion life”) is the genus and

\textsuperscript{20} It is worth noting that though in the NE Aristotle takes it for granted that there is a virtue proper to an art, in the EE he does not commit himself to there being one.
“on the basis of virtue” (or “on the basis of teleion virtue”) is the differentia, together yielding the definition of eudaimonia.\textsuperscript{21}

5.4 Virtue in the Nicomachean Ethics Ergon Argument

We should now return to the passage from the \textit{NE} that we began with:

\textbf{[Section D]} We say that the ergon of an X, e.g. a kitharist, and that of an excellent X, e.g. an excellent kitharist, are the same in kind [\(\tau\omega\ \gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\tau\) and that this holds unqualifiedly in every case, the superiority on the basis of virtue being added to the ergon. For the ergon of a kitharist is the performance [\(\kappa\iota\theta\alpha\rho\iota\zeta\epsilon\nu\nu\) but that of an excellent kitharist is the excellent performance [\(\tau\omicron\ \epsilon\nu\)]. (\textit{NE I 7, 1098a8-12})

If one reads this passage against the background of the \textit{EE}, it is very natural to assume that when Aristotle says the ergon of an X and the ergon of an excellent X are the same “in kind” (\(\tau\omega\ \gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\tau\)) he means that they are the same in genus.\textsuperscript{22} Aristotle would then seem to be claiming not that what it is to be an ergon is identical with what it is to be an excellent ergon, but rather that an excellent ergon and an average ergon both belong to the same general “genus” which is “the ergon.” This interpretation would also dovetail with our interpretation of Section A according to which when Aristotle claims that the excellent accomplishment (\(\tau\omicron\ \epsilon\nu\)) of a thing is found \textit{in} its ergon, he is using “in” (\(\epsilon\nu\)) as one does when one claims that “man is in animal and in general a

\textsuperscript{21} Aristotle perhaps has a similar picture in mind when he discusses, in \textit{Metaphysics} \textit{\textsc{\textalpha} 14}, different ways in which “quality” (\(\tau\omicron\ \pi\omicron\iota\omicron\nu\)) is said. He eventually reduces the different ways to two—one of which is a “modification of an activity” (1020b18)—and then writes: “Virtue and vice are among these modifications [\(\pi\omicron\theta\eta\)]; for they indicate differences [\(\delta\iota\omicron\omicron\varphi\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\alpha\omicron\)] of the movement or activity [\(\tau\omicron\zeta\ \kappa\iota\nu\acute{n}\kappa\omicron\sigma\omega\sigma\varsigma\ \kappa\omega\tau\iota\varsigma\ \epsilon\nu\epsilon\gamma\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha\varsigma\), according to which the things in motion act or are acted on well [\(\kappa\alpha\lambda\omicron\delta\omicron\varsigma\) or badly [\(\varphi\alpha\lambda\omicron\omega\varsigma\); for that which can be moved or can act in some definite way is good [\(\gamma\gamma\acute{a}\theta\omicron\nu\)], and that which can do so in another—the contrary—way is bad [\(\mu\omicron\chi\theta\eta\pi\omicron\nu\)] (1020b18-23; ROT with significant alterations).”

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Aspasius in Heylbut (1889): “[T]he ergon of an excellent person is same in kind [\(\tau\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\tau\)], but not in number or in form [\(\sigma\omicron\nu\tau\epsilon\ \delta\omicron\ \acute{a}\rho\omicron\theta\omicron\mu\omicron\omicron\omicron\ \omicron\omicron\omicron\ \epsilon\omicron\omicron\omicron\)], as that of just any man in any ergon at all.” (18.18-24).
species is in a genus” (Physics IV 3, 210a18).

However, Aristotle elsewhere makes two assumptions that together should make us cautious about this interpretation. He assumes, first, that where the distinction of prior and posterior is present there is no common genus (cf. NE I 6, 1096a17-23), and second, that the ergon on the basis of virtue is prior to the ergon on the basis of vice (cf. Pol. I 5, 1254a34-b2). Aristotle even clearly claims that: “where one <thing> is better and the other worse, the better is always prior; so that of these no genus can exist” (Meta. B 3, 999a13-14). Perhaps because Aristotle was sensitive to this point when he wrote the NE (in a way that he was not when he wrote the EE), he avoided committing himself to their being a strict genus-species relationship between the human ergon and the human good. Nevertheless, even if there is no strict-genus species relationship, there may nevertheless be more or less degrees of specificity and that is all I need for my purposes. The human ergon is still a broader class under which the human ergon on the basis of virtue falls. This interpretation is also compatible with our reading of Section A, and even with our use of Physics IV 3 because Aristotle there says, “one thing may be in another…just as man is in animal and in general a species is in a genus” (210a17-18). By saying “just as” (ὡς) Aristotle seems to indicate that this use of “in” is not restricted to a species being in genus but can hold of things that exhibit a similar relationship—as, for example, odd number is “in” number, and Socrates is “in” the species man.

If I am right that the human ergon is something more general than the human ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue, then Aristotle in NE I 7 does not identify the human ergon as activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of virtue. He also, unlike Plato, makes a principled distinction between an art and the virtue proper to that art. But does Aristotle distinguish between an art and the virtue proper to an art elsewhere in the NE? Though one of
Aristotle’s uses of the term “art” (τέχνη) may suggest a Platonic picture,\(^{23}\) there are nevertheless two passages in which Aristotle clearly marks a distinction between an art and the virtue proper to that art. In *NE* VI 5, Aristotle says, “there exists a virtue of an art [τέχνης] but not of practical wisdom [φρονήσεως]” (1140b21-22). By this I take him to mean that there exists an extreme of excellence in art, which does not exist in practical wisdom and this is because art, unlike practical wisdom, indicates a certain range of expertise. Practical wisdom, however, is itself a virtue and so a certain extreme of excellence. In *NE* VI 7, Aristotle writes:

We ascribe wisdom [σοφίαν] in arts to the people who have the most exact expertise in the arts. For instance, we call Pheidias a wise sculptor-in-stone and Polycleitus a wise sculptor-in-bronze; and by wisdom we signify precisely virtue of an art [ἀρετή τέχνης] (1141a9-12).\(^{24}\)

The passage implies that one can count as possessing the art of sculpting-in-stone without at the same time possessing the virtue proper to that art. Wisdom, he says, signifies “virtue of an art,” and so when we call Pheidias a wise sculptor-in-stone we mean that he possesses the virtue proper to the art of sculpting-in-stone in contrast to the many other sculptors-in-stone who do not. Since both these passages from *NE* VI employ the distinction between the art and the virtue proper to that art, they naturally lend support to our interpretation of Section D because the distinction between the art and the virtue of an art naturally implies a correlative distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well.

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\(^{23}\) I have in mind two passages: *NE* V 3, 1139b14-17, where art is listed as one of the five states by which the soul thinks truly (“ἀληθεύει”) in assertions and denials; and *NE* VI 4, where art is said to be a “state involving true reason concerned with production” (1140a19-20), and is contrasted with lack-of-craft (ἀτεχνία), “the contrary state involving false reason and concerned with production” (1140a21-23).

\(^{24}\) Τὴν δὲ σοφίαν ἐν τῇ ταῖς τέχναις τοῖς ἀκριβεστάτοις τὰς τέχνας ἀποδίδομεν, οἷον Φειδίαν λιθουργὸν σοφὸν καὶ Πολύκλειτον ἀνδριαντοποιόν, ἐνταῦθα μὲν οὖν οὐθὲν ἄλλο σημαίνοντες τὴν σοφίαν ἢ ὅτι ἀρετὴ τέχνης ἔστιν.
Further insight into how Aristotle thinks of this distinction comes in his general discussion of virtue of character. He explains that, unlike capacities such as vision or hearing, virtues of character do not occur by nature:

If something arises in us by nature, we first have the capacity for it, and later perform the activity. This is clear in the case of the senses; for we did not acquire them by frequent seeing or hearing, but we already had them when we exercised them, and did not get them by exercising them. (NE II 1, 1103a26-31; Irwin [1999])

However, when it comes to virtues of character, we must perform virtuous actions before we can possess virtue. Just as we become builders by building and sculptors by sculpting, so we become virtuous people by performing virtuous actions. In NE I 5, he argues that virtues are states (ἕξεις), and not feelings (πάθη) or capacities (δυνάμεις). When he explains in NE II 6 what sort of state a virtue is, he makes remarks that illuminate how he thinks virtue relates to nature:

It should be said, then, that every virtue puts its possessor [i.e. that of which it is the virtue] into a good condition [ἐν ἔχον] and makes it accomplish its ergon well [ἐνδ]. The virtue of the eye, for example, makes both the eye and its ergon good [σπουδαῖον]—for it is by the virtue of the eye that we see well. Similarly, the virtue of a horse makes the horse excellent and good at galloping, carrying its rider and facing the enemy. If this holds for all things, the virtue of a human being will also be the state from which a man is good and accomplishes his ergon well. (NE II 6, 1106a15-24)

When Aristotle says that virtue is a state that both puts its possessor into a good condition and makes it accomplish its ergon well, he seems to assume that the capacity to accomplish the ergon is something that a thing has just because of its nature: an eye, for example, has the capacity to see because it is an eye. Earlier Aristotle mentioned that the capacity to see does not occur by
habituation but by nature (1103a30). So when Aristotle speaks of the virtue of the eye, what does he have in mind?

He probably has in mind two different sorts of things: one thing that occurs by nature and one thing that does not. On the one hand, he may have in mind a sort of natural virtue of keen-sightedness, and this would be analogous to the natural virtues of courage, temperance, etc. that do occur by nature (NE VI 13, 1144b4-5) but not always or for the most part. On the other hand, he may have in mind something like the acquired ability to see something as something. For example, we can learn through repeated experience to see bread as bread, or bread as ready to come out of the oven, etc. A similar twofold explanation would presumably hold for the virtue of the horse, which makes it “good at galloping, carrying its rider and facing the enemy” (1106a20-21). On the one hand, Aristotle may have in mind a natural virtue of a horse that makes it “good at galloping.” On the other hand, he would seem to have in mind the ability that a horse can acquire through habituation to accomplish its ergon well. For it is an acquired state that makes a horse good at “carrying its rider into battle and facing the enemy.”

But does this mean that the ergon of the horse involves being used for human ends? Scholars have not directly tackled this particular question, but there are two positions on Aristotle’s global teleology that could yield plausible interpretations of the passage in question.26 On the one hand, Aristotle may be thinking that it is part of the horse’s nature to serve human needs, and this would dovetail with a picture on which Aristotle’s natural teleology is anthropocentric.27 On the other hand, one could maintain that, while it is not part of the horse’s nature to serve human needs, it is part of the nature of humans to make use of lower animals such as

27 This is the reading of Sedley (1992) and (2007, 194-204). For a critique see Sharle (2008).
as horses.\textsuperscript{28} The latter seems to me the more plausible position, and it is also worth adding that Aristotle thinks that the horse is a tame animal, and that all tame animals are better off when ruled by humans (\textit{Pol.} I 5, 1254b11-12). If this later explanation is correct, even though the definition of the ergon and end of a horse does not make reference to human use, the definition of the ergon accomplished well (because of the addition “well”) will indeed make reference to human use.

Throughout his discussion, Aristotle uses Plato’s examples—of the eye, ear, horse, and human—but to articulate a quite different understanding of virtue than the one we find in \textit{Republic} 1. These differences, however, have not been appreciated. Consider, for example, the following comments by Barney in defense of her way of understanding the ergon argument’s rationale:

\begin{quote}
[F]or Aristotle as biologist, the end of an organism is to lead a good life for organisms of that kind, one constituted by a certain kind of successful activity. And so the function of a horse is not… to serve human needs, but to lead a flourishing equine existence, doing \textit{well} the things that horses are by nature such as to do.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Barney here assumes that the end of the horse is the ergon of the horse, and further, that the end of the horse is flourishing as a horse, glossed by her as “doing \textit{well} the things that horses are by nature such as to do.” This latter claim is also just one application of her broader claim that the end of any organism (hamster, horse, human, etc.) is a \textit{good} life of its kind, that is, accomplishing its ergon \textit{well}. Of course in making this claim Barney is collapsing (as Plato does but Aristotle does not) the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. Because of this, she is also mistaken about how to think of the horse’s ergon accomplished well. For, as we just saw, Aristotle seems to think that when the horse’s ergon is accomplished on the

\textsuperscript{28} Sharle (2008, 162).
\textsuperscript{29} Barney (2008, 301)
basis of the virtue of a horse, it does “serve human needs.” (In what follows, I further discuss the relationship between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well as it occurs in Aristotle’s biology.) How this bears on Aristotle’s use of the notion of virtue in the ergon argument, though, should be fairly clear. On Barney’s view, the ergon of a human being is that ergon accomplished well, and so Aristotle would then introduce virtue into the ergon argument because it is only by means of virtue that a human will accomplish his ergon. However, on the view I am advancing, the ergon of a human is not equated with that ergon accomplished well, and so Aristotle introduces the notion of virtue because it is only by means of virtue that the human ergon will be accomplished well—where this is something better than the mere accomplishment of the ergon.

5.5 “The Well” in Aristotle’s Theoretical Philosophy

We have been looking at passages in Aristotle’s practical philosophy that suggest he marks a distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well, and now, in order to fortify our conclusions, we will note that Aristotle makes structurally similar distinctions at various places in his theoretical philosophy. For the thesis that there is a conceptual distinction between accomplishing a thing and accomplishing it well, some straightforward evidence comes from *Metaphysics* Θ 2:

It is obvious also that the power of merely doing a thing or having it done to one is implied in that of <doing it or having it done> well [τὸ ἐὖ], but the latter is not always implied in the former; for he who
does a thing well must do it, but he who merely does it need not do it well. (1046b24-28; ROT with revisions)\\textsuperscript{30}

Aristotle claims that doing something well necessary implies that you are doing it, while simply doing it does not necessarily imply that you are doing it well. Consequently, “doing a thing” appears to be a broader category than “doing a thing well.” This may seem a simple observation, but from the way that Plato carves up reality, he cannot in principle make this claim. That is because he thinks both that doing a thing in any way defectively is a matter of not doing it without qualification, i.e. not really doing it, and that doing a thing at all still entails doing it (at least to some extent) well.

A quite interesting use of the concept of “the well” (τὸ ἐὖ) occurs in Aristotle’s natural philosophy, and in particular his biology. To appreciate this, we should note that there seem to be two roughly different kinds of teleology in play in Aristotle’s biological explanations: on the first kind of teleology, nature does things for the sake of living and being, and on the second kind of teleology, nature does things for the sake of “the well,” that is, living and being well.\\textsuperscript{31} In Aristotle’s discussion of animal parts, he makes clear use of both sorts of distinctions. On the one hand, he explains that there are some animal parts that are essential for the life activity of a given animal—for example, no animal can exist without a liver or a heart (cf. \textit{PA} IV 12, 677a36-b5; III 7, 670a25ff) and any animal that breathes must have lungs (\textit{PA} III 7, 670a30). On the other hand, he says that some parts do not occur “of necessity” but rather for the sake of “the well”—for example, the kidney:

\textsuperscript{30} φανερὸν δὲ καὶ ὅτι τῇ μὲν τοῦ εὖ δυνάμει ἀκολουθεῖ ἢ τοῦ μόνον ποιήσαι ἢ παθεῖν δύναμις, ταύτῃ δ’ ἐκείνη οὐκ ἄει· ἀνάγκη γάρ τὸν εὖ ποιοῦντα καὶ ποιεῖν, τὸν δὲ μόνον ποιοῦντα οὐκ ἀνάγκη καὶ εὖ ποιεῖν. Ross’s translation with alterations.

\textsuperscript{31} Here I am relying on the work of Leunissen (2010), who uses the terms “primary teleology” and “secondary teleology.” See Henry (2011) for a critique of these terms.
Kidneys are present in some animals, but not of necessity; they are present for the sake of the well and the fine [τοῦ ἐκ καὶ καλῶς]; that is to say, their particular nature enables them to cope with the residue that collects in the bladder, in those cases where this deposit is somewhat abundant, and thereby to help the bladder accomplish its ergon better [βέλτιων ἀποδιδόν κύστις τὸ αὐτῆς ἔργον]. (PA III 7, 670b23-27; Leunissen [2010] with alterations)

The idea seems to be that the kidneys—unlike the heart, liver, and probably also the bladder—do not exist of necessity, that is, they do not seem to be required for any organism to live as the sort of organism that is. Instead, they come about for the sake of “the well and the fine,” and by this Aristotle would seem to mean that the kidneys come about in order to improve upon the activity of a necessary organ, the bladder, and thereby to enable it to accomplish its ergon well.32

Something similar happens in De Anima III 11-13, where Aristotle marks off those sensory capacities that are required for an animal to live and exist as an animal, from those that are instead for the sake of “the well.” Aristotle determines that only touch (along with taste, which is here considered a form of touch) is necessary for an animal to live and exist, and thus the possession of touch alone is a necessary and sufficient condition for being an animal. “All the other senses,” he explains, “are for the sake of the well and for that reason belong not to any and every kind of animal but only to some” (III 12, 434b24-25).33 The idea seems to be that touch is present in animals because touch is necessary for an animal to live as an animal (since without touch it would be very difficult for an animal to avoid immediate evil and to pursue immediate good, and without taste it would be very difficult to avoid unsuitable “food” and to pursue suitable food). The other sensory capacities, however, are present in order to improve upon the bare activity of animal-living. In other words, the other sensory capacities are for the sake of “the well.”

32 Nature provides animals with kidneys because, acting as a good housekeeper, she makes best use of the materials available to her (GA II 6, 744b11-27).
33 οἷς δὲ άλληι τοῦ τε ἐκ ἔνεκα καὶ γένει ζώων ἡδή οὐ τῷ τυχόντι· άλλὰ τισίν
When Aristotle speaks of “the well” he seems to always have in mind a certain frame of reference. In the last passage, Aristotle’s frame of reference is what sensory capacities are necessary if something is to be an animal. In the *PA* passage the frame of reference was what organs are necessary for a certain biological operation is to be performed. But when Aristotle speaks of the ergon and the ergon accomplished well in the *NE*, what frame of reference is he assuming? I think it is quite similar to the frame of reference in the *PA* passage: It is the end that belongs to a thing just in virtue of its nature (and thus that occurs always or for the most part). Thus, even though Aristotle thinks that the power to see is for the sake of the well (cf. *DA* III 11-13), he does not think that the ergon of the eye is seeing well (cf. *NE* II 6, 1106a15-24). And even though the horse and its ergon may partake in “the well” by having various sense-powers besides touch, the ergon of the horse is not horse-living done well.  

We have, then, good reason to think that Aristotle not only admits a conceptual distinction between the ergon of a thing and its “well,” but also thinks this distinction in fact occurs in quite a number of cases—e.g. the cases of the bladder, eye, horse, and human. I should mention, though, that there is reason to think that for some things the ergon and “the well” do not come apart, and this is because the ergon does not admit of improvement in any way. This may occur because perfection is built into the nature of the ergon, as would seem to be the case for the erga of the heavenly bodies. Or this may occur because the ergon is so simple as to not admit of improvement, as would seem to be the case for the ergon of each elemental body (e.g. fire).

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34 In other words, the horse just in virtue of accomplishing its ergon does partake in “the well,” but this is living well as an animal, not (as Barney claims) living well as a horse.
5.6 Doctrine of the Mean and Aristotle on Virtue

As we saw earlier, Plato in the *Republic* speaks of the virtue of the eye as sight and the vice of the eye as blindness, and by so doing seems to imply that the eye, even when deprived of its power to see, is still an eye. Aristotle disagrees with this picture in more than one way. First, as we have been belaboring, he thinks that the power to see is a natural capacity of the eye, and that the virtue of the eye is an exceptional state (whether natural or acquired) that enables it to see well (not merely to see). Second, Aristotle thinks that if an eye loses the power to accomplish its ergon, it becomes an eye only in name. In *Meteorologica* IV 12 he writes:

Each thing is defined by its ergon: a thing actually is itself when it can accomplish its ergon; an eye for instance when it can see. When it is incapable of doing so it is that thing only in name, like a dead eye or one made of stone, for a wooden saw is no more a saw than one in a picture (390a10-13; cf. *Politics* I 2).  

The reason that Aristotle thinks that if an eye loses its power to see it becomes an eye only in name is because he thinks that the ergon of the eye is seeing and that “each thing is defined by its ergon” (*Meteor*. IV 12, 390a10). This is in turn because Aristotle thinks that each thing is defined by its end, and the ergon is the end. One upshot of this view is that Aristotle judges a thing to be an X just insofar as it can accomplish the ergon of an X—not insofar as it can accomplish the ergon well. Consequently, on Aristotle’s picture, there seems to be a range within which something can qualify as an X.

This picture is complemented by the following passage from the *Politics*, where Aristotle not only appears to assume that there is such range, but also explains that if something falls near

\[ \text{άπαντα δ’ εστὶν ὁρισμένα τῷ ἐργῷ· τὰ μὲν γὰρ δυνάμενα ποιεῖν τὸ αὐτῶν ἐργὸν ἄλθεος ἐστὶν ἕκαστον, οἷον ὀσθαλμὸς εἰ ὀρᾷ, τὸ δὲ μὴ δυνάμενον ὁμονύμως, οἷον ὁ τεθνεὼς ἢ ὁ λίθινος· οὐδὲ γὰρ πρίν ὁ ξύλινος, ἄλλ᾽ ἢ ὃς εἰκόν.} \]

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the edges of that range it will be a bad X, while if it falls off that range altogether, it will no longer be an X at all. Aristotle’s immediate topic is the proper size for states, but his remarks apply more broadly:

To the size of states there is a limit, as there is to other things, plants, animals, implements; for none of these retain their natural power when they are too large or too small, but they either wholly lose their nature or are spoiled. For example, a ship which is only a span long will not be ship at all, nor a ship a quarter of a mile long; yet there may be a ship of a certain size, either too large or too small, which will still be a ship, but bad for sailing. (Politics VII 4, 1326a35; ROT)

Though a ship may be too large or too small, we find that it still counts as a ship as long as it is capable of sailing, whether well or badly. However, as soon as the ship becomes too small or too large to sail at all, it is no longer a ship. Likewise, a very bad human will still count as a human so long as he can accomplish the human ergon, even if he only does so badly. But if somehow a human being became so bad that it could no longer accomplish the human ergon, he (or it) would no longer be a human.

These thoughts also dovetail with the way Aristotle articulates his famous “doctrine of the mean.” In NE II 6, after noting that the virtues are those states that enable a thing to accomplish its ergon well, he tries to give us some idea of what accomplishing the ergon well consists in. After explaining the difference between the intermediate in the object itself and in relation to us, he says, “every expertise accomplishes its ergon well by focusing on the intermediate and making the erga conform to that” (1106b8-9). For example, the shipbuilding art will make excellent ships by focusing on the mean—in size but also in other respects too

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36 For example, a tyrant along the lines of Hitler or Pol-Pot, though vicious, is still capable of exercising reason.
37 Aristotle speaks, for example, of a woman who is said to tear pregnant women open and eat their children (NE VII 5, 114820-21). Such actions, he thinks, display a loss of the power of reason. Cf. Pol. I 2,1253a27-29: “he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need of it because he is sufficient to himself, must either be a beast or a god.” Cf. also various places in NE VII 5-6, where the line between human brutishness and non-human animality seems quite thin.
I have so far been arguing that Aristotle, unlike Plato, does not collapse the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. Instead, he understands the former to be a broader category under which the latter falls. Consequently, when Aristotle introduces virtue in the ergon argument, he does so not in order to clarify what the human ergon is but rather to narrow in on what the human good is. But now we should ask: does this mean the human ergon is not at all normative? If by this question we mean to ask whether the ergon is the same as the ergon accomplished well, then of course the answer is “no.” Yet there seem to be other ways in which the human ergon could be “normative,” and in this section I address two questions that bear on this issue. First, does the ergon bear a closer relationship to the ergon well accomplished than to the ergon badly accomplished? And second, is the human ergon itself something good? I take it that if we answer “yes” to either of these questions, then we have good reason to think that the ergon is normative.

The questions are not unrelated, but I will nevertheless begin with the first. Here we should consider Aristotle’s actual definitions of the human ergon, and Gomez-Lobo, who argues...
that all of Aristotle’s definitions are normatively neutral, fastens onto this formulation: “an activity of the soul on the basis of reason or not without reason” (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου 1098a7-8). He argues that Aristotle here means to explicitly include both the activity of the rational part of the soul done well (which Gomez-Lobo understands by “on the basis of reason”) and the activity done poorly (which he understands by “not without reason”).

I find it doubtful, though, that Aristotle would want to identify the human ergon in this way, and I instead think that when Aristotle distinguishes between soul-activity “on the basis of reason” and “not without reason,” he means to mark a difference between actual acts of reasoning (whether practical or theoretical) and non-rational activities that, while not acts of reasoning, are nevertheless relevantly informed by reasoning. If we focus on Aristotle’s first characterization of the human ergon, I believe we will find reason to interpret his later formulation in this way, and we will also find reason to think the human ergon is more close related to the ergon accomplished well than to the ergon accomplished badly.

Aristotle determines the human ergon by first assuming that it is a kind of living, and then eliminating those forms of living that are not proper to human beings as human beings. He eliminates the kind of nutritive living that plants do as well as the kind of perceptual living that nonhuman animals do, and then settles on what is left: “an active life of the part that has reason” (1098a3-4). He then clarifies that the part that has reason consists of two parts: “one has reason because it obeys [or is persuaded] by reason, and the other because it <actually> has reason and thinks” (1098a4-5). Aristotle is here distinguishing between the rational part of the soul strictly speaking, which consists of both practical and theoretical reason, and the non-rational part of the soul that obeys reason (which I will call the ‘obedient part’). Now you might think that any

38 On the basis of this, Gomez-Lobo (1989, 182) claims that Aristotle’s definition of the human ergon is “purely descriptive.”
exercise of these parts would count as an exercise of the human ergon, but this does not seem to be the case. When Aristotle further discusses the obedient part in *NE I 13*, he says that “the part with appetites and in general desires partakes in reason *insofar as* [ἡ] it listens to and obeys reason” (1102b30-31). Thus, some activities of this part may not count as activities of the obedient part (and thus as accomplishments of the human ergon). This is clear if we remember that Aristotle thinks that northern Barbarians, though they are biologically human and have the part of the soul that may partake in reason, nevertheless do not accomplish the human ergon but live instead “by sense-perception” (*NE VII 5*, 1149a10). The same may also go for the activities of natural slaves (*Pol. I 5*, 1254b20-23) as well as for certain activities of the non-rational part of vicious, akratic and enkratic agents.\(^39\) Consequently, Aristotle’s characterization of the human ergon seems to be normative insofar as he is looking to the best cases (or the non-defective cases) to order to determine what that ergon is. He thus implicitly says that a certain relation between the non-rational and the (strictly) rational part is natural for human beings. When Aristotle gives his alternative formulation of the human ergon at 1098a7-8 as “an activity of the soul on the basis of reason or not without reason” he may (as I suggested above) be recalling the distinction he has just made between the two ways the rational part has reason: strictly speaking (“on the basis of reason”) and as obeying reason (“not without reason”). If this is right, then in both of Aristotle’s key formulations, the ergon is specified as something normative in nature.

Aristotle’s procedure here would seem to be one that he articulates in the *Politics*:

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\(^{39}\) Both claims are debatable. With regard to natural slaves, Aristotle does say that they are able to perceive reason in another, and so do “partake in reason” (*Pol I 5*, 1254b) to some extent, and this may be enough to count the activities of their non-rational parts as instances of the human ergon. With regard to the vicious, akratic and enkratic agents, though their activities count as instances of the human ergon, it may be that in many cases this will be due not to the activity of the non-rational part but merely to the activity of the rational part. However, one might alternatively think that the activities of vicious, akratic and enkratic count as instances of the human ergon because of the activities of both the non-rational part and the rational part, and this is because the non-rational part’s activities, though disobedient, have nevertheless been shaped and informed by that person’s practical outlook. On either view, though, it remains true that the activity of the non-rational part will not count as an activity of “the rational part” unless it is—in some important way—informe by that person’s (rational) practical outlook.
The primary constituents of an animal are soul and body: the one being by nature the ruler, and the other the subject. And we should look for what is natural in those things that keep their nature, and not in things that are corrupted. Therefore we must study the human who is in the best state both of body and soul, for in him we shall find the true relation of the two; although in bad and corrupted natures the body will often seem to rule over the soul, since they are in an evil and unnatural condition. (*Pol* I 5, 1254a34-b2; Reeve [1997] with alterations)\(^{40}\)

If you only look at bad or corrupted instances of a thing, Aristotle thinks, you will suppose you understand the nature of that thing when in fact you do not. If you do this in the human case, you will think that the body (by which I take Aristotle to include the non-rational part that can partake in reason) is such as to rule over the soul (by which I take him to mean the strictly rational part) when in fact it is the other way around. Aristotle here seems to think that the nature of a thing is *revealed* in its best instances, not in the bad or corrupted instances. Thus, in designating the human ergon, the excellent ergon and the bad ergon are not on a par. The ergon is more closely related to the excellent ergon because we must look to the excellent ergon and not to the bad ergon in order to see what the ergon in fact is.

Yet even though the human ergon is in this way normative, it does not follow that the human ergon should be equated with the human ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue.\(^{41}\) If you did make such an equation, you would have to affirm either (1) that a vicious person could not accomplish the human ergon, in which case he would not be a human being, or (2) that in accomplishing the ergon viciously the vicious agent was partly accomplishing it virtuously.

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\(^{40}\) τὸ δὲ ἔξοδον πρῶτον συνέστηκεν ἐκ ψυχῆς καὶ σώματος. ὅν τὸ μὲν ἄρχον ἐστὶ φύσει τὸ δὲ ἀρχόμενον. δεῖ δὲ σκοπεῖν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ φύσιν ἔχουσι μᾶλλοντα φύσει, καὶ μὴ ἐν τοῖς διενθαρρημένοις· διὸ καὶ τὸν βέλτιστα διακεῖσθαι καὶ κατὰ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀνθρωπόν θεωρητέον, ἐν ὧν τούτῳ δήλον· τῶν γὰρ μοιχηρῶν ἢ μοιχηρῶς ἐχόντων δόξειν ἄν ἄρχειν πολλάκις τὸ σῶμα τῆς ψυχῆς διὰ τὸ φαινόμεν καὶ παρὰ φύσιν ἔχειν

\(^{41}\) *Pace* Lear (2004, 44) who in support of her claim that “virtuous functioning is a thing’s ultimate end,” argues that “it is more correct to say that excellent functioning is the end, since it is the excellent activity that serves as a normative standard for that kind of activity in general.”
Clearly, though, Aristotle wants to affirm neither (1) nor (2). He does think there is a condition bad enough to make one sink below the human level and he calls this not vice, but “brutishness” (θηριότης; cf. *NE* VII 5). Also, unlike Plato, he does not think that whenever you accomplish the human *ergon* you must, to some extent, accomplish it well. Instead, Aristotle seems to think that the *ergon* is definitionally prior to virtue. For while *ergon* is included in the definition of virtue (since virtue is a state that makes its possessor good and allows it to accomplish its *ergon* well), virtue is not included in the definition of *ergon* (since an *ergon* is the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, has being). Thus, when Aristotle counsels us to look at the excellent *ergon* in order to know what the *ergon* is, he does so not because he thinks that what it is to be the *ergon* is the same as what it is to be the excellent *ergon*, but because he thinks this is the only way we can be sure we understand the true nature of the *ergon*.

We mentioned a second question that bears on the alleged normativity of the *ergon*, and it was this: could the *ergon* itself be something good? Scholars have not been asking this question, but I think it is an important one. Though I do not have space here to tackle it adequately, I will say that I think Aristotle does consider the human *ergon* and the human being to be, as such, good sorts of things. Reasons for thinking this can be found in *Metaphysics* Δ 16:

We call “perfect” [*teleion*]… also that which regarding its excellence and the well [*tò κατ’ ἀρετήν καὶ τὸ εὖ*] cannot be excelled in its kind, such as a doctor is perfect or a perfect flautist is perfect when with respect to his kind he lacks nothing of the proper virtue. And thus we transfer the word to bad things, and speak of a perfect scandal-monger and a perfect thief; indeed we even call them good, i.e. a good thief and a good scandal-monger. Virtue, in fact, is a kind of perfection. For each thing is then perfect and each substance is then perfect, when with respect to the kind of its proper virtue it lacks no part of its natural magnitude. (1021b14-23; ROT with revisions)

42 Perhaps someone would try to resist (1) by saying that even the vicious person has the relevant potential to acquire virtue and so in this way is a human being. First, it is not obvious that this is the relevant potentiality. And second, Aristotle seems to think that there are some humans that do not have the potential to acquire virtue because they are incurably vicious.

43 Τέλειον λέγεται… τὸ κατ’ ἀρετήν καὶ τὸ εὖ μὴ ἔχον ὑπερβολήν πρὸς τὸ γένος, οἴκον τέλειος ἰατρός καὶ τέλειος αὐλητής ὅταν κατὰ τὸ εἶδος τῆς οἰκείας ἀρετῆς μηθὲν ἐλλείποισιν ὁμώθεν δὲ μεταφέροντες καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν κακῶν
Aristotle here says that virtue is a kind of perfection, and by this he seems to mean that the virtue proper to a thing is the state that perfects the respective nature of that thing. Thus, the virtue of the doctor is the perfection proper to the doctor, and the virtue of the flautist is the perfection of the flautist, etc. What is important for our purposes is that Aristotle here speaks of “bad things” by which he means bad sorts of things: for example, scandal-mongers and thieves (Meta. Δ 16, 1021b18-19). These bad things also have proper virtues and thus proper perfections, but Aristotle thinks that when we here speak of “perfection” we do so only by a transference of the term (Meta. Δ 16, 1021b17). Presumably, that is because Aristotle thinks of a perfection as something good. Thus, while the perfection of the doctor is something good and thus really a perfection, the perfection of the thief is not something good and thus not really a perfection (even though we do still speak of it as being one). Though Aristotle does not say so explicitly, he seems to be assuming that a doctor is something good and that is why the perfection of the doctor is something good. It also seems pretty obvious that if X has an ergon, then X will be a good sort of thing only if its ergon is a good sort of thing, the reason being that the ergon of an X is the end for the sake of which an X, qua X, exists. Thus, the doctor is a good sort of thing because his ergon—health—is a good sort of thing. The extension to the human case is relatively straightforward. Aristotle thinks that the virtue of a human is a good sort of thing, and that is because he thinks a human is a good sort of thing. And if he thinks the human is a good sort of thing, he must also think that the ergon of the human being is a good sort of thing. Thus, we

\[\text{λέγομεν συκοφάντην τέλειον και κλέπτην τέλειον, ἕπαιδὴ καὶ ἁγαθόν· λέγομεν αὐτοὺς, οἷον κλέπτην ἁγαθὸν καὶ συκοφάντην ἁγαθὸν· καὶ ἡ ἀρετὴ τελείοσις τῆς ἐκαστοῦ γὰρ τότε τέλειον καὶ οὐσία πάσα τότε τελεία, ὅταν κατὰ τὸ ἐλδὸς τῆς οἰκείας ἁρετῆς μηδὲν ἐλλείπῃ μόριον τὸ κατὰ φύσιν μεγέθους.}\]

44 He probably says “kind of perfection” because he also thinks that pleasure is a perfection (NE X 4, 1174b31-32) but of a different kind since pleasure is not a state.
have another reason to think that the human ergon is in a way normative: it is a good sort of thing.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to come to a well-principled interpretive position on how Aristotle conceives of the relationship between the human ergon and the human ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue—specifically in his discussion in Section D of the ergon argument. I have, on the one hand, argued that Aristotle unlike Plato does not equate what it is to be the ergon and what it is to be the excellent ergon. Instead, when Aristotle introduces the notion of virtue in the ergon argument, he does so in order to explicate what it is to accomplish the ergon well. Thus, when he adds the superiority of being “on the basis of virtue” to the human ergon, he thereby narrows in on what the human good is. On the other hand, we have given reasons for thinking that Aristotle does not conceive of the ergon as normatively neutral. He thinks that the nature of the ergon is revealed in the ergon accomplished well but not the ergon accomplished badly, and he thinks that the human ergon is itself something good. This latter assumption would also seem to be crucial for Aristotle’s ergon argument. For if the human being and the human ergon were not good sorts of things then the human ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue could not be good either. Yet it is, and as we will discuss in the next chapter, when it is accomplished on the basis of the best virtue and over a whole lifetime, it would appear to be the best good achievable by humans in action.
6 The Full Definition of the Human Good (Section F)

6.1 Introduction

At the end of the ergon argument, Aristotle finally arrives at the following ultimate conclusion, which is his full definition—or rather, his full definitional sketch\(^1\)—of the human good:

\[\text{[Full Def.]} \quad \text{The human good turns out to be activity of the } \langle \text{rational part of the human} \rangle \text{ soul on the basis of virtue, and if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most } \text{teleion} \text{ virtue, and moreover in a } \text{teleion} \text{ life (1098a16-18).} \]

\[\tauὸ \ άνθρώπινον \ άγαθὸν \ ψυχῆς \ ενέργεια \ γίνεται \kat’ \ άρετήν, \ εἰ δὲ πλεῖους \ αἰ \ άρεταί, \ κατὰ τὴν \ άριστην \ καὶ \ τελειοτάτην, \ ἐτι δ’ \ ἐν \ βίῳ \ τελείῳ.\]

So far in our discussion of the ergon argument, we have looked at how Aristotle arrives at what we can regard as a preliminary definition of the human good:

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\(^1\) Two comments are here in order. First, though I have called the ergon argument’s conclusion “the full definition of the human good,” Aristotle in the \(NE\) never calls it a “definition” (ὁρισμός) and it is not obvious that he considers it to be one in any strict sense. At best it is a recipe for a definition since, when Aristotle determines whether there is a best virtue and what that virtue is, he would need to remove the if-clause (I 7, 1098a17) and reformulate accordingly. However, it may be the case the human good is not even the sort of thing that could be defined, given the standards for definitions that we find in \(Posterior \ Analytics\ 1\). If this is the case, then we can call it a definition only if we use “definition” in a weaker sense in which case it would mean something like “specification.” When I speak of “definition” I mean to commit myself to using the word only in this weaker way, as the stronger claim is not necessary for my argument. Second, Aristotle’s definition may be more appropriately thought of as a “definitional sketch” because he explicitly acknowledges that it needs to be “filled in.” By this, he means both that further features may need to be added to the definition (as he seems to add one at \(NE\ 111, 1101a15\)), and that a full understanding of the human good awaits the full discussion of all the virtues (of character and intellect) including friendship, self-control and lack of control, and pleasure that are to be provided in Books II through X 5.
The human good turns out to be activity of the <rational part of the human> soul on the basis of virtue (1098a16-17).

In this chapter, we look at the two additions that Aristotle attaches to the preliminary definition in order to arrive at the full definition:

[Addition 1] …if there is more than one virtue, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue (1098a17-18)

and

[Addition 2] …moreover, in a teleion life. (1098a18)

We will discuss what these additions mean, and this will of course require us to determine the meaning of the word “teleion” (variously translated as “final,” “complete,” or “perfect”). Our approach is distinctive insofar as we focus on the question of how exactly these additions derive from the ergon argument itself. This question is of paramount importance. The way in which these additions derive from the argument not only puts constraints on what the additions themselves could mean, but also determines the explanation for why Aristotle defines the human good in the way that he does. Because Aristotle thinks that (in general) we only understand a thing when we possess the explanation for why it is so, and because the ergon argument plainly functions as offering his philosophical reasons for holding the full definition of the human good, Aristotle would think that we cannot properly understand that definition until we understand it as a conclusion of the ergon argument.

The central interpretive question is as follows: In giving these two additions to his preliminary definition of the human good is Aristotle (1) giving additional criteria that something must meet if it is to be the human good or is he (2) merely clarifying what criteria are already implicit in his preliminary definition? I call (1) the additional criteria view, and I call (2)
the *implicit criteria view*. I discuss both views, but will advance a version of the additional criteria view. Though there may not always be room for a distinction between the excellent accomplishment (τὸ ἐὖ) of something and the best accomplishment (τὸ ἄριστον) of that thing, there is room, I think, in the case of a human being. In the ergon argument, I understand Aristotle to specify with his preliminary definition the excellent accomplishment of a human, and with his full definition the best accomplishment—that is, the human good. My contention will be that the full definition of the human good makes sense as the conclusion of the ergon argument only if we explicate it using the additional criteria view, and in particular, only if we reconstruct it in the way that I suggested in Chapter 3 that we should.

6.2 The “Implicit Criteria View” and the “Additional Criteria View”

Depending on how you interpret Section A of the argument, the implicit criteria view will be highly attractive or even required. Take, for example, Lawrence’s interpretation:

[Lawrence: Claim of Section A] 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.²

On this interpretation, as soon as one has spelled out what it is for a human to function well, one has determined the human good (since, in the case of a human, the X-an good is the human good). Yet Aristotle records this determination already in stating his preliminary definition of the human good, and that is why the reconstruction that I gave on behalf of Lawrence stops with the preliminary definition:

² Lawrence (2009, 215).
P1: Where the X is something with a function, the X-an good, i.e. the good of an X, consists in doing its function successfully or well. [=the claim of Section A]

P2: A human being has a function. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33.]

C1: Therefore, the human good, i.e. the good of a human being consists in doing the human function successfully or well. [from P2 and P3]

P3: The function of a human is living with the part of the soul having reason

C2: So, the human good, i.e. the good of a human, consists in doing (with the part of the soul having reason) successfully or well. [from C1 and P3]

P4: To function well is to function on the basis of virtue.

C3: So, the human good, i.e. the good of a human, consists in living (with the part of the soul having reason) on the basis of virtue. [from P4 and C3]

On this reconstruction, Aristotle does not need to add the two additions to his preliminary definition in order to complete his definitional sketch of the human good. Thus, if one is to explain why Aristotle does give the additions, one would need to adopt not the additional criteria view, but the implicit criteria view, according to which the two additions are just ways of elucidating the preliminary definition by expanding it slightly. For this to work, one would need to supply for Aristotle something like the following two premises:

P5: For an activity to be done on the basis of virtue is for it to be done on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue, if there is more than one.

and

P6: For an activity of living (ζωή) to be an activity of living, it must occur in a teleion [i.e. complete] life (βίος).

Below we will discuss how likely it is that Aristotle would hold such premises. But whether he does so or not, they would allow him—given this reconstruction—to arrive at the full definition of the human good, which one would then list as:
C4: The human good, consists in living (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 *teleion* virtue, and in a complete life. [from C3, P5 and P6]

And so, if one adopts Lawrence’s interpretation of Section A and assumes that the full definition of the human good follows from the ergon argument, then some version of the implicit criteria view seems to be required. Indeed, it seems to be required for any interpreter who both assumes that the full definition of the human good follows from the ergon argument and equates “the good, that is, the well” of a human (in Section A) with the human good.³

My own interpretation of Section A, however is compatible with both the implicit criteria view and the additional criteria view.

[Baker: Claim of Section A] If anything has an ergon and an action, the excellent accomplishment of that thing (as such) is its ergon accomplished excellently/well.

In order to make it consistent with the implicit criteria view, one would need to equate “the excellent accomplishment” of a human with the best accomplishment of a human (that is, the human good), and to make use of implicit premises similar to those mentioned above. However, as I have said, I myself favor the additional criteria view, and I assumed it in the reconstruction that I offered in chapter 4. One of the reasons that I can hold the additional criteria view is because, in my reconstruction, I include premise P0—“The human good is the best accomplishment of a human”—and I use the implicit premises P5 and P6 to supply two additions needed to mark off the best accomplishment of a human from the merely excellent accomplishment. Here is my interpretation of the argument:

³ Here I exclude those who interpret “ἐν” as “depends on” in Section A: e.g Irwin (1999) and Gottlieb (2009). As I argued earlier, understanding the word this way makes the claim of Section A much too weak for the ergon argument to work.
P0: The human good is the best accomplishment of a human (1097b22-23).

P1: For anything that has an ergon and an action, the excellent accomplishment of that thing is its ergon excellently accomplished (1097b25-28 [=claim of Section A]).

P2: A human being has an ergon and an action. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33.]

C1: Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is the human ergon excellently accomplished. [from P1 and P2]

P3: 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.]

C2: Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is activity of the part of the soul having reason, accomplished excellently. [from C1 and P3]

P4: For an ergon to be accomplished excellently is for it to be accomplished on the basis of virtue/excellence (1098a15; cf. 1098a8-11).

C3: Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason (1098a16-17). [from C2 and P4]

P5: Activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason, is better if it is accomplished on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue, when there are more virtues than one (cf. 1097a28-30).

P6: Activity on the basis of virtue of the part of the human soul having reason, is better if it occurs in a teleion life (1098a18-20; cf. 1097a28-20).

C4: Therefore, “the human good turns out to be activity of <the rational part of human> the soul on the basis of virtue, and if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue, and moreover in a teleion life” (1098a16-18). [from P0, C3, P5, P6]

On this way of interpreting the argument, we can understand Aristotle to be arriving at his full definition of the human good, by first identifying the class of thing that the human good falls under, and then arriving at the full definition by systematically listing various features that the human good would need to possess. The method seems reasonable. If we want to determine the best accomplishment of any given thing, it makes sense to determine what the proper accomplishment (or proper work) of that thing is and then to list whatever features are necessary for that proper accomplishment to be as good as possible. Since the human good is the best accomplishment of a human, Aristotle first determines the proper accomplishment (or proper work) of a human as an “active life” of the part of the human soul having reason (1098a3-4) by which he means “an activity of the <human> soul on the basis of reason or not without reason.”
(1098a7-8; cf. 13-14). He then lists relevant features that serve to narrow in on what the best accomplishment of a human is: first, “on the basis of virtue” (1098a11, 15, 17) but then, “if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue” (1098a17-18) and finally, “in a teleion life” (1098a18). The last two additions are not optional (even if valuable) elucidations of the preliminary definition, as they are on the implicit criteria view, but additional criteria that Aristotle must add if he is to properly define the human good as the best accomplishment of a human being.

One could employ the very same method in order to determine what, according to Aristotle, is the best accomplishment of a poet. A poet’s proper accomplishment will be a poem, but in order for it to be the best accomplishment of a poet, further features will need to be added: it will need to be accomplished well, that is, on the basis of the virtue proper to a poet, and also, if there are more genres of poetry than one, it will need to be an excellent poem of the best genre. (Aristotle identifies the best poetic genre as tragedy in Poetics 26). Thus, the best accomplishment of a poet will be: “a poem accomplished on the basis of poetic virtue, and if there are more genres than one, such a poem of the best
genre.” And so the excellent accomplishment of a poet, which is an excellent poem, is a broader category than the best accomplishment of a poet, which is an excellent tragedy. One must give the addition “of the best genre” in order to mark off this best poetic accomplishment from the merely excellent one.

I have characterized Aristotle’s method in the ergon argument as one of “narrowing in” on what the best accomplishment of a human is. Such a method may resemble the method of definition by division that Aristotle outlines in *Posterior Analytics* II 13, where he says that the elements in the definition “must be taken up to the first point at which so many are taken that each will belong further but all of them together will not belong further” (96a32-34). Each of the elements of the definition of the human good alone apply more broadly—“activity of the rational part of the soul,” “on the basis of virtue,” “on the basis of the best virtue,” and “in a complete life”—but when taken together they seem to narrow in on the human good reasonably well. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that Aristotle is not here employing the method of definition by division. This is because at each level in a proper definition by division it is assumed that each member of a division is generically unified. However, as we saw in the last chapter, the human ergon itself does not seem to be generically unified. This is because there is a relation of better and worse among human erga accomplished on the basis of virtue and those accomplished on the basis of vice, but there is no common genus over things that admit of such a

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4 Natali (2010) suggests that Aristotle does in fact employ the method of definition by division. This might make his interpretation sound similar to my own, but there are, however, many differences (see the appendix for Natali’s reconstruction) and here I mention three. First, we understand Section A differently. Second, Natali collapses the distinction between the ergon and the ergon accomplished well. Third, Natali avoids saying how the two additions are supposed to follow from the ergon argument. But given his reconstruction, which arrives at a definition of the human good with the preliminary definition, it seems like he will need to adopt the implicit criteria view.

5 The full definition, Aristotle says just after the argument, is itself still only a sketch (1098a20-24), and so in this way the method in the ergon argument is not exactly that from *Posterior Analytics* II 13. Yet this would expected since, as Aristotle goes on, “we must remember what we said earlier: that we should not look for the same degree of exactness in everything, but the degree of exactness that conforms with the given subject matter and is proper to the given line of inquiry” (*NE* I 7, 1098a26-29).
relation (cf. Meta. B 3, 999a13-14). The same would seem to go for the lower levels in the division. “On the basis of the best and most teleion virtue” and “in a teleion life” are added precisely because these are better than the alternatives. Nevertheless, on the view I have sketched, it still remains true that Aristotle’s method of defining the human good is to narrow in on what the best accomplishment is, but this “narrowing in” is not the method of definition by division. Here it is also worth noting that it is an advantage of my version of the additional criteria view (as opposed to the implicit criteria view) that it allows Aristotle’s full definition to be a sketch in the following key way: Aristotle leaves it open that further features may need to be added in order mark off the best accomplishment of a human from the merely excellent accomplishment.

6.3 Addition 1: “if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue”

Immediately after giving the preliminary definition of the human good as “activity of the <rational part of the human> soul on the basis of virtue,” Aristotle adds:

[Addition 1] …and if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue

(NE I 7, 1098a17-18)

Addition 1 has been the subject of much scholarly debate, and the debate has largely centered on how one should understand the phrase “best and most teleion virtue.” The word “teleion” in different contexts admits of being translated as (among other words) “complete,” “final,”
“perfect,” and with regard to the phrase in question there are often assumed to be two basic interpretive options. On the comprehensive interpretation, one takes “teleion” to mean something like “complete,” in which case Aristotle is claiming that, if there are many virtues, the human good must be an activity on the basis of the most complete or comprehensive set of virtues. On the selective interpretation, one takes “teleion” to mean something like “final,” in which case Aristotle is claiming that, if there are many virtues, the human good must be an activity on the basis of the single best virtue.6 (I present the options in the common way, though as we will later see, this is somewhat misleading.)

The reason the line has been the subject of such intense scholarly debate is as follows. When it comes to interpreting Aristotle’s theory of the human good and eudaimonia, scholars have generally divided into two broad camps.7 There are, on the one hand, Inclusivists, who think that the human good consists in a set of all or some intrinsically valuable goods, and it will be helpful to make a distinction within Inclusivism: Total-inclusivists think that the human good consists in a set containing all intrinsically valuable goods, while Activity-inclusivists think that it consists in the set of all virtuous activities.8 On the other hand, there are, opposing the inclusivists, the Monists (also called Dominantists or Exclusivists), who think that the human good consists in just one good. And so, when it comes to interpreting “best and most teleion virtue,” Inclusivists have tended to favor a comprehensive reading, while Monists have tended to favor a selective reading.

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6 I take the terminology of “selective” and “comprehensive” readings from Lawrence (2004). I should also note that some scholars who adopt the selective interpretation translate “teleion” not as “final” but as “perfect” (e.g. Purinton [1998]) or “complete” (e.g. Cooper [1987] 1999), though he later translates the word as “final,” i.e. “end-like” in e.g. [2003] 2004 and [2012]).

7 However, the two camps—monism and inclusivism—do not exhaust the interpretive options. There are, for example, dualist positions (e.g. Scott [1999] and Bush [2008]), and I myself will articulate a “gradationist” position of eudaimonia (though not of the human good) that is neither monistic, inclusivist nor dualist.

8 Though this suffices for our purposes, further discriminations may be made: for example, someone (a “partial-inclusivist”) might think that the human good consists in the set of virtuous activities plus some but not all the other intrinsically valuable goods.
These are the views that, as I said, Inclusivists and Monists tend to adopt, but they need not adopt them. This is because there are other features of the relevant passage that must be taken into consideration, and also because one could think that the definition that Aristotle gives of the human good in NE I 7 is in tension with the view that he later articulates in NE X 6-8 (perhaps because Aristotle uses the term eudaimonia in different ways). In the rest of this section, we will take a look at all the relevant aspects of the passage in question: its two key elements—the meaning of “best and most teleion virtue,” and the meaning of kata (“on the basis of”)—as well as the meaning of Addition 1 as a whole.

6.3.1 “Best and Most Teleion Virtue”

It will be best to begin by presenting the case for the comprehensive interpretation of the phrase “best and most teleion virtue,” and then to present the case of the selective interpretation. As just mentioned, inclusivists have naturally favored this interpretation because on it Aristotle would be identifying the human good with an activity of the soul on the basis of the most complete or comprehensive set of virtues. Ackrill, one of the earliest inclusivists, appears to be the first to advance this interpretation. I will focus on Ackrill’s arguments (supplementing them when need be) because, even though various scholars have given persuasive reasons to reject his comprehensive interpretation of “most teleion virtue,” many still accept some or all of his arguments for why the full definition of the human good needs to be interpreted along inclusivist lines.

Ackrill’s first main argument is that only on the comprehensive interpretation of “best and most teleion virtue” does the definition of the human good follow from the premises of the
ergon argument. He claims that since “the principle of the ergon argument is that one must ask what powers and activities are peculiar to and distinctive of man” and that man’s ergon is identified as an activity of the part of the soul having reason, where this includes more than just theoretical thinking, it follows that “the only proper conclusion of the ergon argument” will be one that identifies the human good with an activity of the rational part of the soul on the basis of “all” the human virtues. Ackrill does not provide a step-by-step explication of the ergon argument, but in order to claim that the only proper conclusion of the ergon argument is the inclusivist one, he must be assuming a certain interpretation of Section A. Indeed, he must be assuming an interpretation of Section A that would yield the claim that the human good consists in the human ergon accomplished well—that is, an interpretation of Section A along the lines of Barney, Lawrence, etc. Here it is worth noting that, even though Lawrence himself thinks that the phrase “best and most teleion virtue” should be interpreted selectively, he nevertheless notes that given his own understanding of the argument (presumably, in particular, his understanding of Section A) only the comprehensive reading of the phrase would seem to follow.

10 Since Ackrill translates the phrase “τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν” (“the human good”) as “the good for a human” ([1974] 1980, 27) he would seem to favor an interpretation more along the lines of Barney than of Lawrence. But this does not matter for our purposes since both Barney and Lawrence equate the human good with the human ergon accomplished well.
11 Lawrence (2006, 59) gives two reasons for favoring the selective reading. First, “best” in “best and most teleion virtue” sounds exclusive (though I should note that this would not rule out an inclusivist view like that of Purinton [1998]). And second, the selective reading matches up better with the argumentative development of the Nicomachean Ethics as a whole.
12 Lawrence (2006, 59) writes: “[I]n favor of the comprehensive <reading of “best and most teleion virtue”>, one might compare eyesight: the good of the eye, or success in the eye, consists in performing its function, seeing, well, i.e. in accord with the excellence proper to seeing; and if there are several, then surely in accord with the best, i.e. most complete, set. There are various defects of sight, and various aspects to its correctness—and one needs them all to enjoy perfect seeing.” Lawrence, thus, appears to agree with Ackrill’s main argument for the comprehensive reading of “best and most teleion virtue”: namely, that only this is the proper conclusion of the ergon argument. Both scholars must also be assuming the implicit criteria view—since they both assume that “on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue” must be a way of elucidating the phrase “on the basis of virtue.” Thus, they reason, since “activity of the soul on the basis of virtue” must include the exercise of all the virtues, so must the “activity of the soul on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue.”
Ackrill’s second main argument for the comprehensive interpretation is due to his interpretation of what it means to be \textit{teleion}. When Aristotle speaks of the “best and most \textit{teleion} virtue” Ackrill very reasonably understands him to be recalling the criteria of being \textit{teleion} that was carefully explained in the first part of \textit{NE I} 7 at 1097a25-b6.\footnote{In fact, the language of Addition 1 pretty closely recalls the way Aristotle explicates the \textit{teleion} criterion: “If there is only one thing that is \textit{teleion}, this would be the <good> we are seeking, and if there are many, the most \textit{teleion} of these” (\textit{NE I} 7, 1097a29-30).} Aristotle there explained that among ends some are \textit{teleion} and some are not, an end being \textit{teleion} if it is desired on account of itself. Such ends include honor, pleasure, virtue, etc. However the best good will be \textit{teleion} without qualification and so it will be worth choosing for its own sake and never for the sake of something else, and eudaimonia most of all would seem to be this good (\textit{NE I} 7, 1097a34).

Noting that the other \textit{teleion} goods would seem to be sought for their own sakes but also for the sake of the best good, Ackrill argues that Aristotle must mean that the best good—eudaimonia—is a compound of all the \textit{teleion} goods. Eudaimonia, he says, is “a comprehensive end,” which is “inclusive of all intrinsic goods.”\footnote{Ackrill ([1974] 1980, 22). He arrives at this conclusion partly by his interpretation of the self-sufficiency criterion and in particular Aristotle’s remarks about “counting together” at 1097b14-20. I do not have space to discuss the self-sufficiency criterion, but for readings that make the criterion compatible with monism, see Heinaman (1988), Cooper ([2003] 2004), and Lear (2004).} And so Ackrill reasons that since Aristotle has already explained that the most \textit{teleion} end will be this sort of comprehensive end, it will be natural to understand “best and most \textit{teleion} virtue” as referring to “the combination of all the virtues.”\footnote{Ackrill ([1974] 1980, 28). This is the place where, as I discuss below, Ackrill appears to get confused about whether he is arguing for total-inclusivism or activity-inclusivism. He fudges the issue of eudaimonia being \textit{teleion} by including all intrinsic goods and virtue being \textit{teleion} by including all the virtues.}

Ackrill also mentions three other, subsidiary considerations. First, he notes that Aristotle seems to use \textit{“teleion virtue”} to mean “complete virtue” in the conclusion of the \textit{Eudemian Ethics} ergon argument, which Ackrill translates as:

\begin{quote}
Since we saw that eudaimonia is something complete [\textit{teleion}], and life is either complete or incomplete [\textit{teleia kai atelēs}], and so also virtue—one being whole virtue, another a part—and the activity of \end{quote}
eudaimonia must be the activity of a complete life in accordance with complete virtue. (EE II 1, 1219a35-39)\textsuperscript{16}

Ackrill claims that by “teleion virtue” Aristotle here means “all virtues,”\textsuperscript{17} and if he is right about this then that is at least some prima facie evidence for thinking that “most teleion virtue” in Addition 1 means “all virtues.” Second, Ackrill cites reformulations of the definition of happiness in the NE that he thinks support a comprehensive interpretation of best and most teleion virtue: I 9 1100a4-5 (“as we have said, happiness requires teleion virtue and a teleion life”), and I 13, 1102a5-6 (“happiness is some activity of the soul on the basis of teleion virtue”), to which we can add I 10, 1101a14-16 (“then why not call happy the one who is active on the basis of teleion virtue, sufficiently supplied with external goods, and not for just any time but in a teleion life”). And third, he thinks that the “whole further development of the work, with its detailed discussion of the virtues” makes sense only if we understand “best and most teleion virtue” as meaning the comprehensive set of virtues.\textsuperscript{18}

I am now going to present the case for the selective reading of “best and most teleion virtue,” and I will do so by addressing each of Ackrill’s arguments in turn. His first argument was that an inclusivist interpretation of the full definition of the human good (and in particular comprehensive reading of “most teleion virtue”) is required if Addition 1 is to follow from the ergon argument’s premises. This reasoning, in some form or other, has been quite influential, and has so far gone unrefuted.\textsuperscript{19} However, on my reconstruction, which is a version of the

\textsuperscript{16} ἐπεὶ δὲ ἦν ἡ εὐδαιμονία τέλεόν τι, καὶ ἔστι ζωὴ καὶ τελέα καὶ ἀτελής, καὶ ἄρετὴ ἡ ὑσσύτως (ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὄλη, ἢ δὲ μόριον), ἢ δὲ τῶν ἄπελθων ἐνέργεια ἀτελής, εἰδὲ ἄν ἡ εὐδαιμονία ζωῆς τελείας ἐνέργεια κατὰ ἄρετὴν τελείαν.

\textsuperscript{17} Ackrill ([1974] 1980, 27)

\textsuperscript{18} To this we could add (on behalf of Ackrill) that “teleion” may seem to mean “complete” in Addition 1 since scholars regularly take “teleion” in Addition 2—“in a teleion life” (1098a18)—to mean “complete,” and it would be odd for Aristotle to switch back and forth between these meanings. I discuss this issue in what follows.

additional criteria view, a monistic reading can in fact follow. Two key differences between the ways Ackrill and I think about the argument are worth noting. First, my reconstruction assumes that the best accomplishment (τὸ ἄριστον) of a human is something better than the excellent accomplishment (τὸ ἔυ) of a human, and that the two additions serve to mark off the best accomplishment from the merely excellent one. Second, even though the ergon of a human being is specified as activity of the part of the human soul having reason, where this includes both activity of the part that has reason strictly speaking and activity of the part that has reason as obeying reason, I take it that Aristotle would consider an activity just of the part of that has reason strictly speaking (e.g. theoretical activity) to be a genuine instance of the human ergon. It is a genuine instance of the human ergon even though it involves no activity of the obedient part of the soul.20 Similarly, to use our earlier analogy, even though the ergon of poet may be specified as a poem, where poems include tragedy, comedy, lyric etc., Aristotle would consider just a tragedy to be a genuine instance of the poet’s ergon. It is a genuine instance of the poet’s ergon even though it is not also a lyric, a comedy, etc. And so, when Aristotle gives Addition 1 he may thereby mean to single out a certain activity of the part of the soul that has reason strictly speaking as the best accomplishment of a human. Likewise, when one attaches the addition “if there are more genres than one, of the best genre,” one may thereby mean to single out a certain tragedy or group of tragedies as the best accomplishment of a poet. Of course, what I have said does not show that the additional criteria view (and in particular my version of it) is correct, but because it is a viable interpretive option, Ackrill’s argument for the inclusivist interpretation of the full definition does not succeed.

20 It may of course also be the paradigmatic instance of the human ergon—one in which the full nature of the reasoning power is displayed—but I need not affirm this for my interpretation to work.
We now turn to Ackrill’s second argument, which is based on the criteria of being *teleion*. I begin by noting a problem internal to Ackrill’s own interpretation. Remember that Ackrill is a total-inclusivist because he holds that the human good, since it is *teleion* without qualification, must be “inclusive of all intrinsic goods.” However, his interpretation of Addition 1 only supports activity-inclusivism since the human good is identified as an *activity* (*NE* I 7, 1098a16). And so his argument from the nature of being *teleion* is actually too strong to support his own interpretation of Addition 1. (Ackrill’s three subsidiary considerations only support activity-inclusivism.) Total-inclusivism seems even more implausible when we note that Aristotle repeatedly identifies eudaimonia as an activity, whereas plenty of intrinsic goods are not activities. But there are also reasons to think that his interpretation of the *teleion*-criterion is not correct anyhow. It is clear that, for Aristotle, what is *teleion* without qualification is most of all an end: it is such as to be chosen always on account of itself and never for the sake of something else (*NE* I 7, 1097a33-34). Indeed, not only is the etymological connection between “*teleion*” (end-like) and “*telos*” (end) clear from Aristotle’s exposition, but he explicitly says that he is just trying to make “more perspicuous” (1097a25) the notion of the best good, qua ultimate end of things achievable in action, that he began the *NE* outlining. That is why he takes it for granted that the best good will obviously be most *teleion* (1097a30). In light of this, we should remind ourselves of what Aristotle takes an end and, in particular an ultimate end, to be.

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21 Ackrill ([1974] 1980, 22). This would include, for example, honor, pleasure, friends, wealth, every virtue, and good fortune (cf. *NE* I 7 1097b1, *EE* VII 1248b28-29)

22 What Ackrill needs is an interpretation of the full definition that is compatible with total-inclusivism. There have only been three suggestions in the literature about how to do this: Crisp (1994), Irwin (1991, 390-391) and Broadie (2002, 278). I briefly discuss the latter two in what follows.

23 Cf. *NE* I 8, 1099a29-30; I 9, 1099b26; I 13, 1102a5, 1102a17-18; I 13, 1153b10-11, X 7, 1177a16-17, 1177b19-24; X 8, 1178b32. See Heinaman (2007) for a discussion of these passages and others in which Aristotle identifies eudaimonia as a kind of activity.

24 I will not here address the problem of “middle-level ends” (cf. Lear [2004]) as it relates to the criteria of being *teleion* because it is not directly relevant to our discussion.
To start with, Aristotle understands an end to be an organizing principle for whatever is subordinated to it. Thus, for example, a house is an organizing principle for the activity of housebuilding. A house determines not only which sub-activities compose the activity of housebuilding (e.g. laying a foundation, building walls, constructing a roof) but also the order in which they must occur (e.g. laying a foundation must occur before building walls). Even though the art of housebuilding will aim at the achievement of its end—a house—in an unlimited way (cf. *Politics* I 9, 1257b25-30), its end is given a limit insofar as it is subordinated to a higher art, say, city-planning. City-planning, in turn, and every other art will be giving a limit insofar as they are subordinated to political science, whose end is the ultimate end, which serves as a principle of organization, and limit to, all subordinate ends. That is why Aristotle thinks that we need to use the ultimate end as a kind of target in organizing our lives (*NE* I 2, 1094a22-24), and he even takes it as evidence that political science has this best good as its proper end because it organizes and sets a limit to every subordinate end and expertise in the city (*NE* I 2, 1094a28-94b1). Could Ackrill’s inclusive end serve this role? It does not seem so. Ackrill thinks that the ultimate end could be an unorganized (and pursued in an unorganized way), but an unorganized set of goods clearly cannot be a principle of organization for the things that compose that set. In response to similar worries, Irwin has proposed that the inclusive end is a set of goods organized by moral virtue. But even so, the organized set of goods is clearly not the principle of organization. That work, on Irwin’s account, seems to be done by one of its elements, moral virtue. Now Ackrill and Irwin are total-inclusivists, but this same challenge would hold for an activity-inclusivist as well. If one wants to say that the best good is the combination of the activities of practical as well as theoretical virtue, one can still ask: what unifies these two things? What is the principle of their unification and organization? Whatever it is would seem

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to be the human good. Consequently, reflection on Aristotle’s understanding of an end as a limit and organizing principle gives us reason to think a set of goods, whether organized or unorganized, whether composed of activities or more than activities, could not be the best and most *teleion* end.  

AAckrill—and inclusivists in general—also do not seem to appreciate Aristotle’s constant assumption, which we discussed in chapter 2, that activities have inherent teleologies. Remember that, even if someone treated housebuilding as an end so that he would build and rebuild houses without cease, that would not change the fact that housebuilding is by its nature not an end but a means to an end. Indeed, when we realize that in articulating the *teleion*-criterion Aristotle is just making more perspicuous his discussion of the ultimate end from *NE* I 1-2, it is clear that he has inherent teleology in mind when he says that the best good is such-as-to-be-chosen (αἱρετῶν) always for its own sake and never for the sake of something else (1097a33-34). Consequently, Aristotle is saying that the best good must have the right kind of essential structure. Thus, when Aristotle observes that the paradigmatically virtuous practical actions are essentially ordered to a further end and are thus not “such as to be chosen on account of themselves” (*NE* X 7, 1177b18), he takes this as a reason for thinking that the virtuous practical activity cannot be the best good. However, virtuous theoretical contemplation, he

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26 For the arguments in this paragraph I am indebted to Lear (2004). Another argument against the inclusivist position (one we will not consider) is based on the fact that the best good seems to be the source of value for all subordinate goods (cf. *NE* I 12, 1102a2-4). It is hard to see how a set of organized or unorganized goods could be the cause of the goodness of the members of that set.

27 It seems to me that when Aristotle uses the word αἱρετῶν to explain the *teleion*-criterion, it should not be translated as “choiceworthy” but as “such as to be chosen.” Aristotle’s idea here relies on inherent teleology and natural subordination, and consequently he is looking for a good that has the right sort of structure—a structure that renders it such as to be chosen in a certain way. This is important to observe because something can be choiceworthy for X without being such as to be chosen for X. For example, the doctoring-art may be choiceworthy for the sake of poisoning someone but it is not such as to be chosen for the sake of poisoning someone. Likewise, contemplation is choiceworthy for the sake of legislating well, but it is not such as to be chosen for the sake of ruling well.
explains, does have the right sort of essential structure to be the best good (NE X 7, 1177b19-24). 28

Ackrill also claimed that when Aristotle in the EE ergon argument speaks of “teleion virtue” he means “complete virtue,” i.e. “all virtues.” 29 What should we make of this? First, even if in the EE argument “teleion virtue” (II 1, 1219a39) were to mean “complete virtue,” there would be good reasons to think that in the NE ergon argument “most teleion virtue” (I 7, 1098a17-18) does not mean “most complete virtue.” 30 Second, even though scholars have uniformly agreed with Ackrill that “teleion virtue” in the EE argument ought to be read comprehensively, it seem to me that it really ought be interpreted selectively. 31 When Aristotle says that teleion virtue is whole virtue, he does not mean that it is all the virtues, but rather the single whole virtue that arises out of the combination of all the other virtues. 32 This becomes extremely clear at the end of the EE, where Aristotle labels “teleion virtue” (1249a16-17) as

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28 Given that this is so, if someone wanted to argue for activity-inclusivism, they would need to argue that contemplation is such as to be chosen for the sake of the good that is the combination of activities of moral virtue and intellectual virtue. This would be the same way in which the activity of understanding and the activity of knowledge are such as to be chosen for the sake of the activity of theoretical wisdom.

29 Ackrill (1980, 27)

30 Three of these reasons are as follows. (The first two are due to Cooper [1975, 100n.10].) First, one arrives at the comprehensive interpretation of teleion in the EE largely because of the context: “teleion virtue” is clarified as “whole” virtue, not “a part” (1219a37). The context in the NE is quite different: many virtues (εἰ δὲ πλείους αἱ ἀρεταί, αἱ Ἀριστεία,) are contrasted with the best and most complete virtue (κατὰ τὴν ἀρίστην καὶ τελειοτάτην), thereby suggesting the selective reading. Second, there is a difference between “teleion virtue” and “the most teleion virtue”: because the superlative strongly suggests some comparison class, “most teleion virtue” is very difficult to read as “most complete virtue.” Third, the NE, but not the EE, shows signs of having wrestled with Plato’s discussion of finality and sufficiency in the Philebus. And so it is not obvious that teleion has exactly the same meaning in the EE and the NE. Here it is also worth observing that, while in the EE Aristotle sometimes spells the word “teleion” and sometimes “teleon” (as Plato does in the Philebus), in the NE Aristotle uniformly spells the word “teleion.”

31 This is in contrast not only to inclusivists like Ackrill (1980) but also to monists like Lear (2004, 42n.68) and Cooper (2003, 295n.41).

32 The virtue arises out of all the virtues—or at least out of the combination out of all the principle (or “most important,” κυριώτατα) virtues (cf. EE VIII 3, 1248b13-16). It may not be necessary to have, for example, magnificence in order to have nobility-and-goodness. There is room for debate over this. However, it does not affect my main argument either way since the principle character virtues (courage, temperance, justice, etc.), practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom are obviously among the “most important” virtues.
“nobility-and-goodness” (καλοκάγαθία), which is a virtue that “arises out of the combination of the <other virtues>” (1248b10), both those of character and those of intellect. It is called “teleion” (“end-like”) because Aristotle conceives of the relation of part to whole as a teleological relation: the parts are for the sake of the whole, and the whole is prior to the parts (Meta. VII 10, 1034b28–32; Pol. I 2, 1253a18–29). Because Aristotle in the EE assumes that the particular virtues do unite to form this single virtue, he also assumes the only relevant teleological relationship among the virtues is that of part to whole. And so, even though the EE does (in a way) identify eudaimonia as the exercise of all the virtues, that is not because eudaimonia is the exercise of all the virtues but rather because eudaimonia is the exercise of the single teleion virtue that arises out of the combination of all the other virtues. This is important to note because contemporary activity-inclusivists conceive of the NE’s human good as the exercise of all the virtues but not as the exercise of a single virtue that arises out of the combination of all the other. Consequently, the EE provides a precedent neither for a comprehensive reading of “teleion virtue” nor for the activity-inclusivism more generally.

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33 Two comments are in order. First, though Aristotle says he has already called this teleion virtue “nobility-and-goodness” (1248b10-11), there seems to be no place in our extent version of the EE where he does so. Second, I have given the literal translation “nobility-and-goodness” for the noun (καλοκάγαθία), which derives from the adjective “noble-and-good” (καλοκάγαθος or καλός κάγαθος), partly because one needs to do so in order make sense of the argument in EE VIII 3. However, it is worth noting that the word (or word-phrase) seems to have originally meant “gentility” or “gentlemanliness,” and Aristotle may be partly drawing on this original meaning. This is because the virtue that Aristotle has in mind may seem to aptly describe a true gentleman—someone with the practical virtues but also (because he has had leisure time to cultivate them) the theoretical virtues of thought as well. And third, this view is similar to that of Aristotle in the Politics (“the good man, we say, does express a single virtue: the teleion one,” [III 4, 1276b33]), and to that of Plato in the Republic, where the virtue of a human being is identified as justice (e.g. I, 353e7-8).

34 Here are two reasons to think that this is correct. First, the conjunction of three extremely plausible claims yields this conclusion: (1) eudaimonia is activity “on the basis of teleion virtue” (EE II 1, 1219a39), (2) teleion virtue is the single virtue of nobility-and-goodness (EE VIII 3, 1249a16-17), and (3) the exercise of the theoretical virtues is part of eudaimonia (cf. EE VIII 1249b9-25). And second, Aristotle says that nobility-and-goodness arises out of all the virtues or all the most important virtues (EE VIII 3, 1248b11-16) and it is clear that sophia is one of the most important virtues.
Ackrill also drew attention to various reformulations of the definition of the happiness, and noted that in them the phrase “*teleion virtue*” needs to be interpreted comprehensively. I have three responses. First, if one agrees that “teleion virtue” should be interpreted selectively even in the *EE*, then this consideration loses much, if not all, of its force. Second, one could (not indefensibly) argue that one could retrospectively hear the phrase in each of the quotations selectively, and in particular, as referring to theoretical wisdom.\(^{35}\) (I myself, however, present a more accommodating solution in a later section.) And third, there are other reformulations of the definition that strongly support the selective reading of “best and most teleion virtue.” For example, in *NE* I 9 Aristotle appears to refer back to his definition of the human good in I 7, reminding the reader that “we say eudaimonia is the <best> activities, or <rather> one of them, the best one” (1099a29-31; my emphasis). If the comprehensive reading of “best and most *teleion virtue*” were true, then there would not be any clear place for this to refer back to.\(^{36}\) The same would seem to go for *NE* VII 13, 1153b10-11: “eudaimonia is the activity of all the virtues or <rather> of a certain one of them.”\(^{37}\)

Ackrill also thought that the development of the *NE* would make sense only on the comprehensive reading. But while something would need to be said by a monist in order to explain Aristotle’s detailed discussion of the character virtues, something could be said.\(^{38}\) Further, if we look at the argument of the *NE* taken as a whole, a selective reading of “best and most teleion virtue” makes good sense. Retrospectively, we can see that Aristotle should leave open the possibility in his full definition of the human good for there to be one virtuous activity

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\(^{37}\) My emphasis. I take this reference from Lawrence (2004, 59), who also offers *NE* X 5, 1176a26-9 as support of the selective reading, though it is a little less straightforward.

\(^{38}\) See Cooper (2003) and Lear (2004).
that is teleologically higher than all the others—since this *is* what turns out to be the case.³⁹ In *NE* VI 12-13, Aristotle argues that practical wisdom is for the sake of theoretical wisdom (e.g. 1145a6-11). Then in *NE* X 7, apparently recalling his earlier definition in *NE* I 7, Aristotle writes:

If eudaimonia is activity on the basis of virtue, it is reasonable for it to express the best virtue and this will be the virtue of the best part. The best part is intellect [*nous*]… Hence teleia eudaimonia will be its activity on the basis of its proper virtue; and we have said that this activity is the activity of contemplation (1177a12-13).⁴⁰

He later identifies the “proper virtue” as theoretical wisdom (*NE* X 7, 1177a24). And so on the most straightforward interpretation of these lines, Aristotle is identifying the best good with the activity of contemplation on the basis of theoretical wisdom.⁴¹

In light of these various considerations, I believe we have very good reason to think that Aristotle intends the phrase “best and most teleion virtue” to be interpreted selectively and not comprehensively. Nevertheless, three clarifications are in order. First, in arguing in favor of the selective interpretation I have sometimes drawn on material from later in the *NE* (especially X 6-8) and from outside the *NE* (the *EE*’s identification of teleion virtue as a single virtue), but I do not want to suggest that it is only retrospectively, or only from some broader context, that a reader of the *NE* would have reason to interpret “best and most teleion virtue” selectively. Rather I take Aristotle to have already given enough information for a fresh but careful reader to arrive at the selective interpretation merely on the basis of *NE* I 1-2 and the explication of the *teleion*-criterion immediately before the ergon argument in *NE* I 7. Second and relatedly, though

⁴⁰ Ἐὰν δὲ ἐστὶν ἡ εὐδαιμονία κατ’ ἀρετήν ἐνέργεια, ἐνέργοις κατὰ τὴν κρατίστην· αὕτη δὲ ἐν ἐκείνου τῶν ἀριστῶν. ἐὰς δὲ νοῦς τοῦτο εἶπεν ἄλλο τι, δὴ κατὰ φύσιν διδάσκει ἀρχεῖν καὶ ἐφεξῆς καὶ ἐννοεῖν ἐκείνον ἐνεφείν καὶ θείον, εἶτε θείον ὥστε καὶ αὐτὸ εἶπεν τόν ἐν ἡμῖν τὸ θειότατον, ἢ τούτου ἐνέργεια κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρετὴν εἶπεν ἂν ἢ τελεία εὐδαιμονία.
⁴¹ There are, of course, inclusivist interpretations of these lines as well: e.g. Cooper ([1987] 1999), Irwin (1999) and Purinton (1998, 270).
we have seen good reason for thinking that the phrase “best and most teleion virtue” refers to theoretical wisdom, we should bear in mind that Aristotle in the ergon argument only uses the phrase to refer to the best and most teleion virtue, whatever that may be. It is only retrospectively that a reader could hear the phrase as referring to any particular virtue. Third, given our understanding of “most teleion” as “always such-as-to-be-chosen on account of itself and never on account of something else” (1097a33-34), it may seem that a virtue could not really be “most teleion.” This is because Aristotle explicitly says that we choose “every virtue” (1097b2) for the sake of eudaimonia—and this is because every virtue is for the sake something else, namely, its actualization. The solution, however, is simple. By “most teleion virtue” Aristotle speaks of that virtue that is most teleion among the virtues, not that this virtue is the most teleion end. However, because it is the most teleion virtue, it is clear that its proper activity will be the most teleion end—that is, the human good.

6.3.2 “Kata Virtue”: “On the Basis of Virtue” or “In Accordance with Virtue”?

We now turn to the second key element in Addition 1 and this is the word kata, which I have translated as “on the basis of.” It occurs both in the preliminary definition (“an activity of <the rational part of> the soul on the basis of virtue”) and in Addition 1 (“if there are more

42 Cf. Lawrence (2001). Purinton (1998, 261n.9) challenges this idea on the grounds that the reference of any definite description is timeless. However, this fails to appreciate that there are two different ways of using definite descriptions: the attributive use and the referential use. “A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, [intentionally] uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing” (Donnellan [1966, 285]). Thus, pace Purinton, there is a defensible interpretation to be given to the claim that Aristotle is not referring to X with the description “best and most teleion virtue,” even though the description “best and most teleion virtue” does refer to X.

43 Cf. Lear (2004, 44)
virtues than one, *on the basis of* the best and most *teleion*). On this reading of *kata*, which I will call the exercise reading, if an activity is performed *kata* some particular virtue, then it is an exercise of that virtue, which is to say, it is performed on the basis of and thereby expresses that particular virtue.\(^{44}\) Thus, if an action is performed *kata* generosity then it is performed on the basis of and thereby expresses generosity. When Aristotle speaks of activities performed *kata* virtue in the ergon argument and indeed throughout the *NE*, scholars generally assume the exercise reading of *kata*, even though they follow the precedent of mistranslating the word as “in accordance with” (which suggests that the activities need merely conform with the virtues, not express them). But if you do adopt an exercise reading of *kata* and a selective reading of “best and most *teleion* virtue,” it may seem like some sort of monistic reading of the full definition is required. If one finds this result unwelcome, then one can avoid this by finding a different interpretation for *kata*.

Perhaps the most obvious alternative reading of *kata* would be what I will call the conformity reading. For example, an action may be *kata nomon* (“in conformity with the law”) if it is not in violation of (\(\text{para}\)) that law.\(^{45}\) Thus, Aristotle may be identifying the human good as “an activity of the soul *in conformity with* excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, *in conformity with* the best and most *teleion*.”\(^{46}\) But this certainly cannot be correct because this would allow for the possibility of a non-virtuous person—in fact a vicious person—attaining the human good. This is because Aristotle thinks that virtuous actions—actions in conformity with virtue—may be performed viciously, that is, on the basis of *vice* (cf. *NE* II 4).

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\(^{44}\) This roughly, though not exactly, corresponds to the use of *kata* that Irwin (1991) calls “prescriptive” and Walker (2011) “restrictive.”

\(^{45}\) Lawrence (1993, 25) considers such a reading, but rightly rejects it.

\(^{46}\) My emphasis. The translation is that of Ross in Barnes (1984 [1995]), but with “*teleion*” substituted for “*complete*.”
And so the inclusivists would seem to need a reading of *kata* that is weaker than the expressive reading but stronger than the conformity reading.

Irwin attempts to supply this when he claims that Aristotle employs a “regulative” sense of *kata* in the ergon argument. On the regulative reading, an activity performed “*kata* virtue” is an activity that does not exercise any virtue, but is nevertheless somehow regulated by virtue.\(^47\) He says that in “watching a film,” for example, one is not acting “bravely or temperately,” but one’s action may be regulated by virtue insofar as it is “different (actually or counterfactually) from actions of non-virtuous agents.”\(^48\) Irwin only applies his thoughts about *kata* to the preliminary definition, but Walker extends Irwin’s suggestion to Addition 1. After changing the name from “regulative” to “directive,” Walker makes his “directive” sense of *kata* disjunctive. On the directive reading, for an activity to be performed *kata* some virtue is for the activity either to exercise the virtue or to be directed by the exercise of the virtue.\(^49\) He thinks we should read *kata* directly both in the preliminary definition and in Addition 1, but he also thinks that even if we read *kata* expressively in the preliminary definition we should still read it directly in Addition 1. He is drawn to this reading because he is convinced that “best and most *teleion* virtue” should be taken selectively, and indeed as referring to theoretical wisdom, but

\(^47\) Irwin’s language is slippery. He may mean that these actions do not express virtue at all (and Heinaman [2007, 225] understands his meaning this way). But he also speaks as though these actions do not fully exercise virtue. If he means the latter then the actions really are exercises and thus expressions of virtue in which case the exercise reading of *kata* is the most appropriate. Here it is worth noting that Aristotle seems to think that most actions that express virtue do not fully express virtue (cf. *NE* X 8, 1178a29-34).

\(^48\) Irwin (1991, 390). Irwin is a total-inclusivist, and he is trying to make Aristotle’s definition compatible with total inclusivism, but it is worth observing that reading *kata* regulatively is not sufficient to accomplish this. Irwin also has to interpret *zōē* (“life”) in the definition of the human ergon not as an activity of living, but as “life” in some broader biographical sense that can include other intrinsic goods (1991, 391). This seems to me extremely implausible. I will not fully discuss what Irwin has in mind, but so long as we take “activity of the <rational part of the human> soul” to mean what it seems to mean, then Aristotle would be identifying the human good as a certain kind of activity in which case the definition—even with the regulative reading of *kata*—is straightforwardly read as incompatible with total-inclusivism. One could, however, try to make it compatible with total-inclusivism in the ways that Crisp (1995) and Broadie (2002) try to.

\(^49\) Walker (2011, 94) presumably makes the reading disjunctive because he is worried that if he just has the directive aspect, that would actually *exclude* actions that directly exercise the virtue, and he reasonably does not want this.
nevertheless wants to find an interpretation of the definition of the human good that is compatible with activity-inclusivism.  

I will not address the suggestions of Irwin and Walker at any length, but I believe that the reasons they give in favor of them are remarkably weak, and moreover that there are decisive reasons to adopt the exercise reading of "kata" instead. First, the evidence that there even is any directive/regulative sense of "kata" is the NE is extremely thin. Second, when Aristotle introduces the phrase "kata virtue" into the ergon argument, he clearly indicates that he takes the phrase to be substitutable with "well": e.g., to perform on the kithara well is to perform on the kithara kata the virtue of a kitharist (1098a8-12). But on the directive/regulative reading, "kata virtue" is not substitutable with "well." Take Irwin’s example: even if you watch a film kata virtue (in the directive or regulative sense) that does not mean that you watch that film well. Third, when Aristotle says immediately before his definition of the human good that “each thing is completed well [eυ kata its proper virtue [κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρετὴν]” (1098a15), he is

50 Walker (2011) thus thinks that the activity of sophia somehow directs the activity of the other virtues and is their organizing principle. Irwin (1991) would not agree with this because he thinks that the inclusive end is organized by moral virtue. It is perhaps also worth noting that Walker is an activity-inclusivist and he does not seem to realize that Irwin is not an activity-inclusivist but a total-inclusivist, and thus could not agree with a number of his assumptions.

51 The key text that Irwin and Walker offer in support of their reading is Aristotle’s definition of the human ergon as “activity of the soul kata reason or not without reason” (I 7, 1098a7-8). (Irwin offers no other passages and Walker offers only two: NE III 12, 1119b13–15 and EE II 2, 1220b5–7.) The standard way of understanding this passage is as a pithy summary of the distinction that Aristotle just made between the two parts of the soul having reason that have reason: (1) the one that has reason as obeying reason and (2) the one that has reason as having reason itself and thinking. The part of reason that has reason itself would correspond to the activity “kata reason” and the part of the soul that has reason as obeying reason would correspond to the activity “not without reason.” Irwin and Walker, however, want to understand the phrase differently. They think that “or not without reason” is merely epexegetic in which case Aristotle’s definition of the human ergon would just be “an activity of the soul kata reason.” They then argue that since Aristotle makes it clear that the human ergon includes activities of the non-rational part “as long as they are regulated by reasoning” (1999, 390), activity kata reason must mean activity regulated by reason. However, this is a mistake. The activities of the non-rational parts of the soul are not part of the human ergon insofar as they are regulated or directed by reason but because they can “obey reason,” in the sense of “listening to it as to a father.” The looser idea of regulation or direction is just not in play here. If Aristotle really did think that the human ergon included those activities that are merely regulated by reason then we would have to include activities of the nutritive soul (like digestion) that can be regulated by virtue insofar as virtue directs one to exercise, eat healthy food, etc. But Aristotle clearly thinks that the nutritive soul is not part of the human ergon and has “no share in human virtue” (NE I 13, 1102b12).

52 Neither Irwin nor Walker reconstructs the argument. And because they sever this clear link between “well” and “kata virtue” it is extremely unclear how they understand the ergon argument to work.
clearly using *kata* in its exercise use. For example, a kitharist performs well on the basis of—

that is, by exercising—the virtue *proper* to a kitharist, and someone acts courageously on the

basis of—that is, by exercising—the virtue *proper* to a courageous person (courage). The
directive/regulative reading, however, cannot make sense of Aristotle’s mention of *proper* virtue.

For on that reading, an activity may be performed well not only *kata* the proper virtue but also

*kata* a directing/regulating virtue. For example, acting courageously can be performed not only

*kata* courage but also *kata* theoretical wisdom. In light of this, I believe we have

overwhelmingly good reason to adopt the exercise reading of *kata* both in the preliminary

definition and Addition 1.

6.3.3 “If There is More Than One Virtue, On the Basis of the Best and Most *Teleion* Virtue”

If one adopts the selective reading of “best and most *teleion* virtue” and the exercise

reading of “*kata*,” then the straightforward reading of the preliminary definition with Addition 1 is:

[T]he 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, *<the human good is activity>* on the basis of the best and most

*teleion* virtue.  

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53 This seems to me even clearer in the corresponding passage in the *EE* (II 1, 1219a18-23) where Aristotle appears to equate the ergon of X’s virtue with the ergon of X accomplished on the basis of its virtue.

54 Similarly, the kitharist can perform well not only *kata* the virtue proper to a kitharist but also *kata* practical wisdom and *kata* theoretical wisdom.

55 Here I am to some extent following the translation of Cooper (2003 [2004]).
On this straightforward reading, Aristotle is identifying the human good as a single good—the activity of the best and most *teleion* virtue—in which case the passage most clearly supports monism. But is there no way to make Addition 1 compatible with inclusivism? Barring some very implausible interpretive moves, total inclusivism does seem to be ruled out.\(^{56}\) However, one could attempt to read the definition as compatible with activity-inclusivism, and in this section, we look at one such attempt: that of Cooper (1987).\(^{57}\)

Even though Cooper rejects the comprehensive (and thus inclusivist) reading of “best and most final virtue,”\(^{58}\) he agrees with Ackrill that the conclusion that actually seems to follow from the premises of the ergon argument is the preliminary definition (“The human good turns out to be activity of the <rational part of the human> soul on the basis of virtue”), which Cooper interprets to mean: “happiness is activity of complete virtue, activity of specifically human

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\(^{56}\) Given these constraints, the two interpretive options for the total-inclusivist are those expounded by Crisp (1994) and Broadie (2002, 278).

\(^{57}\) (I give the date beside Cooper’s name because, as we will see, in a later article from 2003 Cooper articulates a different, incompatible interpretation of Addition 1.) The only other attempt that I know is that of Purinton (1998), who argues that when Aristotle says, “if more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most *teleion* virtue,” he is speaking of the virtues that correspond to the different parts of the soul that he has earlier mentioned—the nutritive, perceptive and rational—and the “best and most *teleion* virtue” is the virtue of the rational part. Purinton gives two main considerations in favor of his argument. First, he supposes that only activity-inclusivism follows from the premises of the ergon argument, and his interpretation of Addition 1 allows this to be so. And second, on his interpretation, the readers of the *NE* are “in a position to know how he means to define happiness” (1998, 267). His first reason explicitly assumes that Ackrill’s first argument succeeds, but we have already shown that it does not. His second reason is due to a failure to appreciate that there are two possible uses for definite descriptions, and I address this in an earlier footnote. Now, more generally, Purinton’s interpretation, which would seem to be a version of the implicit criteria view, is not attractive. First, it makes the progression of the argument redundant and misleading because Aristotle has already ruled out the nutritive part and (at least some of) the perceptive part from consideration when he identifies the human ergon as an activity of the part of the soul having reason. Purinton himself concedes that his interpretation makes Addition 1 “unnecessary” (265n.16). Second, on this interpretation, it is odd that Aristotle would say “if there are more than one virtue” since he has already said that the erga of the nutritive and the perceptive part are different, and he understands virtues are relative to their erga. Third, if this is what Aristotle is saying, it does not serve as a guide to the overall argument of the *NE*, but the definition of the human good is clearly offer as a “sketch” that is intended to be “filled in” (*NE* I 7, 1098a21-22). Fourth, though Purinton understands his view to be in line with the definition of eudaimonia in the *EE*, it is not. As we have seen, “*teleion* virtue” in the *EE* refers to a single virtue, but Purinton’s “rational virtue” is not a single virtue. And fifth, Purinton’s interpretation is also open to our more general arguments against activity-inclusivism mentioned earlier.

\(^{58}\) After arguing against the comprehensive reading, Cooper concludes that there is “no way around the fact that by ‘activity of the best and most complete virtue’ Aristotle is referring to the activity of a single virtue, whichever is the most chosen for itself and least for other things” ([1987] 1999, 224).
nature perfected in all its relevant aspects.” Nevertheless, Cooper argues, because the word “virtue” in the preliminary conclusion is left unspecified, this might lead a reader to think that someone who exercised merely one of the virtues—indeed even a “lesser” virtue—over a sufficiently long period could count as happy. It is, thus, in order to block this inference that Aristotle adds the clarification of Addition 1. In light of all this, Cooper thinks we should read the preliminary definition plus Addition 1 in the following activity-inclusivist way: “happiness is virtuous human activity, and if there are more than one human virtue happiness is activity of all of them, including most particularly activity of the best among the virtues.”

There seem to me a number of good reasons not to adopt the interpretation. First, what is perhaps Cooper’s main reason for interpreting as he does—that only such a conclusion could follow from the ergon argument—we have already seen does not work. Cooper of course thinks it does work because he, like Ackrill, assumes that one must interpret the ergon argument with the implicit criteria view, and he assumes an interpretation of Section A that requires that the human good must consists in both practical and theoretical activity: “the good of any living thing consists in the perfected exercise of its specific nature as the kind of thing that it is.” I have already argued at length for a different interpretation of Section A, and I believe I have also already shown that my version of the additional criteria view does allow the more straightforward reading of Addition 1 to follow from the premises of the argument. Second, if the human good is the most teleion end (as Aristotle says it is) and if by “most teleion virtue” Aristotle means the virtue whose exercise is the most teleion end, then one should think that the

60 Cooper ([1987] 1999, 225). Cooper explains that the passage “does not mean to say that flourishing consists in the activity of some single virtue, but rather to emphasize the special need for the activity of the best virtue, as completion to the others, if one’s life is to express the full perfection of human nature” (227).
61 Cooper ([1987] 1999, 222). He does not say that this is his interpretation of Section A, but in occurs in the natural place in his summary of the argument for it to strongly suggest an interpretation of Section A.
exercise of the most *teleion* virtue is the human good—in which case one should interpret

Addition 1 in the straightforward way. Third, Cooper’s reading seems extremely difficult to get out of Aristotle’s Greek, and Cooper does not say how one would do so.  

Indeed, if Aristotle had wanted to express Cooper’s interpretation, he could have very easily and clearly done so, but he did not. There are also, of course, the more broadly philosophical reasons for rejecting activity-inclusivism that we have already mentioned: in particular, those drawn from the fact that the ultimate end, in virtue of being an ultimate end, is an organizing principle and an unlimited limit.

Here we should note that when Cooper became convinced, having further reflected on the *teleion*-criterion and the self-sufficiency-criterion, that there were good philosophical reasons for thinking the human good must be a single good, Cooper (2003) finds it very easy to read Addition 1 in the straightforward way: “or, if there is a plurality of virtues, then it [*eudaimonia*] is activity deriving from the soul’s best and most final (τελειοτάτην) virtue” However, Cooper (2003) does not respond to one of the central worries that moved Cooper (1987) to interpret the definition of the human good in an inclusivist way: that is, the problem of how the monistic reading of the definition is supposed to follow from the premises of the ergon argument

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62 It is clear that Cooper does not consider the comprehensive interpretation of “best and most *teleion* virtue” to be defensible (1987 [1999], 220-224), and so that is not an option. Hendrik Lorenz has suggested to me that it may be possible to get Cooper’s (1987 [1999]) reading out of the Greek so long as we take ἐνέργεια as a mass term and δέ as a connective joining the prepositional phrases κατ’ ἀρετήν and κατά τὴν ἄριστην καὶ τελειοτάτην. If one thought this reading correct then one would want to punctuate the full definition as follows: “the human good turns out to be activity of the soul on the basis of virtue and, if there are more virtues than one, on the basis of the best and most *teleion*.” (However, as Benjamin Morison has pointed out to me, it is at the very least uncommon for δέ to connect prepositional phrases in this way.) Morison has also suggested that one could get Cooper’s (1987 [1999]) reading out of the Greek if one understood there to be an implicit καί before κατά τὴν ἄριστην καὶ τελειοτάτην. Neither of these suggestions seems an impossible reading of the Greek, but neither is nearly as linguistically easy as the reading that I am defending.

63 The Greek would be along the lines of: τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἄγαθὸν ὕψιστον ἔνέργεια γίνεται κατ’ ἀρετήν, εἰ δὲ πλείους αἱ ἀρεταὶ, κατὰ συμπάντας τὰς ἀρετὰς καὶ μᾶλλον κατὰ τὴν ἄριστην καὶ τελειοτάτην.

64 Also, as we earlier mentioned, there seems to be no precedent in the *EE* for the sort of activity-inclusivism that Cooper (1987) has in mind.

65 Cooper ([2003] 2004, 294)
itself. Our interpretation of the argument, which is a version of the additional criteria view, explains how this could be so, and of course I consider it to be the most defensible reading of the argument as a whole.

6.3.4 Towards a Better Understanding of Addition 1

I now want to say more about how exactly we should interpret Addition 1. If one is reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* for the first time, it is not at all clear what virtue (or sort of virtue) "the best and most teleion virtue" is supposed to refer to. It is clear from what one has

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66 Cooper’s ([1987] 1999) other main motivation was that Aristotle’s reformulations of the definition suggest the inclusivist reading. I address this in the next section.

67 Lear (2004, 43), who interprets Section A in roughly the same way as Cooper ([1987] 1999) and who appears to assume the implicit criteria view, nevertheless agrees with Cooper ([2003] 2004) about how to interpret the full definition, and she makes a suggestion about how the definition, so understood, might follow from the ergon argument: ‘‘[I]f it is part of the implicit understanding of the function of something that excellence in that activity is its ultimate end, then where there are several functions, we should expect that the most final among them will constitute the function and the most final end” (2004, 44n.73). The reasoning here is not totally clear. Her core suggestion is that Addition 1 can be taken to follow from the premises of the ergon argument, as long as one makes the following assumption: if a thing has many erga, then the most final (teleion) of these will constitute “the function”. As she has phrased it, her suggestion relies on the idea, argued against in the last chapter, that the end and ergon of anything will be that ergon accomplished on the basis of virtue. (This in conjunction with the core suggestion leads her to think that the human ergon and the human good are identical [see 2004, 23]). It is not clear to me how this assumption is supposed to lead to her core suggestion, and so I will focus merely on the core suggestion.

It has some plausibility since there may be evidence that Aristotle thinks that theoretical reason is, in some sense, the ultimate end of our nature (cf. *NE* X 7, 1178a2-3 and *Pol.* VII 15, 1334b15-25). However, the trouble for Lear comes in her phrase “the function.” On the one hand, if she thinks that theoretical activity just is the human ergon, then given the way that she interprets Section A, something like the actual conclusion of the ergon argument would seem to follow from the premises of the ergon argument. The problem, though, is that such a claim clearly conflicts with how Aristotle actually identifies the human ergon in the ergon argument. He goes out of his way to define the human ergon generically as “activity of the rational part of the soul” where this includes both the activity of the part that has reason in itself and the part that has reason as obeying. On the other hand, if by “the function” Lear just means that theoretical activity is most of all the human ergon, then this does not conflict with Aristotle’s definition of the human ergon in the ergon argument. However, she would then not be able to arrive at something like the actual conclusion of the ergon argument, as she and Cooper ([2003] 2004) interpret it. For even if theoretical activity is most of all the human ergon, her interpretation of Section A requires “the good of a thing” to be its ergon accomplished well, not what is most of all the ergon accomplished well. Perhaps one could defend the reasoning here by saying that what is most of all the ergon accomplished well would be most of all the good of that thing, but that would still only seem to yield the claim, in the human case, that the activity of the best virtue is most of all the good of a human, not that it is exclusively the good of a human.
read earlier (particularly in NE I 1-2 and 7) that the phrase needs to be understood selectively and not comprehensively, but it is still an open possibility, for all Aristotle has so far said, that “the best and most teleion virtue” refers to a single virtue that arises out of the combination of all the other virtues. 68 This, as we saw, is what happens in the Eudemian Ethics, where Aristotle argues that there is a single teleion virtue that arises out of the other virtues: nobility-and-goodness (καλοκάγαθία). However, as one reads further into the Nicomachean Ethics, one sees that Aristotle never speaks of such a virtue. Instead, there seems to be, in a way, two most teleion virtues.

On the one hand, I agree with the many interpreters who think that “best and most teleion virtue” refers to theoretical wisdom (sophia). Aristotle identifies teleia eudaimonia as the activity that expresses theoretical wisdom (NE X 7, 1177a24). And part of his reasoning seems to be that only theoretical activity has the right sort of essential structure to be the best good: it alone is such as to be chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of something else (cf. NE I 7, 1097a33-34; X 7, 1177b16-24). (It may of course be incidentally chosen for the sake of something else as when one chooses to study the soul in order to make better laws [cf. NE I 13, 1102a18-21], but that does not mean that it is such as to be chosen for the sake of something else. Similarly, someone might use a shoe as a paperweight but that does not mean that the shoe is such as to be used as a paperweight. It is not, qua shoe, that it is such as to be used as a paperweight, but qua adequately heavy thing.) Consequently, it seems quite natural for an intelligent reader of the Nicomachean Ethics both to retrospectively identify the best and most

68 Here my interpretation is somewhat similar to that of Cooper (2012, 87n.32) who also emphasizes that Addition 1 can be read in one way by someone proceeding through the work for the first time, but in a different way by someone who has already read the NE as a whole. He appears to suggest that, though the definition with Addition 1 is most naturally read initially as including the activities of all the virtues but prominently including the best virtue (cf. the interpretation of Cooper [1987] 1999)), it is most naturally read retrospectively as consisting in the activity of only the best virtue, which is theoretical wisdom (cf. the interpretation of Cooper [2003] 2004)).
teleion virtue of *NE* I 7 as theoretical wisdom, and to interpret the full definition of the human
good monistically as referring to the activity on the basis of theoretical wisdom over a whole
natural lifespan.

On the other hand, Aristotle also seems to identify a different virtue as “most teleion.”
He explains in his introduction to *NE* V, his book on justice, that “justice” names both “a part
virtue of virtue” (*NE* V 2, 1130a14) and “the whole of virtue” (*NE* V 1, 1130a9). He supposes
that this latter kind of “justice” exists because we call “just” whatever is lawful. Since legislative
science makes laws about all kinds of virtuous actions (1129b13), it must, he thinks, involve all
the virtues of character. This “legal” type of justice is, then, “teleion virtue—not teleion without
qualification [οὐχ ἁπλῶς], but teleion virtue in relation to another [πρὸς ἕτερον] (*NE* V 1,
1129b25-27). As later becomes clear, teleion virtue without qualification seems to be the
single, whole virtue that results from the combination of all the particular character virtues (cf.
*NE* V 1, 1130a10-13), and Aristotle carefully explains that while justice is the same as whole
virtue, what it is to be justice is not the same as what it is to be whole virtue (V 1, 1130a12-13).
When whole virtue is exercised not in relation to one’s own affairs, but in relation to another and
in a community, it is justice (V 1, 1130a2). Now because justice is the fullest exercise of
complete virtue, it is “teleion virtue most of all” (V 1, 1129b30), and consequently often seems
to be the “best among the virtues” (V 1, 1129b27-28). Now when someone reads *NE* V 1, while

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69 This is just what happens in our earliest extant commentary on the *NE*, that of Aspasius from the 2nd c. AD.
70 Whether justice that is the whole of virtue is the same as legislative science is a question I set aside for present
purposes.
71 ἀὕτη μὲν οὖν ἡ δικαιοσύνη ἀρετὴ μὲν ἐστὶ τελεία, ἄλλη ὡσε ἁπλῶς ἄλλα πρὸς ἕτερον.
72 I take it that when Aristotle in *NE* V I speaks of “whole virtue” (1130a8-13), he has in mind that single virtue that
arises out of all (or all the principle) virtues of character. However, when Aristotle in *EE* II 1 speaks of “whole
virtue” (1219a38, b21; cf. 1220a2-4) he has in mind that single virtue that arises out of all (or all the principle)
virtues—both of character and of intellect.
73 Justice could be exercised in relation to one’s own affairs but only incidentally—that is, only insofar as one’s
affairs take place in a community about which one is making laws.
74 τελεία μᾶλλον ἀρετῇ. Legal justice is more teleion than whole virtue because whole virtue is such as to be
chosen for the sake of justice. However, this is not because whole virtue is a part of justice but because the exercise
of justice is the fullest expression of whole virtue.
reading the *NE* for the first time, he would not unnaturally suspect—especially if he has read Plato’s *Republic*—that the “best and most *teleion* virtue” earlier mentioned in *NE* I 7 is now being identified as “legal” justice.\(^7\)5

What I want to note is that both of the *NE*’s “most *teleion*” virtues—justice and theoretical wisdom—resemble, to some extent, the *EE*’s *teleion* virtue—nobility-and-goodness (*καλοκάγαθια*). All three virtues arise out of the combination of other virtues. Nobility-and-goodness (*καλοκάγαθια*) arises out of the combination of all the human virtues, both practical and theoretical.\(^7\)6 Justice is whole character virtue—the single virtue that arises out of the combination of all the particular virtues of character—but applied in relation to another.

Theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) arises out of the combination of the relevant kind of knowledge (*episteme*) and the relevant kind of understanding (*nous*). Thus, in his discussions of *teleion* virtue in both the *EE* and the *NE*, Aristotle makes crucial use of the assumption that the relation of the part to the whole is a teleological relation. What changes, however, is that in the *NE*, unlike the *EE*, Aristotle does not seem to think that there is a single virtue that arises out of the combination of all the other virtues. Because there are instead two “most *teleion*” virtues (justice and theoretical wisdom), there is a rivalry in the last chapters of the *NE* (as there is not in the last chapters of the *EE*\(^7\)7) between the lives that most strongly manifest them: the contemplative life and the political life.\(^7\)8 The contemplative life expresses the virtue of theoretical wisdom (X 7, \(7\)5 Here I would like to thank Henry Mendell, who first suggested to me the possibility that someone could take justice as the referent of “best and most *teleion* virtue.”

\(^7\)6 See my earlier arguments for why nobility-and-goodness should be thought to arise out of the combination of both practical and theoretical virtues.

\(^7\)7 The reason this does not occur in the *EE* is of course because Aristotle there thinks that one single *teleion* virtue arises out of a combination of all the other virtues and so the life that most strongly manifests this single virtue will clearly be the best.

\(^7\)8 I do not have space to argue thoroughly that the political life is under discussion in X 7-8, but I offer the following considerations (the first four of which are derived from Lear [2004, 179-181]). First, Aristotle calls the person who aims at this second best life the *politikos* (X 7, 1177b12; X 8, 1178a27). Second, in *NE* X 6-8 Aristotle would seem to revisit the rival three lives from *NE* I 5. He rejects the life of pleasure (X 6) and awards first prize to the
and the political life expresses “the other virtue” (X 8, 1178a9), which I take to be the “legal” virtue of justice (NE V, 1029a34)—the whole of character virtue applied in relation to others. He of course assumes that it is the whole of character virtue (cf. X 8, 1178a16), but he also immediately assumes that it is the virtue we exercise in relation to one another (πρὸς ἀλλήλους, X 8, 1178a11) and we know that character virtue insofar as it is related to another is justice. By various arguments, which we will not go through, Aristotle concludes that the contemplative life will be the happiest, while the political life is happiest only in a secondary way (X 8, 1178a9). Likewise, the activity of theoretical wisdom is the primary form of eudaimonia (cf. X 7, 1177a24), while the activity of justice seems to be eudaimonia only in a secondary way (cf. X 8, 1178a9, 20-22).

These last remarks suggest that Aristotle is neither a monistic nor an inclusivist about eudaimonia. Aristotle is not an activity-inclusivist about eudaimonia because he does not claim that the best activity is a certain conjunction of practical and theoretical activity. But neither is he a monist because he clearly claims that the activity of justice is a genuine case of eudaimonia, though it has less the character of eudaimonia than the activity of theoretical wisdom. He is instead what I will call a “gradationist.” Such an interpretation is confirmed by Aristotle’s claim that the God’s eudaimonia is “superior in blessedness” to our own (X 8, 1178b22), and that theoretical life (X 7) and second prize the political life (X 8). Third, the amount of external goods that Aristotle thinks necessary for this life suggest that he is talking about the political life (see Lear [2004, 180]). Fourth, if Aristotle wants to consider the best possible version of the life of virtue, this would seem to be the life of politics—for “among actions on the basis of the virtues those in politics and war are preeminently fine and great” (1177b16-17). Fifth, he emphasizes that the virtue of the second best life is one that we exercise towards one another (πρὸς ἀλλήλους, X 8, 1178a11; cf. 1178b5) and “legal” justice is characterized as teleion virtue towards another (πρὸς ἕτερον, V 1, 1129b27).

Aristotle explicitly says that the activities that express this virtue are “towards others” (πρὸς ἀλλήλους, NE X 8, 1178a11). Perhaps the reason that Aristotle does not explicitly identify “the other virtue” as justice is because the term “justice” is ambiguous between the particular virtue and the whole of virtue and it is easier for him to just make it clear he is talking about the whole of virtue.

The word “happiest” is actually omitted at NE X 8, 1178a9, but it seems like it should be supplied from the previous line (cf. Broadie [1991, 438n.72]), though it is defensible to supply “happy” instead (cf. Lear [2004, 176n.2]).

I am taking it as obvious that he is not a total-inclusivist.
human activities have the character of eudaimonia only to the degree that they are akin to God’s activity (NE X 8, 1178b22-24). We thus have three things that are explicitly called eudaimonia and can be ranked in relation to one another: the activity of God is better than the life-long activity of theoretical wisdom, which is in turn better than the life-long activity of legal justice.

But does this mean that Aristotle is a gradationist about the human good? I do not think so. “The human good” is the label that Aristotle gives to the best good achievable in action by human beings, and this is not the sort of thing that can come in degrees. Consequently, we need to pry apart what it is to be the human good and what it is to be eudaimonia. This is both exegetically possible and exegetically necessary. It is possible because only the human good is strictly equated with the best good achievable in action, which is the most teleion end. When Aristotle identifies eudaimonia with the best and most teleion end (1097a34), he does so not by means of a deductively valid argument, but by an “inference from a sign.” He thus leaves it open how exactly we should think of the relationship of the human good and eudaimonia. This interpretation is necessary because it is clear that eudaimonia and the human good are not coextensive. First, the gods possess eudaimonia, but they do not possess the human good since the human good is something that is achievable in action by humans. Second, the activity of justice is called eudaimonia (NE X 8, 1178a21-22) but there is good reason to think that it cannot be the best thing achievable in action by humans since it does not have the right structure to be the best and most teleion end (NE X 7, 1177b18). I thus propose that we be monists about the human good but gradationists about eudaimonia.

Such an interpretive position allows me to accommodate some of the key motivations of both monists and inclusivists. On the one hand, I can agree with those monists who persuasively argue that the human good, in virtue of being the best and most teleion end, cannot include

82 “Eudaimonia most of all seems to be this sort of thing” (NE I 7, 1097a34). Cf. Cooper ([2003] 2004, 281-282).
within it practically virtuous activity. Because the conclusion of the ergon argument is offered as a definition of the human good, it must then be interpreted monistically. The human good, which is the primary case of human eudaimonia, is an activity of theoretical wisdom (“the best and most teleion virtue”) carried out over a whole natural lifespan. On the other hand, I can agree with those inclusivists who refuse to deny that the activity of moral virtue carried out over a whole life is a genuine case of eudaimonia. The gradationist picture also allows us to make sense of Aristotle’s later reformulations of his definition—reformulations for which monistic interpretations seem procrustean at best. Take, for example, NE I 13, 1102a5-7: “Since eudaimonia is some activity of the soul on the basis of teleion virtue, we should examine virtue, for perhaps in this way we will better see what eudaimonia is.” Because this is offered as a definition of (human) eudaimonia and not of the human good, we are free to hear it as something that could be satisfied to different degrees. When Aristotle here speaks of “teleion virtue” (NE I 13, 1102a6), that phrase may be satisfied by whole character virtue (NE V 1, 1129b26, 1130a11-13), satisfied still better by justice (NE V 1, 1129b30), and satisfied best of all by theoretical wisdom (NE X 7, 1177a24).

83 Thus, I agree with Cooper ([2003] 2004) and Lear (2004).
84 You might think that if one takes the conclusion of the ergon argument as a definition of human eudaimonia, one can hear it as being most perfectly satisfied by the activity of theoretical wisdom, while also being satisfied—though in a secondary way—by the activity of justice. This is because though theoretical wisdom is the most teleion virtue with respect to all the human virtues, justice is the most teleion virtue only with respect to all the virtues of character. If this is right, then the primary referent of “best and most teleion virtue” would be theoretical wisdom, while the secondary referent would be justice. Though this would be neat if it did work, I do not think it does. For in order for the phrase “best and most teleion virtue” to refer to justice, one must restrict the virtues in question to character virtues, but by doing so you would change the meaning of the phrase “best and most teleion virtue.” However, I think you can hear multiple referents for the phrase “teleion virtue” at e.g. NE I 13, 1102a5-6, on which see below.
85 Cooper ([2003] 2004) and Lear (2004) do deny this. However, they still want to claim that the person who engages in such an activity is happy, but because he is organizing his life by reference to the best and most teleion end, which is theoretically wise contemplation.
86 See Lawrence (1999, 29n.31) for a defeated attempt to reconcile the reformulations with a monistic reading of the full definition.
87 Of course, if Aristotle in the NE thought that there was a single, whole virtue that arose out of all, or all the principle, virtues (i.e. the EE’s καλοκαίραθια) then this would satisfy the phrase “teleion virtue” most of all, but, as I
6.4 Addition 2: “In a Teleion Life”

After Aristotle determines that the human good is “activity of the <rational part of the human> soul on the basis of virtue, and if there is more than one, on the basis of the best and most teleion virtue,” he adds:

[Addition 2] “and, moreover, in a teleion life” [ἐτι δ’ ἐν βίῳ τελείῳ].

Scholars normally translated this as “in a complete life” and that is because Aristotle immediately gives the explanation: “for one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy” (1098a18-20). Aristotle appears to be claiming that the relevant virtuous activity must be of a sufficiently long temporal length—something like a whole natural lifespan—if it is to be the human good. Perhaps surprisingly, even though commentators have extensively discussed Addition 1, they have

have argued, Aristotle in the NE does not think there is any such virtue. Nevertheless, as I said earlier, at this point in the NE, it could very well have turned out that there is such a virtue.

88 This is clear from other formulations of the same criteria: NE I 9, 1100a4-5; I 11, 1101a14-16; X 7, 1177b25; EE II 1 1219b5-8; MM I 14 1185a5. Broadie (2002, 278), however, thinks that “in a teleion life” means that you need to have all kinds of good things in your life: “A complete life includes abundance of opportunities for such excellent activities, as well as the wherewithal necessary for engaging in them; and elsewhere we learn that it includes friends and loved ones, the respect of others, and pleasure.” It is unclear whether she thinks that this should be attached to the definition of the human good or not. For on the one hand, she thinks that if Aristotle’s definition is to meet the “self-sufficiency” requirement, it must include “in a complete life” (thereby including things like friends, respect, etc.). This is her way of allowing the definition to be read in a total-inclusivist way. On the other hand, she thinks that it does not need to be included if the definition is to meet the “finality” criterion. I do not find Broadie’s suggestion attractive, and here are three of my reasons for rejecting it. First, when one looks at Aristotle’s immediate explanation for the phrase “in a teleion life” (as well as his other formulations of the same criteria) there is no indication that Aristotle has anything in mind except temporal length. Second, Broadie’s interpretation presupposes that finality can come apart from self-sufficiency, but Aristotle clearly thinks they cannot (cf. Cooper [2003] 2004) since self-sufficiency is introduced as a sign of something’s finality (I 7, 1097b6-8), and eudaimonia is thought to be teleion and self-sufficient precisely because it is the “end of all things achievable in action” (I 7, 1097b20-21). Third, Aristotle later seems to add as a further feature to his definition of eudaimonia: “sufficiently supplied with external goods” (I 10, 1101a15-16), but if Broadie were right, such an addition would be obviously redundant.
generally ignored Addition 2. However, Addition 2 is of great interest not only in itself, but because examining it will help us to adjudicate between the implicit criteria view and the additional criteria view.

I have seen no one who holds to the implicit criteria view try to explain the way Addition 2 is supposed to follow from the premises of the ergon argument, but a natural suggestion is as follows. One might think that the addition “in a complete life” is merely a filling-out of the definition of the human ergon—as “active life of the part of the <human> soul having reason”—and this is because “a life” (ζωή) naturally has a beginning middle and end, and the further requirement “in a complete life” simply makes this clear. The missing premise would be something like:

P6: “an activity of living (ζωή) is only an activity of living if it occurs in a complete life (βίος).”

If Aristotle did subscribe to a principle like this, then one could very well derive Addition 2 from the preliminary definition of the human good, while maintaining the implicit criteria view. Nevertheless, it seems very doubtful to me that Aristotle did subscribe to such a principle. This is because, as we saw in chapter 2, Aristotle makes it extremely clear that he considers an activity of living—unlike an activity of housebuilding or shoemaking—to be a complete activity, and a complete activity has no internal reason why it has to stop. It is false, then, that an activity of living just in virtue of being an activity of living, must have a beginning, middle and end.

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89 I agree with Cooper ([2003] 2004, 294n.40) that Addition 2 is supposed to be part of Aristotle’s definition of the human good, and I also think that it is supposed to follow from the premises of the ergon argument. For the argument is introduced as a way to determine what the best good is, and so we should expect the definition of the best good that occurs at the end of that argument to follow from the premises.

90 The formulation at EE II 1, 1219a36 may suggest this view.

91 Perhaps someone who subscribes to the implicit criteria view might find a slightly different formulation of P6 to be more plausible: “an activity of living is only complete as activity of living (ζωή) if it occurs in a complete life (βίος).” If one prefers to use this premise then one would need to supply another premise which states that “the human good must be something complete” (cf. EE II 1, 1219a35-36).
Indeed, God’s life, which is identical to God, is an eternal activity (1072b14-30) and thus has neither a beginning, middle, nor end.

Here one might respond that even if life, qua life, has no internal reason to stop, nevertheless humans do seem to have a natural lifespan and so human living, qua human living, must have an internal reason to stop (and thus an end by nature). The reasoning behind such a suggestion could run as follows.

1. The complete life (ζωή) of any sublunary being has a beginning, middle and end.
2. A human is a sublunary being.
3. Therefore, a complete human life (ζωή) has a beginning, middle and end. [from 1 and 2]
4. The only human life (ζωή) that counts as an accomplished human ergon is a complete human life.
5. Therefore, the only human life (ζωή) that counts as an accomplished human ergon is a human life (ζωή) with a beginning, middle and end. [from 3 and 4]

This reasoning, however, is mistaken. Even though Aristotle does think that humans are sublunary (and thus perishable) beings, and that human activities of living, as a consequence, do naturally have a beginning, middle and end, he does not think that this is due to the nature of human life-activities or the capacities for them. Instead, as we discussed in chapter 2, he thinks that this is due to the human body, which cannot sustain human life perpetually (cf. DA 408b21-24) and which by its corruptibility establishes for human beings a certain life-span as normal. Aristotle seems to think that the soul is such as to retain its capacity for various life-activities (growing, perceiving, thinking, etc.) but is nevertheless impeded in those activities by the deterioration of the body. When the body is deteriorated to such a degree as to prevent the accomplishment of the human ergon altogether, the human as such dies.\(^2\) And so Aristotle would think the human life-activity retains its status as a complete activity even though every

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\(^2\) I hear sidestep the question of whether the human soul, which seems to have a power that does not operate by means of a bodily organ, can persist the death of the body.
instance of the human life-activity will come to an end. \textsuperscript{93} Because this is so, the human life-activity is complete at every moment, and does not require a beginning middle and end in order to count as an accomplished human ergon.

Besides these (decisive) philosophical reasons to reject the suggestion that Addition 2 is merely an elucidation of the definition of the human ergon, there are textual reasons as well. First, when Aristotle speaks of “in a complete life” (ἐν βίω τελείῳ) he uses a different word for life than when he speaks of the ergon of a human as a “certain kind of life” (ζωήν τινα, 1098a13). In the first case he uses the word “bios” (βίος), which here suggests the natural lifespan of an organism as a whole, and in the latter case he uses the word “zoê” (ζωή), which Aristotle identifies elsewhere as a complete activity. \textsuperscript{94} Consequently, even though it may be the case that a human bios has a beginning, middle and end (due to the maturation and deterioration of the body), this does not seem to be the case for instances of zoê. Second, if Aristotle’s rationalization for the second requirement was just that it is a spelling out of human “life” it is surprising that Aristotle does not give this reason but another. He explains: “for one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor similarly does one day or a short time make us blessed or happy” (NE I 7, 1098a18-19). The idea is not: you can engage in the characteristically human activity of living (ζωή) only if you do so over a complete lifespan. It is rather: you can achieve the human good, and thus can be happy, only if you live well over a complete lifespan.

\textsuperscript{93} Someone might object that I am unfairly separating off the formal aspects of an activity that is essentially composite (cf. DA I 1, 403a29–b2). I have two responses. First, Aristotle seems to identify performing on the flute as a complete activity, but he could not do so if he thought that the material aspects of that activity determined whether or not it had an intrinsic end. Rather he seems to think that it is the formal aspects of an activity that determine whether or not it is complete as an activity. Second, there are good reasons for thinking that Aristotle does not even consider activities of reasoning to be hylomorphic, and this is because he does not think that the intellect operates by means of bodily organ (DA III 4, 429a18-27, a29-b5; cf. Cohoe [2013]).

\textsuperscript{94} Aristotle in the NE never characterizes the human ergon as a kind of bios, and when he reformulates the definition from I 7 he continues to speak of a “complete life” with the word bios, not zoê (NE I 9, 1100a4-5 and NE I 10, 1101a14-16).
Lawrence offers a different explanation for why Aristotle gives Addition 2 (though he does not explain how it follows, if at all, from the premises of the argument). He claims: “happiness (eudaimonia) is a temporally extended notion. It is not just happy living, but a happy lifetime.” However, this is simply not true. Aristotle thinks that the only activities that must exist in time are those activities that require some further step in order for them to be completed. Thus, housebuilding must exist in time because at any point during the activity of housebuilding some further step is needed for it to be completed. It is complete only when it achieves the end at which it is aiming and this is at the final moment, when it goes out of existence (cf. \textit{NE X 4}, 1174a19-23). But, as we saw in chapter 2, Aristotle thinks that there are some activities—like living and thinking—that need not exist in time and that is because they need not involve any “steps.” The activity of \textit{eudaimonein}—being a kind of living—is an activity like this (\textit{Meta \Theta 8}, 1048b26). That is why Aristotle can say that God is alive, thinking, and happy—indeed, the paradigmatic case of happiness (\textit{NE X 8}, 1178b25-27; \textit{Meta. \Lambda 7}, 1072b14-30)—while at the same time maintaining that God’s activity, to which God is identical, is essentially timeless. Since time is the number of change (\textit{Physics IV 11}, 220a24-26), and God is essentially unchanging (\textit{Metaphysics \Lambda 7}, 1072a25), it and its unchanging activity are timeless (\textit{De Caelo I 9}, 279a16–22). God might be said to be incidentally present in time insofar as its effects (the motions of the heavens, etc.) are brought about in time. Nevertheless, God and the activity to which God is identical are essentially timeless.\footnote{Lawrence (1993, 18).}\footnote{I have used the neuter pronoun “it” to refer to God. I do so in order to emphasize that God does not, according to Aristotle, have a gender. I also do so in order to avoid prejudging the question of whether or not Aristotle considers God to be a person or to be in some sense “personal.”}

My own view is that Aristotle adds Addition 2 for the same reason that he added Addition 1: he does so in order to narrow in on what the best accomplishment of a human really
is. Thus, he assumes that a human can achieve something that counts as an instance of the excellent accomplishment as a human (τὸ εὖ) without this taking a whole life. Indeed, Aristotle seems to affirm as much when he speaks of courageous people who have died in battle, thereby cutting their lives short, but have achieved something fine (καλὸν) (NE III 10, 1117b13-15). They clearly have achieved something excellent, but they have not achieved the human good simply by that action. One could make the same point, I think, about theoretically wise contemplation. If one successfully understands the Pythagorean theorem (which would require one to understand the theorem as deriving from the fundamental principles of geometry), one has accomplished something excellent. However, by so doing, one has not achieved the human good, which is the best accomplishment of a human. And so we need to assume the premise:

P6: The activity on the basis of virtue of the part of the human soul having reason, is better if it occurs in a teleion life (1098a18-20; cf. 1097a28-20).

Here the idea is simply that “activity on the basis of virtue of the part of the human soul having reason” can be the best accomplishment of a human only if it is carried out over a whole natural lifespan.

The background rationale seems to be that an excellent complete activity will be better to the extent that it is more continuous and perpetual. For when an activity is more continuous or more perpetual then you have more of it that you otherwise would. This assumption is made clear at various places throughout the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle reasons that the happy person will have friends because the activity of the person with friends “will be more

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97 Aristotle equates “well” (εὖ) and “finely” (καλῶς) in the ergon argument at NE I 7, 1098a14-15.
98 Here the language of “flourishing” seems ill-fitting to the phenomena. When a soldier dies on the field of battle, it seems rather off to say that his last heroic acts are acts of flourishing as a human. It is more appropriate to say that they are the excellent achievements of a human.
continuous” (NE IX 9, 1170a7) than the activity of the solitary person.99 He assumes that an activity’s proper pleasure, which is in a way its proper perfection (NE X 4, 1174b31-32), “makes an activity more exact, longer, and <generally> better” (NE X 5, 1175b15).100 He argues that theoretical contemplation is the best activity because it “is the most continuous activity, since we are more capable of continuous contemplation than any continuous action” (NE X 7, 1177a22). And after arguing that teleia eudaimonia is virtuous contemplative activity, he says that it still must occur over “a teleion span of life, since nothing imperfect [ἀτελές] is proper to happiness” (NE X 7, 1177b25-26). Aristotle seems to make the same assumption in Metaphysics Λ 7, where he says that “if God is always engaged in the excellent <activity> that we sometimes are <engaged in>, this should inspire our wonder” (Λ 7, 1072b24-25). Aristotle later says that the fact that God’s activity is better than our own should inspire our wonder even more (Λ 7, 1072b25-26), but here he seems to think that our wonder is due just because of that activity’s continuity and perpetuity.101

If this is correct, then why does Aristotle say “in a complete life” and not “perpetually”? The NE is a work of practical philosophy, and in it Aristotle is interested in determining the best good achievable in action by human beings. If he were to say “perpetually” then, of course, the human good would not be achievable in action, since our bodies do not allow us to engage in perpetual activity.102 And so he seems to think of the human good as that single good that is as great as is reasonably possible for the human beings to achieve. Nevertheless, if Aristotle had learned of some way for humans to extend their natural lifespans, he would think that (other

99 ἔσται οὖν ἡ ἐνέργεια συνεχεστέρα
100 My emphasis. ἐξακριβοῖ τὰς ἐνεργείας καὶ χρονιωτέρας καὶ βελτίους ποιεῖ
101 Of course, continuity and perpetuity, strictly speaking, do not seem to apply to a timeless activity. But from the perspective of time, the activity is continuous and perpetual.
102 Aristotle in various places shows himself sensitive to the constraints that are imposed on us by our biology. For example, he says that we should not hold someone responsible for those cases that “overstrain human nature” (NE III 1, 1110a23-26; cf. EE II 8, 1225a19-27).
things being equal) it would be obviously desirable for them to do so, as it would open up the possibility of engaging in contemplation for a longer period of time. As we saw earlier, God’s eudaimonia is the standard by which anything else is called eudaimonia (NE X 8, 1178b22-24), and since God’s activity is eternal and unbroken, our virtuous activity will be have more the character of eudaimonia to the extent that it is perpetual and continuous (cf. De Caelo II 12, 292a22-b19).

I now want to consider the reasons why two scholars think that virtuous theoretical contemplation cannot be improved, in any way relevant to its being the best good, by extending its temporal length. Both Cooper and Lear understand the best good to be an organizing principle and on the basis of this identify the best good as the activity of theoretical wisdom. They also think that the best good cannot be improved by adding extra goods to it.\(^\text{103}\) Because they consider further temporal length to be an “extra good,” they both conclude the activity of theoretical wisdom cannot be improved by extending its temporal length.\(^\text{104}\) Though this reasoning opens up a number of important issues that I do not here have space to address, a few comments are in order.

First, the interpretation of Lear and Cooper seems to clearly conflict with Aristotle’s requirement that eudaimonia must be an activity that occurs “in a complete life”—a requirement that he gives not only in I 7, but several further times throughout the NE. They do not address this conflict, but it seems to me a serious one. Second, though they both appreciate that the ultimate end is an organizing principle and thus a limit to subordinate ends, they do not

\(^\text{103}\) Cooper ([2003] 2004) and Lear (2004) both think that the best good is unimprovable as the good that it is. For arguments against this view, see Heinaman (2002) and (2007).

\(^\text{104}\) Cooper ([2003] 2004, 308) writes: “[T]he good is taken to be unqualifiedly choiceworthy: when carried out over a greater extension of time it does not become more choiceworthy than it would be over a lesser extent.” Lear (2004, 203) writes: “Adding good to contemplation, then, does not yield an end that is more final than contemplation—eudaimonia—on its own. And this remains true even when the good we are adding is more moments of contemplation.”
appreciate that the ultimate end is aimed at in an unlimited way. For example, in arguing that the
virtuous person does not aim to maximize eudaimonia, Lear says: “After all, when a carpenter
makes a house his final end qua carpenter, he does not set about building as many houses as
possible.”\textsuperscript{105} However, as we saw in chapter 2, even though a carpenter may not set about
building other houses in building the given one, his art, therein being exercised, does have this
unlimited orientation to its end (cf. \textit{Politics} I 9, 1257b25-30). Of course, the end of carpentry
does become limited insofar as it is subordinated to a further end, but the highest end is not
subordinated to another and so is aimed at in an unlimited way. Because this end is a complete
activity, the highest art would aim at it in an unlimited way and thus aim for it to be as
continuous and perpetual as possible. Third, it seems to me inappropriate to characterize
extending the temporal length of the activity of theoretical wisdom as adding “extra goods” to
that activity. This is because when you extend a continuous activity, you still just get one
activity. (Aristotle thinks that continuity is prior to division and that is why, according to him,
lines are not made out of points [cf. \textit{Physics} VI 1].) The whole continuous activity is
teleologically prior to its parts, and is thus more \textit{teleion} than them. This explains why, for
example, three hours of continuous contemplation is better than just one, but how are we to
explain the “activity” of a whole life, which is certainly not continuous? Here I think that we
must again remember that God’s activity of eudaimonia is the standard against which anything
else is called eudaimonia (\textit{NE} X 8, 1178b22-24). Now God attains eudaimonia by being his
own simple, eternal, and timeless activity. Of course, by being a timeless activity, this may lead
one to think that an activity of 20 years is no better of an approximation to God’s timeless
activity than an activity of 20 minutes. But such reasoning fails to appreciate that Aristotle
clearly thinks that, from the perspective of time, it is correct to speak of God’s activity as being

\textsuperscript{105} Lear (2004, 201)
perpetual and continuous (cf. *Meta. A* 7, 1072b24-25). This also explains why the heavens, which best approximate God’s activity, do so by single, continuous, and perpetual motion (*De Caelo* II 12). Human beings cannot approximate God’s activity as well as the heavens, but in their best approximation, their activity will be as continuous and perpetual as possible.

I now close by revisiting the small issue of how to understand the word “teleion” in Addition 2. As we said before, scholars uniformly translate Addition 2 as “in a complete [teleion] life,” and this includes those who translate Addition 1 as “best and most final [teleion] virtue.” Are these different uses of the word teleion? Though we have no single word in English that would easily translate both, it seems to me that these two instances of “teleion” are roughly the same in meaning. The central, basic sense that Aristotle employs in *NE I* 7 is just “end-like.” We have also seen that one way in which A can be more end-like than B is for A to be the whole of which B is a part. This is in fact the only way in which theoretical wisdom (sophia) is more teleion than the relevant kind of knowledge (episteme) or the relevant kind of understanding (nous). Now if we understand the parts of a life to make up a whole, teleion life, then Aristotle could be using the same sense of teleion in both Addition 1 and Addition 2. He would be claiming that the activity must be on the basis of “the best and most end-like [teleiotatēn] virtue” but also in an “end-like life.” So much is in fact suggested by a comment of Aristotle’s in *NE X* 7: “The end-like (teleia) eudaimonia of a human will be <theoretically wise contemplation>, if it receives an end-like (teleion) span of life since nothing un-end-like (ateles) is proper to eudaimonia” (1177b24-26).

6.5 Conclusion

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106 Cooper ([2003] 2004, 295n.41) says that Aristotle uses teleion in the common acceptation of “complete” in Addition 2 but in the specialized sense of “final” in Addition 1.
I have given reasons for thinking that Aristotle must assume the additional criteria view if his ergon argument is to arrive at the full definition of the human good as correctly understood. One thing worth keeping in mind, though, is that Aristotle considers his definition to be an outline—a “sketch” (NE I 7, 1098a20). And so, even though Aristotle’s full definition remains true (the human good is “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 teleion virtue, and moreover in a teleion life”), there may be further requirements that need to be added. Indeed, Aristotle seems to add one later when he says that the activity needs to be “sufficiently supplied with external goods” (NE I 11, 1101a15; cf. cf. I 8, 1099a31). My reconstruction, of course, allows this because it keeps squarely in view (as other interpretations do not) that the fact that the ergon argument is Aristotle’s attempt to define the best good achievable by humans in action.
7 Conclusion: The Ergon Argument and Beyond

7.1 A Brief Review

We began this dissertation by emphasizing that in order for the virtuous person to act virtuously he needs to understand what the human good—the best thing achievable by humans in action—actually is. By looking to this best good, the virtuous individual should organize his life and the virtuous politician should organize his city. In *NE I* 7 Aristotle defines (at least in outline) the human good, and so understanding this definition would seem to be of paramount importance to the virtuous person. Scholars have been sharply divided on how to interpret that definition, however, but I proposed to carefully analyze the argument by which he arrives at this definition—that is, the ergon argument—in the hopes of making progress on understanding the definition itself. I gave two reasons for this strategy: first, a correct reconstruction of the argument puts constraints on acceptable interpretations of the definition, and second, Aristotle would think that we can only understand the definition when we possess the explanation for why it is the definition, and that explanation is contained in the ergon argument.

I have accordingly come up with a reconstruction of the ergon argument that valid, plausible, and faithful to the text. It differs from all other contemporary readings because I reject the ubiquitous assumption that the ergon of an X is always the proper activity of an X, arguing instead that it is an activity in some case but a product in others depending on the sort of the thing the X is. This recovered concept enabled us to interpret the rationale of the ergon argument
expressed in Section A) as saying that the excellent accomplishment of anything with an ergon and an action is its ergon accomplished well. This claim naturally helps Aristotle define the human good—the best accomplishment of a human—because all he would need to do is to assume either that the excellent accomplishment is the best accomplishment (in which case the implicit criteria view is true) or that the best accomplishment is the excellent accomplishment but with some further better-making features (in which case the additional criteria view is true). I argued that the latter view is both philosophically and exegetically more attractive. On my interpretation, Aristotle first locates the broad genus or class for what the best accomplishment of a human is, and then proceeds to narrow in on the human good by adding various requirements that would turn the proper accomplishment of a human into the best accomplishment. This interpretation informs the reconstruction below.

P0: The human good is the best accomplishment of a human (1097b22-23).

P1: For anything that has an ergon and an action, the excellent accomplishment of that thing is its ergon excellently accomplished (1097b25-28).

P2: A human being has an ergon and an action. [From sub-argument in 1097b28-33.]

C1: Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is the human ergon excellently accomplished. [from P1 and P2]

P3: 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.]

C2: Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is activity of the part of the soul having reason, accomplished excellently. [from C1 and P3]

P4: For an ergon to be accomplished excellently is for it to be accomplished on the basis of virtue/excellence (1098a15; cf. 1098a8-11).

C3: Therefore, the excellent accomplishment of a human being is activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason (1098a16-17). [from C2 and P4]

P5: Activity on the basis of the virtue of the part of the human soul having reason, is better if it is accomplished on the basis of the best and most end-like virtue, when there are more virtues than one (cf. 1097a28-30).

P6: 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. 1097a28-20).

C4: Therefore, “the human good turns out to be activity of <the rational part of human> 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). [from P0, C3, P5, P6]

This reconstruction does not supply a full explanation for why Aristotle defines the human good in the way that he does. For example, someone could agree to this reconstruction but still suppose that Aristotle identifies the human ergon and the human ergon achieved on the basis of virtue—even though, as I argue in Chapter 5, I think that would betray a misunderstanding of P4.

In any case, this reconstruction does aid us in understanding the definition of the human good in the two ways mentioned earlier. First, even though scholars have often taken it for granted that only an inclusivist interpretation of the definition could follow from the premises of the ergon argument, this reconstruction clearly allows a monistic interpretation to follow. Second, the reconstruction shows that previous scholars have all been getting the key explanatory middle term in the argument wrong. They have supposed that Aristotle defines the human good as he does because this is the “flourishing” or the “successful functioning” of a human, but as I have argued, the correct middle term is the “best accomplishment of a human.”

7.2 A Look Forward

Before I conclude this dissertation, I want to briefly address a variety of questions that might be raised given the arguments that I have made.

First, what effect does my interpretation have on how we understand the overall argument of the NE? Though many scholars have taken the last chapters of the NE (X 6-8) to be at odds with the rest of the work, on my reading these chapters do not come as a surprise. Already in NE I 1-7 Aristotle has given his readers the principles they would need the work out this view for
themselves, and when he says in *NE* VI that practical wisdom prescribes for the sake of theoretical wisdom, he gives them even less reason to be surprised at X 6-8. However, I should also add that because I distinguish between the human good and eudaimonia, arguing that we should be monists about the human good but gradationists about eudaimonia, I avoid problems that afflict monistic readings. For example, I can explain why Aristotle would apply the term “eudaimonia” both to theoretical contemplation and to practically virtuous activity. I can also give the most natural explanation for why Aristotle would call the life of the practically virtuous person happy: namely, because that life contains within it a certain amount of practically virtuous activity, which is a kind of happiness.

Second, given my interpretation of the ergon argument, what metaphysical and teleological commitments would one need to make in order to develop an Aristotelian theory of the human good? Aristotle’s understanding of the human good does require a commitment to there being a human ergon, which is the end for the sake of which a human, qua human, has being. Thus, those neo-Aristotelians are on track who appear to argue that there is natural teleology and in particular a human end. Nevertheless, my work in chapter 5 brings up two complications that such neo-Aristotelians should seriously reflect upon. The first of these is that Aristotle, unlike most, if not all, neo-Aristotelians, distinguishes the human ergon from the human ergon accomplished well. Full human virtue is the result not of nature but of the practical intervention of reason in nature. The second complication is that, while Aristotle and neo-Aristotelians both assume that the human ergon and likewise the human being are good sorts of things, Aristotle

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1 In fact, if one does not distinguish the human good and eudaimonia, there will be good reason even for a non-monist to think that Aristotle is confused. Cf. Gottlieb (2009, 196) on Aristotle’s talk of primary and secondary eudaimonia in *NE* X: “[A] ranking of types of happiness makes no sense in terms of Aristotle’s arguments about happiness in Book I. If there is something more choiceworthy than x, then x cannot be happiness, but if there is such a thing as happiness mark two, there can be something more choiceworthy than itself.”

2 This is in contrast to the explanations offered by Lear (2004) and Cooper ([2003] 2004).

3 I am thinking in particular of the trajectory of the work of Thompson (2008) and Foot (2003).
realizes that he is assuming this, and makes it clear that being a “good” or “perfect” X in some non-trivial sense requires that the X itself be something good. Why, then, does Aristotle think that humans are good sorts of things? Here we come to a deep and (as far as contemporary scholarship goes) unasked question at the heart of Aristotle’s value theory. My primary purpose here is just to raise this question, but I will now indicate what I take to be the sketch of an answer. Aristotle seems to think that a human being is essentially but conditionally good. He is essentially good because a human just in virtue of being a human is good. But he is conditionally good because a human’s substance is teleologically ordered to God who, being identical to his own goodness (EE VII 12, 1245b19; Meta. Α 9, 1075a7-10), is both essentially and unconditionally good. Thus, on the way I read it, if we want to understand the heart of Aristotle’s “metaethics,” we need to look at the heart of his metaphysics. The metaethical picture that we can find there has yet to be properly appreciated by contemporary scholars of Aristotle or by neo-Aristotelians.

Third, does the fact that the ultimate end is aimed at in an unlimited way have any further effects on how we think of Aristotle’s ethical theory? I think the answer to this question must be “yes,” and I will briefly discuss two of the most important effects. The first of these is as follows. Certain important explanations for why the virtuous person does not perform vicious actions in order to promote the human good depend (at least partly) on the claim that the virtuous person does not aim at the human good in a maximizing, that is, in an unlimited way.\(^4\) If we reject this claim, we will need to reevaluate these explanations and perhaps come up other explanations.

The second is that the maximizing rationale implicit in the ergon argument would appear to

indicate that the virtuous person has a rational desire that cannot in any obvious way be satisfied. In chapter 6 we saw that theoretically virtuous activity will be better just to the extent that it is more continuous and perpetual, and so when Aristotle adds “in an end-like [i.e. complete] life” to his definition of the human good, that is because attaching the addition “perpetual and continual” would make the human good something that is not achievable by humans in action. However, if the virtuous person were able to extend his natural lifespan or even make himself immortal, he would (other things being equal) choose to do so. The reason for this is that the virtuous person seems to have a background desire for best good full stop—that is, not necessarily achievable in action—and this appears to be a perpetual activity. Though deciding to achieve in action this unachievable good would of course be irrational, having the desire for this good does not itself seem to be irrational or unnatural (NE III 2, 1111b20-23). Plato too, who considers the desire for happiness to be a desire “to possess the good forever” (Symposium 206a11-12), would not consider the desire irrational or unnatural. If one accepts that there is (for Aristotle) such a desire, one could provocatively pair this thought with the following argument.

1. If nature gives us a desire that is unsatisfiable, then it does something in vain.
3. Therefore, nature does not give us a desire that is unsatisfiable.

If we accept the conclusion of this argument, then even though the virtuous person’s desire for a perpetual good may seem unsatisfiable, it must not be. Such a line of reasoning would naturally lend support to those who argue that Aristotle considers survival after death to be possible.\(^5\) Properly evaluating this line of reasoning is, of course, the task for another occasion. Yet I mention it now in order to make us aware of an interesting issue that arises when we assume that

\(^5\) See, for example, Cohoe (2012).
in defining the human good, Aristotle takes it for granted that virtuous person aims at the best good in an unlimited way.

7.3 Conclusion

These last remarks, though interesting, are of course somewhat speculative. Now, however, I should like to conclude by clearly listing what I take to be the six, non-speculative, central claims that constitute the main results of my dissertation. First, according to Aristotle, the ergon of an X is not always an activity, but rather an activity in some cases and a product in others, depending on the sort of thing the X is. Second, because the recovered concept of an ergon tracks the distinction between complete and incomplete activities, when Aristotle identifies the ergon of a human as an activity of living, he thereby identifies it as a complete activity. Third, the recovered concept of an ergon allows the ergon argument to define the human good by employing the key explanatory middle term that it should be employing: “the best achievement of a human.” Aristotle reasons that just as the best achievement of a sculptor will be an excellent version of his ergon, which is a sculpture, so the best achievement of a human will be an excellent version of his ergon, which is activity of living of the rational part of the soul. Fourth, when Aristotle adds “on the basis of virtue,” he does so not in order to clarify what the human ergon is but to narrow in on what the human good is. Fifth, the recovered concept of an ergon enables us to read the ergon argument using the additional criteria view, which in turn allows us to see how a monistic reading of the definition of the human good could in fact follow from the premises of the argument. And sixth, the additional criteria view also allows us to see for the first time what I take to be the correct explanation for why Aristotle adds “in an end-like life”—
namely, because continuity and perpetuity make an excellent, complete activity even better. Though the virtuous person may have a desire for something better than the human good, the human good is nevertheless defined as it is because it is the best good achievable by humans in action.
Appendix: Previous Reconstructions of Aristotle’s NE Ergon Argument

Though many scholars have discussed the NE I 7 ergon argument, far fewer have attempted to reconstruct it in premise-conclusion form. Below I list the six reconstructions that I have found in the secondary literature. The formatting varies because I have followed the formatting that the authors themselves used.

Glassen

1. The function of man is activity of soul implying a rational principle.
2. The function of a good man is activity of soul [implying a rational principle] in accordance with excellence.
3. Therefore, the good of man is activity of soul [implying a rational principle] in accordance with excellence.¹

Gomez-Lobo

1. For any x, if x has an ergon y, then x will be a good x, if and only if x produces good instances of y.
2. The ergon of man is activity with reason.
3. A human being will be a good human being if and only if he produces good instances of activity with reason.²

¹ Glassen (1957, 320). The brackets are those of Glassen himself.
1. A good human being, that is, someone who has the virtues, carries out the human function well.
2. For something to carry out its function well is for it to attain what is good for it.
3. Thus, a good human being attains what is good for him.3

Achtenberg

Premise One: The good of anything is relative to its ergon: specifically it is to do its ergon well; that is, it is activity of its ergon in accordance with virtue.

Premise Two: The human ergon is activity of the rational soul, both of the part that is itself rational, and thinks (intellect) and of the part that obeys rationality (feeling).

Conclusion: Hence, the human good is to engage in rational activity well; that is, it is activity of the [rational] soul in accordance with virtue.4

Natali

– for everything that has an ergon, its good resides in accomplishing that ergon
– man has an ergon,
– therefore the good for man consists in accomplishing his ergon.

– the good for man consists in accomplishing his ergon;
– man’s ergon is activity (ἐνέργεια) of the rational part of the soul;
– therefore, the good for man consists in the activity of the rational part of his soul.

2 Gomez-Lobo (1989, 182)
3 Pakaluk (2005, 80).
the good for man consists in accomplishing his ergon;
man’s ergon is the activity of the rational part of the soul according to virtue,
therefore, the good for man consists in the activity of the rational part of his soul, according to virtue.\(^5\)

Gottlieb

(1) An F’s good (literally, its well) depends on its function (ergon), if it has one.
   An F’s good is exercising-its-ergon (en-erg-eia) well.
(2) Human beings have a function.
(3) The human function is activity (en-erg-eia) of the soul in accordance with or not without reason.
   By (1), (4) The human good (happiness, doing well) depends on the human function.
(5) The function of an F is the same in kind as the function of an excellent F.
   So (6) The human good (happiness) is activity of the soul (in accordance with or not without reason)
(done) well, that is, in accordance with virtue, or, if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the
best and most complete/final virtue, and not just for a short time.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Natali (2010, 304-324).
\(^6\) Gottlieb (2009, 66-67).
Abbreviations

Aristotle’s Works

APo = Posterior Analytics
DA = De Anima (On the Soul)
EE = Ethica Eudemia (Eudemian Ethics)
GA = De Generatione Animalium (On the Generation of Animals)
Meta = Metaphysica (Metaphysics)
Meteo = Meteorologica (Meteorology)
MM = Magna Moralia (Great Ethics)
NE = Ethica Nicomachea (Nicomachean Ethics)
PA = De Partibus Animalium (On the Parts of Animals)
Ph = Physica (Physics)
Pol = Politica (Politics)
Protrep. = Protrepticus

Other Abbreviations

LSJ = Liddel, Scott, Jones, Greek-English Lexicon
OED = Oxford English Dictionary
ROT = Revised Oxford Translation
ST = Summa Theologica
W3 = Webster’s Third New International Dictionary
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