

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth *NE*) famously features an argument, central to the logic of the whole work, called the '*ergon*' argument or function argument, which admits of at least two prominent, and one novel, competing interpretations, leaving peripatetic scholars divided on how to properly interpret Aristotle's argument. The first prominent reading is variously called the exclusive, intellectualist or monistic reading, while the second is called, by contrast, inclusive. The third reading, proposed by Stephen S. Bush, is called a dualist reading according to which man has two distinct natures. In this paper I will argue that the correct way of reading Aristotle concerning εὐδαιμονία and man's ἔργον is the monistic one. I will cite reasons to reject the inclusive reading, argue that the dualist reading admits of a conspicuous problem, and then propose a monistic reading, inspired by Richardson Lear, which synthesizes tidily the exegetical tensions at play.

There are two classical readings of Aristotle's ἔργον argument, which arise because of an apparent tension in the text of the *NE* itself. As Gary Gurtler explains:

Aristotle seems to have two contradictory positions. One position is found in book 1, chapter 7, where happiness is the highest good, an activity of soul in conformity with virtue. In context, this seems to indicate human virtue as a whole, involving both moral and intellectual virtues. The other position occurs much later in book 10, chapters 6-8, where happiness is identified with wisdom alone (Gurtler, 801).

Thus, "due to the unexpected manner by which Aristotle concludes Book X, as viewed through the lens of Book I, interpreters have roughly divided themselves into two camps: those that read Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* with an exclusivist sense and those that read it with an inclusivist sense" (Bauchan, 2). It is necessary to review the argument, at least in summary fashion, for, as Christine M. Korsgaard notes: "it is essential to make good sense of the function argument, because the theoretical structure of the *NE* collapses without it" (Korsgaard, 130), and

it follows that without a comprehension of the ἔργον argument no exegetical arguments concerning the *NE* can be appraised.

Aristotle begins his treatise by defining the good as "that at which everything aims" (*NE*, 1094a4), and argues that "there is some... good that is something in itself, and also causes all [other] goods to be goods" (*NE*, 1095a25-30). Ordering goods into a hierarchy, then, he comes to the conclusion that the highest good, which is the end for which all other ends may be pursued, and which is never pursued for the sake of another end (Adams, 106), is happiness (*NE*, 1097b1-10). Happiness being recognized as the best good, Aristotle then suggests that "perhaps we shall find the best good [for human beings] if we first find the function of a human being" (1097b24-25). Aristotle is here reflecting a metaphysical assumption that things are naturally teleological, and that each thing which has a nature (ἔσος) has a corresponding end (τέλος) or function (ἔργον) *qua* its essence (ἔσος). He thus presents his infamous ἔργον argument in *NE* I.7, which can be summarized as follows:

1. If there is a highest good for human beings then it is the end which belongs peculiarly to human beings.
2. There is a highest good for human beings.
3. The end which belongs peculiarly to human beings is some sort of action of the part of the soul that expresses reason.
4. Therefore, the highest good for human beings is some sort of action of the part of the soul that expresses reason.

Moreover, Aristotle explains that "happiness is a virtue <in general> or some <particular> virtue" (*NE*, 1098b30-31), and specifies that "if there are more virtues than one, the good will express the best and most complete virtue" (*NE*, 1098a16-18). Thereupon enters the ambiguity for, as Stephen S. Bush notes, it is possible to read '*best and most complete*' inclusively as "a composite of all virtues" (Bush, 50). However, he notes that "this is an unnatural and implausible

reading... since "best" (*aristos*) implies the single most valuable item in a set of items, not the set itself" (Bush, 50). The inclusive reading also suffers problems such as that, on it, "no satisfactory account of 10.6-8 has been able to integrate it into Aristotle's account of virtue and happiness, with the result that it is either ignored as an aberration or left as an anomaly" (Gurtler, 802). For such reasons the inclusive reading should be *prima facie* discounted, only to be picked up if exhaustive consideration of all other readings has ended in an even more exegetically pernicious failure at every turn.

In order to justify preference to the monistic reading, however, one must also disqualify the dualist alternative, as well as provide a positive case for a monistic interpretation. The dualist shares the same reservations with the monistic reading as the exclusivist does; the problem is that:

One cannot hold that: (a) happiness is monistic, (b) contemplative activity exclusively is happiness, (c) contemplative activity and morally virtuous activity are two distinct activities, and (d) morally virtuous activity is happiness. (Bush, 54).

It is because the monistic reading is thought to violate this constraint that monism is thought "untenable" (Ibid, 51), making hermeneutical space for dualism. The dualist maintains that man, according to Aristotle, actually has two natures, and thus two functions, one of which corresponds to human nature, the other corresponding to the divine nature. Thus "in the dualistic reading... Aristotle views contemplation, which he calls "complete (*teleia*) happiness," as the divine good [and] he does not see it, properly speaking, as a human good" (Ibid, 51). Support for this is thought to come from assertions in *NE* to the effect that "contemplation is the activity of the gods" (Ibid, 55), for "such a life will be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him" (*NE*, 1177b26-32). Thus, according to the dualist, the "*Nicomachean Ethics* exhibits a "bifocal

anthropology” according to which humans have two essences: one of these is our intellect and the other our practical reason; the first is divine, the second anthropic" (Bush, 61).

This reading is terrifically problematic, however, in view of the fact that Aristotle tells us that man, "is "most of all" his intellect (NE 1166a23)" (Adams, 112). The natural conclusion is that man's nature involves something divine beyond the 'merely' human, rather than that man has two natures. For "if a thing has only one essence, it is not possible for it to have more than one *ergon* and ultimate end" (Richardson Lear, 22), but the very structure of Aristotle's *ἔργον* argument, and thus of the *NE*, proceeds as though man has only one essence.

Turning then to the monistic reading, an examination of the work of Gabriel Richardson Lear will provide the springboard from which I will propose a new monistic interpretation. Richardson Lear uses the notion of middle-level ends, by which she means ends which can be chosen for their own sake *or* for the sake of a higher end, to distinguish between *the* good and the ends which "are likely to be mistaken for *the* good" (Richardson Lear, 25). She reproduces an argument for thinking that the relationship of middle-level ends and *the* good "ought to be interpreted as the relationship between part and whole" (Richardson Lear, 25). She forfeits this gambit, however, arguing that "this is an ingenious, though ultimately flawed, solution to the problem" (Richardson Lear, 25). She is wrong.

Recall that the puzzle for monism is supposed to be that maintaining (a) and (b) seems to entail maintaining (c), while (d) is incompatible with the conjunction of those three while also unavoidable given the textual evidence from Book I. The solution, it seems to me, presents itself in the text: "we have found, then, that the human function is the soul's activity that expresses reason <as itself having reason> or requires reason <as obeying reason>" (*NE*, 1098a5-10). If we read this as an inclusive disjunction then Aristotle seems to be saying that man's *ἔργον* is an

activity that expresses reason, and this can be done in either of two modes, either by immediate participation by contemplation, or by proximate participation by obeying the dictates of reason. On this reading it would seem that (c) is flatly false, since the contemplative activity *is* the morally virtuous activity. This can be reconciled with Aristotle's identification of *ἔργον* with contemplation in Book X, by attending to a closer reading of the text in Book I. Aristotle there specifies that "the function of F... is the same in kind... as the function of an excellent F... and the excellent man's function is to do... [*ἔργον*] finely and well" (*NE*, 1098a10-15). Therefore, premises 3 and 4 should read as follows:

- 3.\* The end which belongs peculiarly to human beings is some sort of action of the part of the soul that expresses reason, *performed excellently*.
- 4.\* Therefore, the highest good for human beings is some sort of action of the part of the soul that expresses reason, *performed excellently*.

We can thus argue that the single *ἔργον* is not strictly contemplation, but is an action of the soul that expresses reason, and this is achieved in part by morally virtuous activity, but is only performed excellently in contemplation. This allows the monist to acknowledge (d), while maintaining (a) and (b), and even make sense of there being a secondary end of man without man having a second nature.

To recapitulate, I have argued that the inclusive reading is fraught with exegetical difficulties, that the dualist reading suffers from one glaring difficulty, and that the monistic reading I propose is immune to its supposed difficulty. It is the false supposition that "morally virtuous activity... is clearly a different activity from contemplation" (Bush, 51) which misleads the dualist, and once addressed, given Richardson Lear's insight into secondary ends being middle-level ends which may be conceived of as related to *ἔργον* as part to whole, a monistic reading can be erected which synthesizes exegetical tensions between Books I and X.

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