

Aristotle's Function Argument: The Human Function and its Peculiarity

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I, Lawrence Edward John Evans, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

My thesis is on Aristotle's 'function argument'. In my first chapter I explore the opening lines of the function argument, and I investigate whether Aristotle has an argument to support his claim that human beings have a function. I argue that Aristotle has such an argument, and that the questions he asks are therefore rhetorical questions. In my second chapter I consider the problem that the human function cannot be peculiar to humans in the sense of something unique, since reason and contemplation are shared above all with the gods. I also consider the problem that there are many activities peculiar to humans besides reasoning, and why it is reasoning well that marks someone out as a good human being. I argue that Aristotle understands the peculiar function of humans to be the characteristic life that only humans live, namely an 'active life'. In claiming that humans have a 'function', then, the claim is that human beings have a particular kind of life appropriate to them, which, I argue, Aristotle understands to include both practical and theoretical activity. In my third chapter I consider the connection between being a good human and the human good. If the human function is a certain kind of life that humans live, the challenge is why living well is the good for human beings. I argue that, for Aristotle, to be a 'good' human just is what it means to live well *as* a human, in accordance with the specifically human life, so that the good for humans is good for them in so far as they are good specimens of their kind. Hence, in drawing a connection between the 'life' appropriate to a human and 'the good', Aristotle means to directly show us how human beings can live the good life.

Impact Statement

I anticipate that my research into Aristotle's function argument, a famous argument in ancient and moral philosophy, will be primarily aimed at having an impact inside academia. The function argument is of central importance to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, outlining the human good and human happiness, so it is particularly important that a thorough understanding of Aristotle's reasoning and desired conclusion is appreciated. The argument is also particularly controversial, and a variety of problems and challenges have been raised against it, especially since the renewed interest in virtue ethics. One of my aims in this thesis has therefore been to clear up what I perceive as a variety of misunderstandings with certain Aristotelian concepts like 'function' and the connection, in Aristotle's philosophical usage, between a thing's function, its excellence and its good. Additionally, Aristotelian ethics is still a major influence on contemporary moral philosophy, such as in the aforementioned renewed interest in virtue ethics, as well as in studies of ancient ethics and ancient philosophy. This research will therefore be of interest for contemporary moral philosophers, as well as for scholars and others interested in ethics, Aristotle, or ancient philosophy. On the other hand, I do not anticipate that my research into the function argument, an argument little-known outside philosophy, will have any kind of significant non-academic impact. Nevertheless, the function argument focuses on what it is that makes human beings human and how to live a good life. Aristotle's *Ethics* also remains persistently influential on the way in which we think about ourselves, and how we ask questions about the good life and the sort of life we should lead. Such questions are surely of interest to many people, whatever their academic background. For individuals, these questions can make people think about the sort of life that they want to live, their capacity for good, and what sort of actions and decisions they should make if they want to do good and live a good life. For the populace generally, questions about the good life can be relevant to influencing issues on the formulation of public policy, especially for those interested with collaborating with academics, as, for example, in relation to issues of the quality of life. For these reasons, while I anticipate that my thesis will be primarily aimed for academics and specialists, certain aspects will have interest for almost everyone, which means that it has the potential to have some impact outside academia.

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Introduction

The ‘function argument’, as it is commonly referred to, in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter the *Ethics* or *EN*) is one of the most widely discussed arguments in the Aristotelian *corpus*, if not in ancient philosophy.¹ It is, however, extremely controversial.² There is dispute over the importance of the argument, what does the work in the argument, the validity of the argument and the conclusion of the argument.³ My aim in this thesis is to critically examine the argument’s three main parts, considering some of these disputes and trying to answer certain questions, examining both the primary and secondary literature.

In the first chapter I explore the opening lines of the function argument where Aristotle compares the functions of carpenters and tanners and bodily parts to human beings. He poses his comparisons in the form of questions, and it is debated whether Aristotle has any kind of argument that humans have a function, and if he does, what this argument is. I consider the two possible readings of the questions Aristotle asks – one as an argument and the other not as an argument – and I argue that Aristotle does in fact have an argument, so that we should prefer to read the questions he asks as rhetorical.

In the second chapter I explore Aristotle’s important but, I argue, problematic claim that we are looking for the function ‘peculiar’ to human beings; it is important because it allows Aristotle to deduce our function, but it is problematic because it raises several questions. If the human function is *peculiar* to humans in the sense of an activity that only humans can do, how can the activity of contemplation (which Aristotle later argues is our best activity) be peculiar to humans if it is also shared with Aristotle’s god? Also, are there not many activities peculiar to humans besides reasoning? Lastly, why should performing the function peculiar to humans distinguish someone as a good human, as Aristotle thinks it does? My aim in chapter 2, then, is to explore proposed solutions to these three problems. In seeking our function, I argue that Aristotle means to deduce the characteristic life of humans, which is an ‘active

¹ Recent studies include Charles (2017), Baker (2015), Barney (2008), Korsgaard (2008) and Lawrence (2006).

² For a criticism and defence of the function argument see e.g. Whiting (1988).

³ Gottlieb (2001)

life' involving the combination of practical and theoretical reasoning, or moral and contemplative activity.

In my third chapter I consider the connection between being a good human and the human good. If the human function is a certain kind of life that humans live, the challenge is why living well is the good for humans. Some argue that Aristotle commits a fallacy by failing to distinguish the notion of what the good man does with what is good for a man.⁴ I will argue that, for Aristotle, to be a 'good' man just is what it means to live well in accordance with the kind of life appropriate to man. Hence, in drawing a connection between the 'life' appropriate to man and 'the good', Aristotle intends for us to see the immediate connection between how human beings live (their function) and the good life. So my aim in chapter 3 is to examine how performing our function well, that is, living well, is the good for human beings.

⁴ E.g. Glassen (1957).

Chapter 1: Aristotle's Argument That Humans Have a Function

Although Aristotle's function argument is one of the most widely discussed arguments in all of ancient philosophy, the opening lines of the argument have received, perhaps surprisingly, comparatively little attention.⁵ Yet these opening moves are important because they lead up to Aristotle's claim that human beings have a function, and he introduces these moves before arguing what our function actually is. Just before the function argument begins, Aristotle claims that merely stating that happiness is the best good might appear to be something agreed, but we want a clearer account of what it actually is. He proposes that we can find such a clearer account by appeal to the human function, and he explains why appealing to the concept of function (*ergon*) is helpful:

For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? (*EN* 1097b25-33)⁶

This passage, as I understand it, marks the beginning of the function argument. There are two main ways of reading it. The first proposes that the passage is supposed to add up to an argument for the conclusion that human beings have a function. On this interpretation, the questions Aristotle asks should be taken as rhetorical questions. The second reading, on the other hand, proposes that the passage is not supposed to add up to an argument for the

⁵ Suits (1974), Tuozzo (1996) and Barney (2008) are, to my knowledge, the only major studies that discuss in detail the opening moves of the function argument. Of recent studies, Baker simply states that the passage 1097b28-33 is a sub-argument that establishes the premise: 'A human being has an *ergon* and an action' (2015, 259). However, Baker gives no indication of what this sub-argument consists in. More recently, while Charles (2017) discusses that Aristotle's claim that humans have a function is crucial to his conclusion about the human good, he denies, for reasons I shall discuss in this chapter, that Aristotle's argument for this claim takes place within these opening lines.

⁶ Quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from Ross (1925), with minor changes to the translation in some places; unless otherwise stated, quotations from Aristotle are from Barnes (1984).

conclusion that human beings have a function. On this interpretation, the questions Aristotle asks should be taken as genuine questions that Aristotle does not think he has answered yet. My aim in this chapter is to consider these two ways of reading this passage. I will argue that Aristotle does indeed have an argument for his claim that humans have a function, and moreover, one which is worth taking seriously, which suggests that we should prefer to read these questions as rhetorical. Similar to Barney, I will argue that Aristotle intends to establish his conclusion that humans have a function in two main ways: an ‘argument from the crafts’ and an ‘argument from the bodily parts’. First, it would be absurd or unreasonable if carpenters and tanners (or other craftsmen) have functions while human beings have none. Second, it is reasonable to posit a function of man apart from, and in addition to, all those of his bodily parts. To establish these claims, Aristotle must have had some kind of underlying thought throughout this passage, and some reasons for comparing the functions of carpenters, tanners and bodily parts with the function of human beings, and why we should find these examples convincing as support for his conclusion that we have a function. The problem is that Aristotle’s argument is unclear, and it is my aim in this chapter to propose an answer.

An Argument by Analogy or Induction?

If, then, the passage is supposed to add up to an argument, what sort of argument could it be? Aquinas, for example, read Aristotle as arguing, roughly, that the fact that carpenters, tanners, and, in general, all the activities incidental to man, have a proper operation or function, as well as the fact that every bodily part has a proper operation, proves that there is an operation proper to man.⁷ More recently, Barney claims that it seems clear that this passage is ‘supposed to add up to an argument for the conclusion that human beings have a function.’⁸ In fact, she claims that there are two distinct arguments: an argument from the crafts and an argument from the organic parts.⁹ Grant comments that ‘from the analogy of the different trades, of the different animals, and of the separate parts of the body, the existence of a proper function for man is proved’.¹⁰ He does not, however, indicate exactly how the different trades and bodily parts are supposed to be analogous to human beings, and thus how this argument

⁷ Aquinas ([1271-2] 1993, 40-41)

⁸ Barney (2008, 295)

⁹ Barney (2008, 297)

¹⁰ Grant (1885, 449)

by analogy ‘proves’ that man has a proper function. Burnet states that Aristotle’s argument is an epagoge (or induction) of the following kind:¹¹

(1) Every class of men has a function

(2) Every part of man has a function

It is therefore reasonable that man as such should have a function.

Yet Burnet does not say whether this proposed form of Aristotle’s argument that humans have a function is actually, in his opinion, a good one, or whether it is an argument that we should accept or take seriously. As has often been pointed out,¹² however, if Aristotle were attempting to argue from these examples to the conclusion that humans have a function, such an argument would be weak. Any induction can, of course, be argued to be weak on the grounds that it involves reasoning from a limited number of observations to wider, more general assertions, which are, at best, only probable. No matter how many times the sun has risen, for example, and even if it has risen on every single day of human existence, this trend does not guarantee the conclusion that the sun will rise tomorrow. Any conclusion of an induction therefore lacks the kind of certainty that a conclusion of a deductive argument provides. Though, as I understand it, this particular induction is claimed to be weak for two related reasons. First, craftsmen and bodily parts are just a relatively small number of things that have functions. We might think, then, that an inductive argument from just two kinds of things – craftsmen and bodily parts – which have functions to the conclusion that another kind of thing – human beings – have a function is weak, since we have an insufficient amount of data to justify this conclusion. This is contrasted with a relatively strong induction about the likelihood that the sun will rise tomorrow, which is based on a vast amount of data of sun risings. This brings us to the second problem with such an induction, namely that the examples are relatively dissimilar to each other and to human beings as a whole. For one thing, the ‘functions’ of particular craftsmen often refer to the products that they produce, and we might suppose that craftsmen have these functions only in so far as they are instrumental to the society to which they are a part. And something similar might be said of bodily parts: they have functions only in so far as they contribute to the well-being of the whole organism. Hence, even if craftsmen can be said to have functions, there is no obvious reason why it

¹¹ Burnet (1900, 34)

¹² E.g. Irwin (1999, 183-184); Broadie (2002, 276); Barney (2008, 295-296).

should follow that human beings as such must also have a function, nor is it obvious that even if every bodily part of a human being had a function that it should follow that there must be a function of the whole human being over and above all the functions of his parts. At the very least, Aristotle must offer some explanation why such an induction should be justified. As it happens, however, no such explanation is evident. Why then should we accept any claim that human beings are analogous to craftsmen and bodily parts in a way that supports Aristotle's conclusion that human beings have a function?

Not all scholars, however, think that Aristotle asks these questions as a means to provide an argument that human beings have a function. Irwin, for example, notes that some have taken Aristotle's questions about craftsmen and bodily parts to be rhetorical that really is an inductive argument.¹³ Irwin doubts, however, that there is an argument here on two main grounds: an inductive argument from the examples of craftsmen and bodily parts would be feeble, and there is no reason to doubt that Aristotle is asking genuine questions.¹⁴ In questioning the notion that Aristotle provides an argument that humans have a function, Irwin is apparently upholding the principle of charity: since an argument for a human function here would be weak, we should interpret Aristotle in the strongest way possible, and this is to accept the alternative, namely that Aristotle is not providing such a weak argument. Thus, according to Irwin, we should probably take these questions as genuine, which Aristotle does not think he has answered yet.

Irwin prefers instead to think of the examples as an 'analogical exposition', that is, a means for Aristotle to illustrate his concept of function.¹⁵ We can think of this as if Aristotle were trying to show exactly what he means when he applies the concept of 'function' to human beings by providing examples of things which obviously do have functions. For, as Irwin observes, the appeal to the crafts is one of Aristotle's favourite explanatory devices. By appealing to the functions of carpenters and shoemakers, then, Aristotle can illustrate the connection between good carpenters and good shoemakers and their respective functions. When we say that someone is a good shoemaker, we mean that they make good shoes or that

¹³ Irwin (1999, 183-184)

¹⁴ It is possible that Irwin thinks that there is no reason to doubt that Aristotle is asking genuine questions *because* an inductive argument would be feeble. Nevertheless, Irwin does not say this, so we should probably take this as an additional reason for Irwin to think that these questions are not themselves arguments, or constitutive of an argument.

¹⁵ Irwin (1988, ch. 16 n. 37, 607)

they make shoes well, which is a shoemaker's goal or end *as* a shoemaker. Hence we say that making shoes is the function of a shoemaker, since it is the activity a shoemaker performs to achieve his goal. The example of the bodily parts is intended to illustrate roughly the same: we say that good eyes see well, so that seeing is revealed to be the function of eyes because it is what good eyes do well, and it is the activity that eyes perform to achieve their end. Hence, just as a good shoemaker makes shoes well or a good eye sees well, so too a good human *Fs* well, whatever the function *F* may be of a human. On Irwin's interpretation, then, Aristotle is simply trying to illustrate by analogy the connection between the functions of craftsmen and bodily parts as goal-directed activities and their functioning well; he does not think that Aristotle is trying to argue or prove that humans do actually have a function.

Like Irwin, Broadie thinks that an induction from these examples having functions to the case of humans having a function would be 'dismally weak'. Nevertheless, she defends the underlying thought.¹⁶ She proposes that 'perhaps the examples are meant rather to illustrate the concept of *characteristic function (ergon)*.'¹⁷ As she adds, it is a central doctrine of Aristotle's metaphysics that 'the being or essential nature of an individual is expressed through a typifying activity'. For Broadie, then, it is not merely a thing's function that is meant by *ergon* in the function argument but the *characteristic* function. This means that a thing's function (or typifying activity) is characteristic of it in so far as it expresses its essence. So in understanding what a thing is, we have to understand its essential nature, and we do this by examining its function. We can understand Aristotle's appeal to the crafts, then, as a way to illustrate how the essence of craftsmen is expressed through their functions and productive activities. For example, the essence of a shoemaker – what it is to be a shoemaker – is expressed through his productive activity, what a shoemaker does *qua* shoemaker, namely making shoes. Crucially, it is impossible to understand what a shoemaker *is* without reference to this defining function or characteristic activity. So, in comparing human beings to shoemakers and carpenters, Broadie thinks that the thought is that the essence of a human – what it is to be a human – will be expressed by the function or characteristic activity of a human, i.e. what a human does *qua* human. In other words, the thought is that just as it is impossible to understand what makes a carpenter a carpenter or a shoemaker a shoemaker without reference to their defining functions, so too it is impossible to understand what makes

¹⁶ Broadie (1991, 34-35)

¹⁷ Broadie (2002, 276)

a human a human without reference to a human's defining function or activity. It matters that we understand what the essential nature of a human is, then, because as the function argument is structured around the aim of establishing the *human* good, we have to understand the sort of beings humans are, which is expressed by their function.

I agree with Irwin and Broadie that an induction or argument by analogy would be weak. But even if it is true that such an argument would be weak, it does not, of course, follow that Aristotle is not intending to argue in this way; perhaps the argument is simply a poor one. Likewise, even if Irwin is right that there is no reason to doubt that Aristotle is asking genuine questions, it would not follow that Aristotle *was* actually asking genuine questions; in my view, there seems no reason to doubt that Aristotle is asking rhetorical questions either. Conversely, maybe Aristotle is not arguing by an induction or argument by analogy at all. Although I am sympathetic to readings of philosophers that try to interpret them in the strongest or fairest way possible, I think that it is possible to read Aristotle's questions in such a way that better captures the underlying thought, which suggests that they serve the purposes of some kind of argument that humans have a function, so that we should prefer to read his questions as rhetorical. This would be not only a way to interpret Aristotle as providing an argument, but it would also be a *better* argument than an argument by analogy or induction, one worthy of serious consideration.

To see how, consider that, on Irwin's reading, Aristotle's examples of the crafts and bodily parts is simply meant to illustrate the concept of function as a goal-directed activity, thereby showing that the human function is analogous to these other functions, without intending to argue for the conclusion that humans actually do have a function. Irwin is surely right that Aristotle intends to use these examples to show what he means by 'function' as applied to human beings, even though I disagree with him that Aristotle doesn't also mean to use these examples to argue that we have a function. Crucially, however, Irwin and I must agree on one thing: Aristotle obviously thinks that humans *do* have a function. This is for two reasons. First, as the function argument progresses, Aristotle explicitly states what our function is. Second, as Charles correctly points out, the conclusion of the function argument will follow if

(and only if) humans have a function, since, for Aristotle, we achieve what is good for humans to achieve if and only if we perform our function well.¹⁸

Still, although Charles thinks Aristotle must have an argument to establish that humans have a function, he is unconvinced that Aristotle does so by means of a few, unanswered, rhetorical questions.¹⁹ Charles argues that carpenters and tanners have functions associated with their respective roles in production, and they accept these roles when they become carpenters or tanners. But there is no analogous way for accepting one's role, or function, as a human. If this is right, Charles says that Aristotle's question, 'Do carpenters and tanners have functions while man is functionless?', is easily answered yes, because the functions of craftsmen are dissimilar to humans in this respect. The second analogy, according to Charles, is equally poor. Although the function of each bodily part clearly contributes to the well-being of the organism, there seems to be no reason (at least from all Aristotle says here) for it to follow that there is a similar function for a human being as a whole, over and above all of these bodily functions. To this extent, Charles follows Irwin in thinking that these questions cannot be an argument. For on Charles's view, as I understand it, the analogies are poor because it is unclear that the examples of craftsmen and bodily parts are in fact analogous to humans in the relevant respect. So, given the weakness of such proposed arguments by analogy, it is implausible to think that Aristotle has any good reasons for establishing that humans do actually have a function in this passage. 'Even if Aristotle thought that these rhetorical questions might encourage us to think that man has a function, it would be surprising, and disappointing,' he thinks, 'if the argument of the *Ethics* rested on such weak foundations.'²⁰

While Charles is right to point out the weakness of such arguments, it is, however, difficult to escape the thought that, as readers of the *Ethics*, we need good reasons to be confident in concluding *that* humans have a function, in *this* particular passage. I would like to suggest that the surrounding text, both before and after these questions, can be read in such a way that supports reading the passage as an argument. In asking these questions, Aristotle gives us two choices: either we accept that there are functions and activities of carpenters and tanners, but

¹⁸ Charles (2017, 111)

¹⁹ Charles (2017, 111-112)

²⁰ Charles (2017, 112)

none of man; or just as every body part appears to have some function, so we should suppose that there is also a function of man besides all these.

Consider first what Aristotle says before asking these questions, which is important for understanding his motivation for asking them. Aristotle claims that the good and the ‘well’ for man will reside in his function, *if he has a function*, just as it does for all things that have a function (1097b25-33). But it would surely be problematic for Aristotle, even in this passage, if not *especially* in this passage, to claim, on the one hand, that the good and the ‘well’ for man will reside in the human function *if there is one*, and then, on the other hand, to provide no compelling reasons at all *in the same passage* for concluding *that* there actually is a human function. Thus, given that Aristotle does say the former – the good and ‘well’ resides in the human function, *if there is one* – it would surely make better sense to read him as then afterwards intending to establish the latter – *that there is one*. Thus, in my opinion, it makes better textual sense to understand Aristotle’s next move – asking these questions – as seeking to establish *that* humans do indeed have a function.

Next consider what happens straight after he asks his questions. Aristotle asks ‘What then can this be?’ (1097b33), where ‘this’ indisputably refers to the human function. He then proceeds to find out what this function is. Now, in my view, it is unreasonable for Aristotle to ask this if he had not already given us at least *some* grounds for thinking that a human function actually exists. It would also, I think, be especially problematic for Aristotle to have no argument, or no reasons at all, for accepting his claim that humans have a function, given that he then goes on to argue what our function actually is – if Aristotle has given us no reasons to think that humans do actually have a function, why follow this next process of reasoning? I propose that the most plausible way to understand Aristotle’s meaning at this point in the function argument is: ‘There is a human function, and now we need to specify exactly what this function is.’ Thus the second of the alternatives – that there is a human function beside those of the bodily parts – is clearly preferred. Aristotle’s point, then, is that we can only accept this second alternative by also rejecting the first – that a carpenter and a tanner have functions but man does not – as absurd. Rejecting the first alternative is supposed to lead us into accepting the second option, which suggests an argument.

So, from the outset, I disagree with any reading that claims Aristotle does not intend to argue for the existence of a human function by means of rhetorical questions. If my reading is

correct, the way these two questions are presented, and the surrounding textual evidence, is best explained by the existence of an argument underlying several, unanswered, rhetorical questions. I do not, of course, pretend that the way I am reading this passage *proves* that Aristotle is providing an argument here. Indeed, Irwin and others could legitimately stand by their readings and interpret what I have presented differently. The considerations I have offered are just supposed to offer preliminary reasons for supporting the reading that the passage adds up to an argument, and that the questions are rhetorical. I accept that it may not be at first obvious that Aristotle is providing an argument, especially when such an argument is apparently disguised behind rhetorical questions. Any such reading which proposes that Aristotle does have an underlying argument in this passage, then, must acknowledge the fact that Aristotle's reasoning, whatever it may be, is unclear. As Bostock observes, if Aristotle does intend to argue that humans have a function, he 'makes little attempt to argue for this'.²¹ Hence, if we are to seriously consider that there is an argument here, the proposed argument needs to be made clearer: we need to actually *show* what the argument could be. Moreover, we must acknowledge that Aristotle's reasoning displays a tentative and uncertain attitude. As Barney says, the existence of conditionals and rhetorical questions in this passage suggests that Aristotle himself is aware that his reasoning is 'quick, sketchy, and less than demonstrative.'²²

It seems, then, that Aristotle has left us with some work to do and with certain related questions to consider. The problem is that Aristotle does not seem to give us any good reason to accept the second alternative, which is the one he clearly prefers. Why should we reject the idea that carpenters and tanners have functions, while human beings have no function? Why would Aristotle think his appeal to the crafts gives him grounds to conclude that there is a human function? Why should we accept that the existence of functions belonging to the eye, hand, foot and every other bodily part proves we have a function beside these? Thus the primary question of this chapter remains: If Aristotle has an underlying argument that supports his claim that humans have a function, what is it? To answer this, we should first have a clearer understanding of his concept of function (*ergon*). If we do this, we will have a clearer understanding of what Aristotle means to ask whether humans do in fact have an

²¹ Bostock (2000, 16)

²² Barney (2008, 295)

ergon (and thus whether it is actually intelligible to talk of humans having an *ergon*), which will then help us in trying to find out what Aristotle's argument could be.

The Concept of *Ergon*

In response to Aristotle's question 'may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?', Hardie replies emphatically: 'The obvious answer is that one may not, unless one is prepared to compare a man with an instrument designed for some use.'²³

Although it is 'natural', Hardie thinks, to suppose that the carpenter and the tanner have functions in so far as they are instrumental to the needs which they respectively supply, it is not natural to consider that humans have a function, unless we also think of them as instrumental to some need. For Hardie, the suggestion that human beings have a function is therefore obviously mistaken for precisely the reason that human beings are not instrumental: 'My whole body is not like a tool; still less my soul.'²⁴ So the function argument gets off to a bad start, since to talk of humans having a function is in principle wrong, precisely because only artefacts have functions. Hardie seems to have a particular understanding of function in mind: if something has a function it must be because it was made or designed for a specific purpose. And attributing a purpose to something suggests the existence of a maker or designer – a purposeful *agent* – that attributes a purpose to each thing. The function of a knife, say, is cutting, but it has this function only because it was made by someone to fulfil this specific purpose. The worry about instrumental purpose, then, is that it would presuppose that humans are like tools or instruments that are made, presumably by an intelligent designer (e.g. God), to fulfil the purpose they were created for. However, this seems like a strong and unwarranted assumption to make, and we have seen no argument for it so far.

Hardie's objection assumes a contemporary conception of function as instrumental purpose. Nevertheless, while it may be true, at least in the case of artefacts, that a thing's 'function' is the purpose it is made for, this is not necessarily always true of *ergon*, which is the term Aristotle uses. In fact, there is no suggestion at all that instrumental purpose is the way we are expected to understand 'the *ergon* of man' in the function argument, nor of any of the other examples Aristotle cites – flute-players, sculptors, carpenters, tanners, eyes, hands, and feet. Still, it is unfortunate that, despite being a key term, Aristotle does not feel the need to

²³ Hardie (1980, 23)

²⁴ Hardie (1980, 24)

explicitly define what he means by *ergon*. Fortunately Plato does, in his own ‘function argument’ in the *Republic* (352e-354a). It is noteworthy that Aristotle’s function argument shares a great deal in common with Plato’s own.²⁵ Both arguments have the same basic aim as each other: to employ the concept of *ergon* as a means to prove that the blessed and happy person lives according to the virtues of the soul. Most commentators have therefore taken this to mean that it is likely that Aristotle also endorsed the same concept of *ergon* as Plato.²⁶ At the very least, we may reasonably assume that Aristotle has a somewhat similar conception of *ergon* to Plato. Barney, however, identifies the contemporary concept of function as instrumentality with Plato’s conception of *ergon*, and she thinks that this is a conception of *ergon* that Aristotle simply does not accept.²⁷ She even goes so far as to claim that we can see Aristotle deliberately *rejecting* such a conception in the function argument itself.

Let’s first examine how Plato defines *ergon*. We shall cite both definitions for reasons that will become clear in a moment. Plato has Socrates say to Thrasymachus:

And would you define the function (*ergon*) of a horse or of anything else as that which one can do only with it or best with it? (*Rep.* 352e3-4)

Now I think you’ll understand what I was asking earlier when I asked whether the function (*ergon*) of each thing is what it alone can do or what it does better than anything else. (*Rep.* 353a9-11)²⁸

Socrates gives the examples of a horse, a pruning-knife, eyes and ears as functional entities to illustrate what he means. Barney correctly observes that the idea of a thing’s function being something that you do ‘with it’ suggests that its function depends on there being a *use* for that thing and a *user*.²⁹ For Barney, this suggests that Plato understands function as instrumentality. Moreover, Barney argues that Aristotle avoids references to tools or instruments, and to organisms like horses that we might use for our purposes, which suggests

²⁵ Commentators have long noticed this. Grant (1885, 449): the analogies of the trades and bodily parts to prove the existence of the human function ‘comes almost *verbatim* from Plato’s *Republic*, I. 352-3’. Stewart (1892, 97): ‘this passage is taken from *Rep.* I 352e’.

²⁶ See e.g. Ross (1923, 191): ‘To enable him to answer this question [i.e. what happiness is], Aristotle introduces the Platonic notion of work or function.’

²⁷ Barney (2008, 298)

²⁸ Trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve in Cooper (1997).

²⁹ Barney (2008, 299)

that he avoids reference to anything that could imply he endorses Plato's conception of function as instrumentality. Hence, according to Barney, the function of a horse is *not*, as it is for Plato, to serve human needs, but to lead a flourishing equine existence, doing well the things that horses are by nature able to do.³⁰ Furthermore, when Plato introduces the soul in this discussion, Barney takes Plato to be talking of the soul as if it were just another instrument, as something that we *use* to deliberate, plan and so forth. For these reasons, she concludes that Aristotle explicitly rejects Plato's concept of function.

There are, however, problems with Barney's account. The first problem is that Barney does not comment on Plato's *second* definition of function, which has an important difference to the previous one: no longer is there any explicit indication of instrumentality or what one does 'with' a thing. Rather, Plato just says that the function of a thing is what *it* alone can do or what *it* does best, which seems to allow for the functional thing in question to be (at least somewhat) autonomous (perhaps allowing it to include living things, for instance). This suggests that Plato does not limit his conception of function strictly to instruments, unlike the first definition. Alas, what is strange is that Plato evidently takes this definition to be somewhat of restatement of the earlier one, given he has Socrates say to Thrasymachus what he was asking 'earlier'. Still, we should probably take the second definition to be his actual view. For, as Annas points out, Socrates' exposes himself to this 'bad objection'³¹ when he talks of the *ergon* of the soul as though it were an instrument used by the person.³² Nevertheless, Annas says that this is only careless expression, and his real view is just the opposite: the body is the instrument of the soul, not vice versa. At any rate, what is important is that the functions of our soul, like deliberating or reasoning, are not functions that we do *with* our souls, but they are just what human souls *do*. If we, ourselves, are to be identified with our souls, it seems strange to say that we use ourselves to deliberate or reason; these are things that we just *do*. It is therefore reasonable, I think, to take Plato's concept of function as not being strictly limited to instrumentality.

The second problem is that, although Barney is right that Aristotle's examples are for the most part different to Plato (mainly because he avoids referring to pruning-knives or horses),

³⁰ Barney (2008, 301)

³¹ I.e. Hardie's objection that function is instrumental purpose and is thus invalidly applied to humans.

³² Annas (1981, 53)

it is not by itself sufficient to claim, as Barney does, that Aristotle outright *rejects* Plato's concept of function. Indeed, Barney seems to be wrong in saying that Aristotle understands the function of horses to be, simply, to live a flourishing equine existence, and that, unlike Plato, their function does not include their use by humans. This is because in *EN* II.6 Aristotle explicitly describes the function of horses, which importantly *does* include their use by humans: 'the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy' (1106a19-21). Therefore, even if Aristotle understands the function of a horse to be performing the kind of equine activities that allow horses to flourish, he also seems to think, plausibly, that horses will flourish if they perform well in their use by humans. But this isn't inconsistent with his view that the function of a horse says something about the type of life that it leads, even if such a life includes its use for human purposes, since its use by humans is, of course, still part of its life. Thus, even if Plato differs from Aristotle in introducing *ergon* through different examples, it does not seem to follow that Aristotle is operating with a totally divorced concept of *ergon*.

For these reasons, I do not think it is as clear as Barney suggests that Aristotle fully departs from Plato's understanding of *ergon*. I do not mean to suggest that his concept would be *exactly* the same as Plato's own. Perhaps the difference in examples simply means that Aristotle chose to illustrate the concept differently; perhaps, more importantly, with a different emphasis. Still, while Aristotle uses something like Plato's definition of *ergon* as what a thing alone can do or what it does best to determine *what* the human *ergon* is, it does not seem to figure among his considerations *that* humans have an *ergon*.³³ So we need to get clear on exactly what Aristotle intends to figure among his considerations that humans have an *ergon*.

A good place to start is by examining how *ergon* is used in Aristotle's other works. Aristotle says 'everything which has a function is for the sake of (*heneka*) its function' (*De Caelo* 286a8-9); 'the final cause (*heneka*) is the function' (*Met.* 996b7). Further, 'the function (*ergon*) of anything is its end' (*EE* 1219a8; cf. *Met.* 1050a21). Thus a thing's function is closely related to its final cause or 'that for the sake of which' (*hou heneka*) and its end. In fact, whenever Aristotle appeals to a teleological explanation he regularly talks of something

³³ Tuozzo (1996, 148)

being ‘for the sake of’ something else: ‘we say “this is for the sake of that” whenever there appears to be some end towards which the change proceeds if nothing impedes it’ (*PA* 641b23-25).³⁴ We can, in other words, see that something is ‘for the sake of’ something else when it explains *why* that thing is done. Furthermore, a thing’s function is what it has to do insofar as it *is* that kind of thing:

What a thing is is always determined by its function: a thing really is itself when it can perform its function; an eye, for instance, when it can see. When a thing cannot do so it is that thing only in name, like a dead eye or one made of stone, just as a wooden saw is no more a saw than one in a picture. (*Meteor.* 390a10-13)

Or, as Aristotle says in the *Politics*, ‘all things are defined by their function and power’ (*Pol.* 1253a23). Hence, if something fails to perform its function, it is that thing in name only. In other words, a thing’s function determines its identity. A saw is defined by sawing, an eye by seeing, and so on. Without having the power to see, an eye would not be an eye, except only in name. Similarly, we might infer that if humans lacked a function, there wouldn’t be a defining feature that the name ‘human’ referred to, and humans would be human in name only. Since, therefore, things are what they are because of their capacity to perform some function, the human function is just what defines a human or determines what it is to be a human, and we are human by our capacity to perform our function. Our function draws our attention to the sort of beings we are, how we should be, and how we are expected to behave. So ‘function’ is evidently an important and powerful normative concept for Aristotle – one which evidently does a lot of work. Functions are hardly limited to tools, since every bodily part can be legitimately said to have a function, i.e. an end or ‘that for the sake of which’.³⁵ Further, as previously mentioned in the case of horses, the function of living things, including humans, will be teleologically relevant to their life.

A final word on *ergon*. Baker has recently argued for the need of a reassessment of Aristotle’s concept of *ergon*, for several reasons.³⁶ First, although it is no doubt true that Aristotle understands *ergon* to mean ‘proper activity’ in the function argument, he

³⁴ Translations of *Parts of Animals (PA)* are from Lennox (2001).

³⁵ As I explain in Chapter 3, ‘that for the sake of which’ need not only be instrumental, for Aristotle, but also beneficial, and it is in this sense which presumably applies to living beings like humans (cf. *DA* 415b20-21).

³⁶ Baker (2015, 230-231)

nevertheless uses *ergon* in expressions that unequivocally refer to products, both prior to (1094a5) and soon after (1106b10) the argument. Indeed, the former is the first appearance of *ergon* in the *Ethics*, and here Aristotle says that when there are ends apart from the activities, the *erga* are by nature better than the activities. According to Baker, Aristotle would then appear to be switching back and forth between different meanings of the word *ergon*, without any clear sign that he is doing so. Secondly, Aristotle explicitly identifies the *ergon* of certain craftsmen as products, not the activities that produce them. For example, he identifies the *ergon* of a shoemaker as a shoe and that of a housebuilder as a house (1133a7-10; *EE* 1219a14-21). Finally, if *ergon* does mean ‘proper activity’, it is unclear how Aristotle’s claim that the good and the well for man being ‘in’ the *ergon* (1097b26-27), just as it is in the case of a flute-player, sculptor, or any other craftsman, helps Aristotle determine the human good, given that he understands the good as the best thing achievable by human action. For if the good of a sculptor consists in sculpting well, this seems irrelevant to what the best thing *achievable* by a sculptor is, since the best thing achievable by a sculptor is not sculpting but a sculpture – the end of the sculptor’s activity. According to Baker, then, these reasons, amongst others, means we should understand *ergon* more broadly as something like the ‘proper achievement’ of a thing, to account for the fact that the *ergon* of a craftsman, for example, more properly refers to the craftsman’s distinctive product, not his productive activity.

Baker also argues that although Aristotle distinguishes a thing’s *ergon* to be an activity in some cases, but a product in others, there is no evidence that Aristotle has two *distinct* conceptions of what an *ergon* is. The clearest evidence of this comes in the *Eudemian Ethics* when Aristotle says that ‘*ergon* is said in two ways’ (*EE* 1219a13). The idea seems to be that Aristotle recognises that there can be two different things going on when we say ‘*ergon*’. This allows for the possibility that *ergon* is itself a single, unified concept: a thing’s *ergon* can refer to an activity in some cases, but a product in others, in accordance with the kind of thing it is. One explanation Baker finds for this misunderstanding of *ergon* is its translation. As he points out, it is usually translated as ‘function’ or ‘characteristic activity’, which tends to obscure the fact that *ergon* refers to the craftsman’s product.³⁷ The fact that *ergon* can refer to a product or an activity suggests that we might better understand *ergon* in English with a translation that more closely reflects these differences, and perhaps the closest equivalent in

³⁷ Baker (2015, 229)

English is ‘work’.³⁸ This should give us pause that we cannot just assume that by ‘*ergon*’ Aristotle means ‘function’ or ‘proper activity’ in the function argument, especially because some of the references to craftsmen, such as sculptors, refer to *erga* which are not their activities.

Understanding *ergon* is important for understanding what Aristotle is trying to show in comparing carpenters and tanners to human beings, since it gives us an indication what Aristotle is actually trying to draw our attention to and what it means to say humans have an *ergon*, which will then help us in trying to find out what Aristotle’s argument could be. Baker certainly raises an important point about *ergon* not being limited to ‘proper activity’, and he is right to think that any adequate understanding of the *ergon* argument must involve an understanding of what ‘*ergon*’ actually means. Yet, as Baker admits, when Aristotle talks of ‘the *ergon* of man’ that expression evidently *does* refer to something like the ‘function’ or ‘proper activity’ of man.³⁹ But now with this understanding of *ergon* in mind, we are in a better position to understand why, and moreover why Aristotle uses the examples of the crafts. For it is notable that when Aristotle introduces *ergon* in the context of craftsmen he introduces it as a pair: ‘function (*ergon*) and activity (*praxis*)’ (1097b26). He then repeats this pairing again a few lines later: ‘functions (*erga*) and activities (*praxeis*)’ (1097b29). This suggests that such a pairing is no accident when comparing the *erga* of craftsmen with humans. Indeed, an ordinary Greek, one who had never read a sentence of Aristotle before, may be unclear exactly what Aristotle means by ‘the *ergon* of man’. He might reasonably take it in the sense of ‘the product of man’, like the ‘product’ of a craftsman. However, it is clear that this cannot be ‘the *ergon* of man’ Aristotle has in mind, since the human *ergon* cannot refer to a material product, as it does for a craftsman. If it did, then then it would not really be the *ergon* of a human after all, but the *ergon* of another kind of craftsman.

Therefore, since Aristotle understands the *ergon* of a craftsman to refer principally to the

³⁸ Baker (2015, 254). Nevertheless, ‘function’ expresses well the fact that *ergon* can be identified with a thing’s ‘that for the sake of which’ or end, i.e., as we might say, its *purpose*. For convenience sake, I have followed the standard translation of *ergon* here as ‘function’.

³⁹ Baker (2015, 231). Although Baker concedes this point, he claims that this does not mean that ‘*ergon*’ and ‘proper activity’ mean the same thing. By comparison, he argues that although Aristotle understands the ‘limit’ (*peras*) of a plane to refer to ‘line’ in the expression ‘the limit (*peras*) of a plane’, ‘limit’ and ‘line’ still express different concepts. Thus, *ergon* can mean the same thing as ‘proper activity’ when applied to a human being, even though *ergon* and ‘proper activity’ express different concepts. This seems correct, but it does not change the important point that the *ergon* of a human is evidently understood as an activity.

distinctive product in which he alone is skilled to make, rather than to his productive activity, this suggests that by adding ‘activities’ in his comparison with the *erga* of craftsmen and humans, Aristotle is making clear the type of *ergon* he has in mind for a human: the human *ergon* is not a ‘work’ in the sense of a ‘product’ but a ‘work’ in the sense of an ‘activity’. That the human *ergon* refers to an activity is perhaps even more obvious with bodily parts, since the function of a bodily part cannot refer to a ‘product’ in any sense of that word as it is intelligible for craftsmen. Aristotle might therefore have supposed that including the examples of the bodily parts expressed even more clearly what kind of *ergon* he had in mind for a human. Furthermore, this understanding of *ergon* agrees with what we have said about Aristotle’s association of a thing’s *ergon* with its end or final cause. The end or final cause of a shoemaker, whose ‘work’ results in a shoe, must refer to the shoe, since this is the proper end of the shoemaker’s activity, or ‘that for the sake of which’ the shoemaker *qua* shoemaker exists. Similarly, the end of an eye, whose ‘work’ results in sight, must refer to the activity of ‘sight’ (or ‘seeing’) itself, since this is the end or ‘that for sake of which’ the eye *qua* eye exists.

Yet even if we accept that there are similarities between these craftsmen, bodily parts and humans, introducing these examples as an *argument* might still appear weak. Recall Charles’ complaint about comparing the functions of carpenters and leatherworkers to human beings to conclude that human beings have a function.⁴⁰ Carpenters and leatherworkers have functions only because of their allotted roles in production, and they could quit their jobs if they wished and undertake another productive role. Even if, therefore, we accept the plausibility that the ‘function’ of a human is, in some way, like the ‘function’ of a craftsman, we might still contend that there remain numerous differences between humans and craftsmen, so that the analogy would still be weak for establishing that a human function exists. But I think enough has been said to see that this misses the point of the examples and what Aristotle is trying to show. Aristotle is not trying to point out that the functions in the sense of the *roles* belonging to a carpenter or tanner are like the function of a human; the human *ergon* is not like the job of a carpenter that we can just adopt – our function is supposed to be something permanent. Rather, Aristotle is trying to show how the *concept* of *ergon* can be legitimately applied to humans in so far as humans have an end or final cause, which will be an activity (or set of activities) belonging to humans, in the sense of an activity

⁴⁰ Charles (2017, 111-112)

(or set of activities) teleologically relevant to human life. Just as craftsmen can be said to have ends (or final causes) which are closely associated with their functions, so the same, Aristotle thinks, must be said of human beings. Furthermore, understanding *ergon* simply as ‘function’ is, as we saw, misleading. Charles has evidently understood it in the sense of a craftsman’s role in production, whereas what it is actually signifying is the craftsman’s ‘product’ or end of his activity.⁴¹

So Aristotle understands *ergon* in a conceptually much broader sense than we might ordinarily understand ‘function’. He understands *ergon* to be associated with the end, final cause, activity or product of a thing, which allows him to say that artefacts, bodily organs, craftsmen, and even living things have functions. Although we may want to challenge some of Aristotle’s assumptions, then, such as teleology, it is unfair to criticise him either of the charge that the concept of function is one of instrumentality, or that function in the sense of a role is illegitimate when it applies to human beings. These charges may be true of ‘function’, but they are not true of *ergon*.

The Argument from the Crafts

Now that we have a grasp of *ergon* and its intended application to human beings, we can finally proceed to looking at Aristotle’s actual argument for his claim that humans have an *ergon*. Following Barney, I think Aristotle argues for this in two main ways: an ‘argument from the crafts’ and an ‘argument from the bodily parts’. We shall begin with the argument from the crafts: if carpenters, shoemakers and all other craftsmen have functions, a human being as such must have a function. Barney says that one way to understand how this argument might work is by considering the nested hierarchy of the crafts and their teleological relation to one another and to the human good.⁴² She calls this ‘the architectonic reading’, which derives from Kraut:

⁴¹ I discuss Charles’ account of the function argument in more detail in Chapter 2.

⁴² Barney (2008, 304ff)

when one finds a nested series of functions, they ultimately serve one highest function. The various functions of craftsmen must ultimately serve one higher function – and what else could that be but our functioning as human beings?⁴³

The idea of this ‘architectonic reading’ is to appeal to the teleological structure of the crafts, which is an ordered hierarchy, consisting of a nested series of functions in which some ends are chosen for the sake of others. The crux is that if craftsmen have functions, the ends of these crafts must contribute to some further end which is functional in nature, and ultimately to the functioning of human beings as such. This suggests the existence of a human function.

According to Barney, the evidence which suggests that this is how the argument from the crafts is supposed to work comes from *EN* I.1-2. Here Aristotle has a vision of the crafts falling within an ordered hierarchy in his argument for the best or highest good. Every craft and human activity, Aristotle says, seeks some good, but since there are many different crafts and activities, there are also many different ends – in medicine the end is health, in shipbuilding a ship, in strategy victory, in economics wealth. What is crucial here is that the end or good of each of these crafts are associated with their *functions*, which can, as we saw, be either a product or an activity. Further, Aristotle recognises that some crafts fall under a single capacity, ‘as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy’ (1094a10-13). Thus some ends are chosen for the sake of others, meaning that some crafts are subordinate to others. But Aristotle thinks that these ends must finish somewhere: ‘for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain’ (1094a20-22). This ultimate end will be proper to the most authoritative or master art, which Aristotle calls politics (*politikê*). Hence, since this is the end associated with human affairs and cities, governing all of the other human activities, and moreover is the end that includes all the others, ‘this end must be the human good’ (1094b6-7). And this end is the same for an individual human and the city. So the ‘highest’ or ‘architectonic’ craft at the top of the hierarchy of this teleological structure will be associated with the human good, and attaining the human good will be associated with the human function.

⁴³ Kraut (2002, 82)

It is important to observe that Aristotle recalls this passage in detail leading up to the function argument (1097a15-34). Again, he emphasises that in each sphere the good consists in an end achievable by action – in medicine health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house.

Crucially, some ends are chosen for the sake of others, and if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more ends than one, it will be these ends. Thus Aristotle has provided another argument for the existence of a highest or best good, which he identifies with happiness. He then begins the function argument by pointing out how identifying *happiness* with the best good may seem a platitude, and so he seeks to give this platitude content by determining what the human function is. Thus, since the good of the crafts is associated with their functions, it is clear that in order to give a clearer account of what the good of man is, we need to ascertain what the function of man is.

To sum up. The architectonic reading takes the existence of the human function to be presupposed by the social teleology of *EN* I.1-2.⁴⁴ It takes Aristotle's conception of the human community as a functioning and teleologically structured whole, and the functioning of each of the crafts to be directed towards the human good. Then, as I understand it, it argues that the existence of the human function is presupposed by the existence of the highest good.

However, Barney says that even if the architectonic reading is successful in explaining the argument from the crafts, it opens the way to a potentially damaging objection, the 'instrumentalist objection'.⁴⁵ This objection follows by virtue of the criticism that the crafts are only of instrumental value, so that the activities or states in which our good consists are non-functional and not structured for some higher goal, so they are in no way subordinate to an ultimate human end or good. According to this objection, if there is a highest good, it is simply a form of pleasure. Crafts, then, are pursued solely either for money-making or for pleasure, not for some highest goal or good – e.g. shoemakers make shoes to make money and to amuse or please those who wear shoes. Shoemaking, then, and every other craft, is of purely instrumental value to the shoemaker and society alike. Barney says the instrumentalist vision of crafts and the good represents a strong alternative to Plato's and Aristotle's own conception of human society as a structurally organised and functioning whole, where the

⁴⁴ Karbowski (2019, 222)

⁴⁵ Barney (2008, 306ff.)

good of each ‘part’ contributes to the common good of the city as a whole. Nothing on the architectonic reading inclines us to refute this rival view.

Nevertheless, Aristotle is fully aware of this rival instrumentalist or hedonist alternative throughout the *Ethics*, which he knows he cannot simply ignore. He often simply dismisses it, however, as something only ‘ordinary people’ and the ‘most vulgar’ would think, or something ‘completely slavish’, a bovine existence, and a childish perspective (1095b19-23; 1176b16-1177a11). For Aristotle, then, the alternative to his own functional view of human nature is evidently much worse. So Barney thinks Aristotle follows up his examples of the crafts with his question, ‘Is he naturally (*pephuken*) functionless (*argon*)?’ (1097b30), not merely to acknowledge the instrumentalist objection but to outright dismiss it. We can interpret this question in two ways. On the one hand, we can consider the etymological root of *argon*, i.e. *a-ergon*, literally *ergon*-less or without *ergon* (hence ‘functionless’). On this reading, Aristotle is offering the logical alternative to his preferred view that human beings have a function. On the other hand, *argon* is a standard term that means idle, lazy or unemployed. So, on this reading, Aristotle is using the pejorative connotation of *argon* to suggest that if humans were *argon*, it would imply that humans were idle or lazy. Barney thinks that there is more than a simple indication of a *reductio* against instrumentalism here, as it concurs with Aristotle’s other objections against it. That Aristotle may have a *reductio* in mind is also suggested, I think, by the fact that he asks these questions in the negative, ‘has man *none*?’ and ‘Is he naturally *functionless*?’ as opposed to simply asking ‘Does man have a function?’, which would be more of an open question and less indicative of his disapproval of the instrumentalist challenge. Therefore, we can see that Aristotle asks ‘Is he naturally *argon*?’ as not only as a response but, crucially, as a strong dismissal to the instrumentalist challenge. The instrumentalist, Aristotle thinks, is committed to a functionless or idle and thereby ‘degrading conception of human nature’.⁴⁶ But such a conception of human nature is absurd, so we should prefer instead to accept Aristotle’s own view, and logical alternative, that humans have a function.

Curiously, Barney does not explicitly comment on Aristotle’s use of the word ‘naturally’ (*pephuken*) here. Perhaps the most plausible way to understand ‘naturally’ is simply as a way for Aristotle to express what his concept of function entails for humans by comparing it with

⁴⁶ Barney (2008, 308)

carpenters and shoemakers: just as shoemakers are ‘naturally’ disposed to make shoes, so humans are ‘naturally’ disposed to do such-and-such a thing. So asking whether we are ‘naturally’ functionless or idle is a way for Aristotle to ask whether there is something that we are naturally disposed to do. Otherwise its association with craftsmen would make no sense, since it is hardly ‘natural’ for shoemakers to make shoes in the sense of something *nature*, as it were, intended. Whatever the case, this need not figure amongst Aristotle’s main reasons for concluding that humans have a function; it can simply be entailed by his dismissal of the instrumentalist objection, that it would be absurd if human beings were not naturally disposed to do such-and-such a thing.

In sum, the architectonic reading of the argument from the crafts draws on the ordered, teleological hierarchy of the crafts, with their respective functions, and concludes that all of the crafts and other activities performed by human beings ultimately serve some final end which is functional in nature, *the* function of human beings as such. Aristotle then responds to the instrumentalist challenge by suggesting that instrumentalism would imply that we are functionless or, worse, idle, which he thinks would lead to a degrading conception of human beings, which is absurd. Barney says that this is not supposed to be a deductive argument that humans have a function, but it might put the instrumentalist in an awkward position. In particular, it might convince those with the right moral background and education, since they would already be inclined to Aristotle’s side of the argument.⁴⁷

Karbowski points out two potential problems with Barney’s architectonic reading. The first problem, he argues, is that the architectonic reading presupposes that the craftsmen mentioned in the function argument (carpenters and tanners) stand proxy for their crafts (carpentry and tanning) and that they are teleologically related.⁴⁸ However, if Aristotle had intended to refer to the social teleology of *EN* I.1-2, he could have done so more explicitly. There is, for instance, no indication in the function argument that the craftsmen mentioned stand proxy for their crafts. Rather, the craftsmen mentioned are precisely that – *craftsmen* – i.e. individuals within their particular crafts, not the crafts themselves. So we have mention of flute-players, sculptors, carpenters and tanners, not flute-playing, sculpting, carpentry or tanning. It could also be argued that the examples of the crafts mentioned in the function

⁴⁷ Barney (2008, 309)

⁴⁸ Karbowski (2019, 222)

argument – flute-playing, sculpting, carpentry and tanning – are completely different to those previously mentioned – medicine, strategy, shipbuilding, economics and architecture. If Aristotle had intended to refer to his social teleology in his argument for a human function, would it not have been clearer if he had at least chosen the same examples of crafts?

The second problem is that the architectonic reading presupposes a nested hierarchy of functions to which no explicit mention is made in the function argument. If Aristotle had intended to argue for the human function by referring to his social teleology, would there not at least be some indication of this strategy in the text? Indeed, we can even question whether Barney's reading conflicts with her strategy, which she states:

We should prefer a reading on which, without introducing anything *incompatible* with his physics and metaphysics, Aristotle's reasoning can get some traction by doing what it seems to do: appealing to obvious facts about carpenters and shoemakers, eyes, hands, and feet.⁴⁹

In what way, however, is a reading that appeals to a nested hierarchy of crafts a reading that appeals to 'obvious facts about carpenters and shoemakers'? Indeed, it seems far from obvious that carpentry and shoemaking are teleologically related to one another or to other crafts, like medicine. And even if they are teleologically related to one another in a hierarchy, how do we explain their connection? Although it is clear how, as Aristotle puts it, bridlemaking can be subsumed under the art of riding, it is less clear how carpentry or shoemaking could be subsumed under another craft. Furthermore, other than Aristotle's explicit invocation of the crafts – which, as I mentioned, are not even the same examples – there is no suggestion of this architectonic strategy. The architectonic reading can therefore be argued to take significant liberties with the text.⁵⁰

We should, of course, prefer a reading that takes a few as liberties as possible, and admittedly Barney's reading does take some. Nevertheless, this need not be a serious problem because no matter what reading of Aristotle's argument that humans have a function we take, his reasoning is, regrettably, as previously mentioned, always going to remain sketchy and

⁴⁹ Barney (2008, 303). Somewhat opaquely, she calls this strategy 'dialectical'.

⁵⁰ Karbowski (2019, 222)

unclear. So any kind of reading of Aristotle's argument for a human function will always have to take at least some liberties.

I also do not think that Karbowski's objections to Barney's architectonic reading are completely decisive. Barney could respond that there is no need to explicitly explain how carpentry and tanning are teleologically related to each other and where they fit within the hierarchy of crafts, since the main point is that all of the crafts *are* teleologically related to one another and ultimately subserve the highest good – this, Aristotle assumes, has already been established in *EN* I.1-2, and is again re-established in *EN* I.7 before the function argument begins. Thus Aristotle can simply begin the function argument with these assumptions already in place. Arguably, then, this teleological hierarchy of crafts has more than just its role in *EN* I.1-2, but also has a crucial role in *EN* I.7 just before the function argument begins. This could suggest that its reappearance is not accidental, and is in fact intended to be assumed and to figure within Aristotle's argument from the crafts.

So far I have argued that Aristotle argues for two related things in asking his rhetorical questions in relation to craftsmen. He is arguing that humans have a function in the sense of an activity – i.e. a function belonging to man which man has *qua* man, and not one which he has *qua* carpenter or *qua* tanner. He does this by appealing to the teleological hierarchy of the functions of the crafts outlined in *EN* I.1-2 that culminate in the function of human beings as such. Given that there is a highest end or good of all the crafts and activities achievable by action, human beings must have a function associated with that end. The weakness of such a reading, however, is that it is open to the instrumentalist challenge, which brings us to the second point. Aristotle argues that it would be absurd for humans to be functionless or idle; if humans were functionless, it would thereby commit us to an idle or lazy and thereby degrading conception of human nature. The premise that humans are functionless must therefore be wrong, so we should accept instead the alternative that humans have a function. But Aristotle has another argument for a human function, which I think complements his argument from the crafts, so now we have to consider this argument.

The Argument from the Bodily Parts

Barney's focus, as she herself admits, is on the how the argument from the crafts is supposed to work, though she still offers a suggestion for how this argument is supposed to go.⁵¹ She says that, for Aristotle, the parts of animals are always the most uncontroversial examples of functions existing in nature. Aristotle expects us to recognise that eyes, hands, feet, and indeed all bodily parts, obviously have functions. Eyes are for seeing, and good eyes see well. Hence, like the crafts, such functions have normative force, since these facts are not reducible to what *some* eyes happen to do. Rather, eyes have the function of seeing because this is what eyes do insofar as they *are* eyes. So these bodily functions impose normative standards independently of whatever else we might do or desire to do with our eyes, hands, feet, or with any other organ. We may therefore, for Barney, take this argument 'as aiming only to defuse the instrumentalist objection, by showing that we have no good reason to assume that recognized social functions can *only* be a matter of social construction.'⁵² As I understand her point, functions can belong both to the realm of the social (as with the functions of the crafts) and to nature, and to human beings in particular, given that all of the bodily parts listed are our own. Thus, according to Barney, we do not need to read this argument as a deductive argument that argues from the existence of the functions of the parts of a human being to a function of the whole human being.

Still, it is not so clear to me that Barney is right that Aristotle intends for the argument from the bodily parts to 'only' defuse the instrumentalist objection. It seems to me that Aristotle needs to secure a strong justification for why he thinks that just as all the parts of a human being have functions, so the whole must have one too. The fact that he does intend to compare the function of the whole human and the functions of his parts is evident by his use of the adverb 'so' as a contrast with 'just as'. Such language is usually introduced to compare the situation in question – whether there is a function of man – with the one just mentioned – that there is a function of every bodily part. So the relation of part to whole is apparently important for Aristotle in his argument from the bodily parts. It is unclear, however, what the argument for this is. It cannot surely be the same weak argument by induction or analogy dismissed earlier: since every part of man has a function, the whole must have one too. Aristotle needs to have a stronger argument for why we should think that there is a human

⁵¹ Barney (2008, 298; 308-9)

⁵² Barney (2008, 309)

function apart from all of our bodily functions. But I think Aristotle does have such an argument, which also makes it easier to see what Aristotle intends in his move from the parts of man to the function of man as a whole.

We could read Aristotle as arguing for the existence of a function of the whole human being to which these other functions belong as parts. However, this simply shows that the function of the whole of a thing is composed of the functions of its parts.⁵³ There would, then, be nothing special about the function of the whole that distinguishes it from those of its parts. Yet Aristotle says that the function of man is ‘apart from all these’ (1097b32). It is unclear what exactly this is supposed to mean. As Reeve asks, does Aristotle mean that the human function is apart from *each* of his bodily functions (the weaker view), or apart from *all* of them taken together (the stronger view)?⁵⁴ Reeve says that this passage in the *Parts of Animals* suggests the stronger view:

Since every instrument is for the sake of something, and each of the parts of the body is for the sake of something, and what they are for the sake of is a certain action, it is apparent that the entire body too has been constituted for the sake of a certain complete action. For sawing is not for the sake of the saw, but the saw for sawing; for sawing is a certain use. So the body too is in a way for the sake of the soul, and the parts are for the sake of the functions in relation to which each of them has naturally developed. (*PA* 645b14-20)

Aristotle says that every bodily part is for the sake of some action; i.e. every bodily part has a function. According to Aristotle, then, since all the bodily parts are for the sake of some complex action (or function) of the whole body, and the whole body is, in turn, for the sake of the soul, the bodily parts are for the sake of an action or function of the whole human being. This suggests that Aristotle thinks that the function of the whole human being will be a function apart from *all* of the functions of his subordinate parts. Crucially, this will be a function of his soul.

However, in attributing a function to the whole human over and above all of his bodily functions, Aristotle could be accused of committing the fallacy of composition: if each of x’s

⁵³ Tuozzo (1996)

⁵⁴ Reeve (1998, xxix)

parts have a function, then x as a whole must have a function. Although it may be true in some cases that there is a function of the whole for anything that has functional parts, it certainly does not seem to be universally true. Think of a Swiss Army Knife or some other multi-tool. Each ‘part’ or individual tool has a particular function, but there is no obvious function of the whole beyond all of its individual functions. If a multi-tool could be said to have a function, it must have a conjunctive function, and so its excellence will depend on whether it performs this conjunctive function well.⁵⁵ Yet, as we have just seen, Aristotle seems to think that the human function is not a conjunct of his bodily functions – it is apart from *all* of them. In which case, it could be argued that even if there is a function of every human bodily part, Aristotle commits a fallacy by concluding that there is a function of the whole human. Why, then, does Aristotle think that it is reasonable to posit a human function apart from, and in addition to, all those of his parts?

Tuozzo argues that Aristotle’s argument that humans have a function relies on a particular conception of the relation between the parts and the whole of a thing, one rooted in Aristotelian metaphysics and biology.⁵⁶ Although it is true, Tuozzo says, that the bodily parts are not fully intelligible without understanding their functions, it is also true that these individual bodily functions are not fully intelligible without understanding their role in some larger whole.⁵⁷ In giving the examples of bodily parts, then, the point is to show that the whole human being provides the necessary context for *making sense* of these individual bodily functions. The crux is that ‘the whole that makes these functions intelligible is itself a *functional* whole, that is, one that itself has a function distinct from that of its subordinate parts.’⁵⁸ If Tuozzo is right, Aristotle will have to explain how we can only make sense of the functions of the parts within the context of a functional whole, and how the functions of the parts are therefore dependent on the function of a whole.

If we can understand that the function of the eye, for example, is best explained by its function in the context of the whole organism, we can posit that a function for the whole animal exists which gives context to and explains the functions of each of its parts. It makes

⁵⁵ See Nagel (1972, 255).

⁵⁶ Tuozzo (1996). Tuozzo does not, however, argue that his account of Aristotle’s argument from the bodily parts can resolve the potential problem of the fallacy of composition.

⁵⁷ See also Connell (2016, 153) who recognises this point.

⁵⁸ Tuozzo (1996, 148)

no sense to speak of the eye functioning on its own, independently of the whole animal to which it is a part; we can understand its function only if it performs its function for the sake of the proper functioning of the whole animal. That is, we consider that such bodily functions exist only because of the function they contribute to the animal as a whole. For instance, the proper functioning of the eyes can allow the animal to see and therefore go about achieving some goal like finding food.

Moreover, if each of the parts of the body did not perform their functions for the sake of something, then there would be no point in them having functions. We know that if the eye were alone by itself, isolated from the body, *it* could not perform its function; it is not the *eye* which sees, but *that which uses* the eyes that sees, which for Aristotle is just the soul. Each of these functions, then, evidently allows for some kind of capacity to be realised, and this capacity belongs to the being's soul. Eyes provide the capacity to see, ears provide the capacity to hear, and so on. We then ask: Well, what are each of these functions for? Or: To what do each of these functions contribute? Since no individual bodily part can function independently of the body to which it is a part, then neither also can the function of these parts, which defines and determines these bodily parts, be understood independently, but rather must be understood in relation to some goal-directed activity (or function) of the whole animal, which will be a function of its soul.

The dependence of the functions of the parts on the whole is most clearly expressed in the *Politics*:

[T]he whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example, if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except homonymously, as we might speak of a stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that. But things are defined by their function and power; and we ought not to say that they are the same when they no longer have their proper quality, but only that they are homonymous. (*Pol.* 1253a20-25)⁵⁹

Bodily parts, such as hands, can therefore only perform their functions in so far as they belong to the whole human. And in so far as they belong to the whole human, the bodily parts

⁵⁹ Cf. *PA* 640b30-641a5

are alive: ‘it is not a hand in *any* state that is a part of man, but the hand which can fulfil its function, which therefore must be alive; if it is not alive it is not a part’ (*Met.* 1036b30-32).

Tuozzo says that the following passage further reveals Aristotle’s logic in arguing from the functions of the bodily parts to the function of the whole:

Whenever, then, there are activities (*praxeis*) that are for the sake of other activities, it is clear that the things whose activities they are stand to one another in the same way as the activities do. (*PA* 645b28-29)

Here, Tuozzo correctly recognises, we have a teleological structure of functions.⁶⁰

Interestingly, this teleological structure reflects the hierarchy of crafts and activities in the argument from the crafts. The difference is that here the structure consists of the activities of the different bodily organs. Again, just as in the case of the crafts, some activities are for the sake of others, and so all of these bodily activities must ultimately serve some final end or activity. In effect, then, Aristotle may think that the teleological relation between the crafts and the human good (as pursued by the city) is analogous to the teleological relation between the bodily organs and the human good (as pursued by the individual). If so, as Barney herself recognises, Tuozzo’s reading offers to support the architectonic reading with the teleological principle that if the parts of a whole have a function, the whole must have one too.⁶¹ Each part is for the sake of something, and ultimately for the sake of the human function as such.

Tuozzo then proceeds to argue that, for Aristotle, there is such an activity in animals for the sake of which all other bodily parts exist, namely sensation, and the bodily organ to which this activity ultimately belongs is the heart.⁶² Sensation, the defining principle of animals, is ‘that for the sake of which’ or the reason why the other bodily parts perform their own functions. The reference to the bodily parts in Aristotle’s argument for a human function supports the claim that humans have a function because the functions of the parts are not fully

⁶⁰ Tuozzo (1996, 149)

⁶¹ Barney (2008, 302-3, n. 22)

⁶² For Aristotle, an animal is defined by sensation, primarily the sense of touch, and it is the flesh which is the organ that is the medium of this sense (*PA* 653b19-33). But the flesh is for the sake of its organ, namely the heart. So the heart constitutes the centre of sensation (*PA* 656a27-30).

intelligible without reference to the single function of the whole being they subserve.⁶³ This is plausible, as the heart and other vital organs are necessary for human beings to live. There is also an obvious hierarchy of bodily organs, since the heart, nourishing all the other bodily organs with blood, including the brain, could be seen as a vital organ. Hence for Aristotle the heart is the most essential, the flesh second, and so on.⁶⁴ Furthermore, we can live without certain bodily parts and organs, especially our limbs, but not without our hearts.

Yet although Tuozzo's account explains how a function of the whole animal can exist apart from those of its parts, he doesn't clearly explain how this would work with humans. Indeed, in so far as humans are animals and have hearts, it would appear that the function of their whole bodies besides those of their parts is one that they share with non-human animals, namely sensation. But that would imply that the defining principle of non-human animals is the same as humans, which is not the case.

Tuozzo's reading is also controversial. When he discusses the hierarchy of bodily organs, he seems to place an overemphasis on Aristotle's biology as being the main basis for concluding that humans have a function. Barney is likewise cautious of any kind of 'biological reading', as she calls it, of Aristotle's argument, namely one which argues that the main basis for claiming that human beings have a function is that we are members of a biological kind, and like all biological kinds, our natures are constituted by a set of capacities exercised in our characteristic function or activity.⁶⁵ Such a reading is no doubt plausible, but there is little textual evidence that Aristotle attempts it here. Indeed, according to Barney, though she admits that a biological reading is plausible within a general Aristotelian framework, 'such readings operate at an unsatisfactory remove from the text of the *Ethics*', so 'it threatens to wreck the reasoning [Aristotle] *does* present.'⁶⁶

I am inclined to agree that there is little evidence to suppose that a purely biological reading is what Aristotle has in mind. Still, I don't think we need to be fully committed to it in the argument from the bodily parts. Instead, what is crucial to emphasise is Aristotle's

⁶³ Tuozzo (1996, 150)

⁶⁴ Cf. *GA* 740a18-19: 'the heart ... is the first principle of both homogeneous and heterogeneous parts.'

⁶⁵ Barney (2008, 302)

⁶⁶ Barney (2008, 302). This is not to suggest that Aristotle's biology plays *no* role in his *Ethics*, but rather that it does not play a *central* role.

conception that the existence of the whole is prior to that of the parts, which means that the parts are dependent on the whole. And since the functions of the parts can only be understood in the context of the teleological role they have in the whole, there must be a function of the whole apart from the parts, and which makes sense or provides context to those functional parts. Moreover, such parts have a hierarchical structure that mirrors that of the crafts. So, given that both the argument from the crafts and the argument from the bodily parts appeal to a teleological hierarchy associated with the activities of humans – in the former, the practical activities, while in the latter, the bodily activities – we thus have two complementary arguments that humans have a function. This should perhaps be no surprise, since they are, after all, both supposed to be establishing the same claim. When combined with his argument from the crafts, then, the argument from the bodily parts gives Aristotle a powerful basis for supporting his claim that humans have a function, one worthy of serious consideration. This is opposed to simply giving reasons that there *might* be one, which is all that someone who claims that Aristotle is not arguing for a human function could presume.

Chapter 2: The Peculiarity of the Human Function

As I argued in Chapter 1, Aristotle has an argument for his claim that human beings have a function, and one that is worth serious consideration. Having established this, Aristotle proceeds to find out what our function actually is:

What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but *it* also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle. (1097b33-1098a4)

There are several interesting things of note in this passage. Aristotle says that ‘life’ or ‘living’ (*zên*) is shared with plants, but this cannot be the function that we are looking for, precisely because it is shared with another form of life. Here Aristotle makes an important but, I argue, problematic assumption, which will be the subject of this chapter: the function of man is peculiar (*idion*) to him. We may call this the *idion* claim or peculiarity requirement. It is important that we understand it because Aristotle’s whole argument in this passage seems to depend on it: by eliminating the functions shared with plants and animals, Aristotle thinks he can determine the peculiar function of a human being.⁶⁷ The human function cannot, he argues, be the life of nutrition and growth, since this is a life shared with plants; the life of perception cannot be our function either, since this is a life shared with all non-human animals; the only remaining possibility is an active life (*praktikê*) of what has reason. This must therefore be the human function.

There are, however, several problems with Aristotle’s claim that the human function is peculiar to humans. Underlying each of these problems is an understanding of the way ‘peculiar’ is used in this passage. To appreciate the first problem, we must first reconsider Aristotle’s concept of function. Recall that in Plato’s function argument a thing’s function is defined as what it alone can do or what it can do better than anything else (*Rep.* 353a). So we can say that what a thing alone does (or what it does better than anything else) is peculiar to

⁶⁷ Note that, unlike the previous passage explored in chapter 1, it is uncontroversial that Aristotle is providing an argument here.

it; e.g. only flute-players play the flute, and the heart is the only organ that pumps blood, so we would say that such functions are peculiar to flute-players and hearts respectively. Thus, if Aristotle adopts Plato's concept of function, he would appear to be committed to the conclusion that reason is a capacity or activity that humans alone can do or that humans can do better than anything else. But it is here that we encounter the problem. Aristotle's conclusion of the function argument that the human good is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and moreover with the best and most complete virtue, implies that we live according to the best good – the best life for a human – when we perform our function in accordance with the best and most complete virtue. In *EN X.7* Aristotle argues that complete happiness will be the activity in accordance with our highest virtue, which will be the activity of the best thing in us, i.e. our intellect, and that this activity is contemplative (1177a12-18). This suggests that it is not only practical reason that is part of the human function but also theoretical reason or contemplation. However, by Aristotle's own reasoning, 'the activity of God ... must be contemplative' (1178b21-22). Consequently, the problem is that if Aristotle adopts Plato's concept of function, it would appear that he cannot accept that contemplation is peculiar to humans in the sense of what humans *alone* can do, while also accepting that contemplation is shared with the gods; nor, similarly, would Aristotle possibly accept that humans, mere mortals, can contemplate *better* than an immortal god. How then can contemplation be included in the function *peculiar* to humans if it is also *shared* with Aristotle's god?

The second problem is that there is apparently no single capacity or activity peculiar to humans. There are just too many capacities or activities that are unique to us in the sense that only humans can do them.⁶⁸ Humans are, after all, versatile animals: 'the most capable of acquiring the most arts' (*PA* 687a21-22). For example, only humans can speak a language, tell jokes, or cook food. Hence, in 'seeking what is peculiar to man', Aristotle apparently has an abundance of peculiarities to choose from, each as good a candidate as any other for the human function in so far as they satisfy the peculiarity requirement. But this means that there is no obvious warrant to single out rational activity as *the* peculiar function of human beings. Why is the human function 'a life of action of what has reason' and not something else like telling jokes or running for office?

⁶⁸ See Charles (2017, 107).

The third problem grants that human beings have a function in the sense of some capacity or activity (or set of capacities or activities) that is peculiar to them. However, the objection then attacks Aristotle on the grounds that peculiarity is no recommendation: even if some capacity is peculiar to man, it does not follow that a good (or excellent) man is one who exercises that capacity well.⁶⁹ Why is performing the function *peculiar* to a human sufficient to make someone a good human?

My aim in this chapter is to explore proposed solutions to these problems. I will try to show that these problems arise from a mistaken understanding of Aristotle's *idion* claim, so that once we understand what it means to say that we are looking for the function 'peculiar' to humans, we will have answers to our three questions. I will also argue that we have to understand the meaning of 'an active life of what has reason' (the human function) in order to understand how our function is supposed to be peculiar to us.

Preliminary Responses

One suggestion to overcome the problem that we share theoretical reasoning with gods is to limit our function, 'an active life of what has reason' (*praktikê tis tou logon echontos*), to practical reason, and to thereby exclude theoretical reason (and thus the activity of contemplation) from the human function. Grant, for example, thinks that *praktikê* should be understood here as 'moral', 'as opposed to the life of animal instinct.'⁷⁰ He thinks *praktikê* has the same sense here as it has in Aristotle's statement that 'beasts have sensation but no share in action (*praxis*)' (1139a20).⁷¹ That is to say, 'action' is understood here in a narrow sense as rational action on a decision, as opposed to the goal-directed movements of non-human animals.⁷² On this interpretation then, when Aristotle says that our function is a *praktikê* life, this is taken to be restricted to practical activity and not also theoretical activity, and so only practical reason is peculiar to us. Hence the problem that contemplation cannot be peculiar to humans as it is also shared with the gods would not arise, since Aristotle does not intend to include contemplation in our function.

⁶⁹ Whiting (1988, 34). See also Clark (1972, 273), Clark (1975, 14-17).

⁷⁰ Grant (1885, 449)

⁷¹ Grant (1885, 449)

⁷² Irwin (1999, 239)

But there is a problem with limiting our function to only practical activity. As Stewart observes: ‘Man’s function is not *praxis* in the sense of moral, as distinguished from speculative “action” – *theôria*: nor do the words *praktikê tis tou logon echontos* really limit us to the “moral life.”’⁷³ According to Stewart, it is better to understand the peculiar function of man as an ‘active life of the rational part’ which includes contemplation. He cites a passage in *Politics* VII.3 to support this interpretation where Aristotle allows that contemplation is itself a type of action:

If we are right in our view, and happiness is assumed to be acting well, the active life will be the best, both for every city collectively, and for individuals. Not that a life of action must necessarily have relation to others, as some persons think, nor are those ideas only to be regarded as practical which are pursued for the sake of practical results, but much more the thoughts and contemplations which are independent and complete in themselves; since acting well, and therefore a certain kind of action, is an end, and even in the case of external actions the directing mind is most truly said to act. (*Pol.* 1325b14-23)

The important point is that Aristotle explicitly uses ‘active life’ (or ‘life of action’) in the *Politics* to cover both practical and theoretical activity. Indeed, it seems that, for Aristotle, theoretical activity is even more practical in a sense than things that are pursued for the sake of an end. May we allow, then, that theoretical activity is part of the human function, given that theoretical activity, for Aristotle, is in some sense ‘active’ or ‘practical’? The *Ethics* and *Politics* are closely connected, so it is certainly possible that Aristotle intended the meaning of ‘active life’ in the *Politics* to have the same sense as that in the *Ethics*. One might therefore think that it is plausible to read this meaning of ‘active life’ back into the function argument. Besides, Aristotle explicitly discusses an ‘active life’ here in the *Politics* in the context of happiness, which is exactly what the conclusion of the function argument is supposed to establish.⁷⁴ For these reasons, I agree with Stewart in taking a ‘life of action’ to cover contemplation as well as a ‘life of action’ in the narrow sense of moral action. This understanding of ‘active (*praktikê*) life’ is important and I shall return to it later.

⁷³ Stewart (1892, 99)

⁷⁴ More precisely, the conclusion of the function argument aims to establish the human good, but Aristotle identifies the human good with happiness.

But Joachim, though he acknowledges that ‘life of action’ may be intended to cover contemplation, thinks that it seems ‘more natural’ to interpret a life of action in the narrow sense to exclude contemplation.⁷⁵ He gives several reasons for this. He thinks that (a) we are looking for ‘the good that is doable’ (*to prakton agathon*),⁷⁶ (b) the contemplative life has already been set aside for later,⁷⁷ and (c) when Aristotle does treat of contemplation, even though he understands it as the most complete happiness of man, he recognises that ‘contemplation is not in the technical sense something proper to man’, i.e. it is not an *ergon idion*.⁷⁸ As Kraut recognises, this means that Joachim thinks the function argument is only trying to determine what the *second* best life for humans is – the best *human* life – which is one that develops peculiarly human virtues.⁷⁹ To support this claim, we could observe that the conclusion of the function argument aims to establish the ‘human’ good, so that living according to this good will be living the best life *qua* human. Yet this is not the same thing as the best life that we could lead, which will be one that tries to emulate what we have in common with a god.⁸⁰ But Joachim thinks that this poses no difficulty for Aristotle’s defence of the contemplative life, for we are all capable of sharing in the divine activity of contemplation in so far as some element of the divine – the intellect (*nous*) – resides in us, as we contemplate not *qua* man but *qua* the intellect. Hence, for Joachim, in X.7-8 Aristotle seeks to go beyond the function argument, which is concerned with the human good (i.e. the merely human life), in order to seek what man has in common with a god (i.e. the best *possible* life).

Kraut, however, rejects Joachim’s interpretation of the function argument in being only interested in seeking the second best good.⁸¹ For in *EN* I, before the function argument, Aristotle talks about ‘the good’ as ‘that at which all things aim’ (1094a2-3) and the ‘end of the things we do’, which he soon identifies with ‘the chief good’ (1094a18-22). Moreover, Aristotle seems to refer to the chief good as ‘the highest of all goods achievable by action’ (1095a16-17). Thus, although Joachim says we are (a) looking for the ‘the good that is doable’ (or the good achievable by action) in the function argument, in *EN* I Aristotle has

⁷⁵ Joachim (1951, 50)

⁷⁶ Or ‘the good achievable by action’ (Ross).

⁷⁷ At *EN* 1096a4-5. Incidentally, Aristotle defers this discussion till *EN* X.7-8.

⁷⁸ Joachim (1951, 50)

⁷⁹ Kraut (1979, 469)

⁸⁰ Joachim (1951, 287)

⁸¹ Kraut (1979, 469)

already identified this with the chief good. Then, just before the function argument begins, Aristotle says that his aim is to provide a clearer account of what this chief good is (1097b22-25). For these reasons, Kraut correctly concludes that the function argument must be scrutinised as seeking to specify the highest or best good that humans can achieve, not the second best good.

Kraut is also correct in observing that, at the beginning of *EN X.7*, Aristotle seems to recall the conclusion of the function argument, that happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue, as the starting-point in his defence of the contemplative life.⁸² But if the function argument is only meant to tell us about the *second* best good, as Joachim thinks, this raises the question as to why Aristotle seems to appeal to its conclusion here in his defence of the contemplative life. So this certainly supports Kraut's interpretation that the function argument is concerned with the best good that humans can achieve.

Similarly, Charles says that there is no textual indication that Aristotle limits our function to practical activity.⁸³ Consider the conclusion of the function argument: 'if there are many virtues' the human good will be an activity 'in accordance with the best and most complete' virtue (1098a16-18). Although Joachim is right that (b) the discussion of the contemplative life has been set aside for later, the conclusion of the function argument seems to allow for this very discussion of the activity of the intellect as our best virtue to occur later. Accordingly, it seems better to interpret that 'best and most complete virtue' allows for contemplation to be part of our good.

There is one last point to address in Joachim's interpretation: (c) 'contemplation is not in the technical sense something proper to man'.⁸⁴ Kraut argues that Joachim's mistake is to miss the fact that there are two different ways that 'human' (*anthrôpinon*) is used in the *Ethics*.⁸⁵ In *EN X.8* Kraut argues that 'human' is used in a narrow way, so that theoretical activity is no longer considered a human good. This narrow sense of 'human' describes goods that we value as useful because they reflect our emotional composition and the need for interaction

⁸² Kraut (1979, 470)

⁸³ Charles (2017, 107)

⁸⁴ Joachim (1951, 50)

⁸⁵ Kraut (1979, 470-471)

with other human beings.⁸⁶ Accordingly, the ‘human’ goods in *EN* X.8 are those which we need to live well together, particularly the moral virtues and practical wisdom. In *EN* I, however, Kraut argues that ‘human’ is used broadly to cover both the practical and theoretical activities of human beings. Here the broad sense of ‘human’ reflects those goods which humans value because they distinguish us from plants and animals, the ‘lower’ life forms. In *EN* I.13, for example, Aristotle says that we must study ‘human’ virtue, since we are seeking human good and human happiness (1102a13-15), and at the end of the chapter he distinguishes two kinds of human virtue, moral and intellectual (1103a3-10). Accordingly, in *EN* I we are left with the impression that all the intellectual virtues, including philosophic wisdom (*sophia*), which promotes contemplation, as well as the moral ones, are considered ‘human’ in some broad sense. Hence, Kraut reasons, it is in the broad sense of ‘human’ that contemplation is counted as a human good, and thus part of our function.

I also think that Joachim’s mistake is how he reads Aristotle’s account of the contemplative life. Aristotle sees, on the one hand, the contemplative life as being more than a human life, but on the other, as a life that human beings can partake in, albeit to a limited extent. Observe what Aristotle says when he discusses the contemplative life:

But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. (1177b26-31)

Now, if this was *all* that Aristotle said about the contemplative life, then it would seem to support Joachim’s interpretation that the contemplative life was not really a ‘human’ life at all. In the same paragraph, however, Aristotle apparently changes his mind:

But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.

⁸⁶ This is also the sense of ‘human’ Aristotle has in mind when he notes that Anaxagoras and Thales did not seek human goods (1141b3-8).

This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of himself but that of something else. And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore is also the happiest. (1177b31-1178a8)

The claim is that what is proper to a thing is by nature best for it, and that we should strain to live in accordance with the best and most authoritative thing in us. Aristotle's point is that the theoretical reason or intellect, the best and most authoritative part of a human, is what a human being is most of all. If so, then a life according to the intellect – the contemplative life – is after all a 'human' life, since we will live according to what we are most of all.

Therefore, although Joachim is right that Aristotle evidently does somehow consider the intellect to be the divine and best part of ourselves, Aristotle apparently also considers it to be a human life, in the sense that it is what we are most of all, and that, so far as humanly possible, we are able to live according to it and to thereby partake in the life of the gods.

At any rate, then, despite these attempted solutions, it seems that if the human function is supposed to include contemplation, we still need to explain how this function is peculiar to us, given that the gods, who are alive, presumably also have rational souls required for contemplation. Kraut offers two solutions, though he favours the second.

The first solution is that human and divine contemplation differ in kind. Humans and gods are different kinds of beings, so one might think that there is a difference in *kind* between the contemplation of humans and gods which reflects this difference. The difference may be that human and divine contemplation are two different sorts of activity. Human beings also possess the capacity of imagination (*phantasia*), for example, and Aristotle thinks that humans cannot contemplate without images (*DA* 432a8-9). Presumably, then, gods, being purely rational beings, lack *phantasia*, and so do not do this. Or human and divine contemplation could be essentially the same activity but performed in different ways. For, unlike Aristotle's god, humans are not purely rational but have composite natures, which means that we need to eat, drink and sleep, for example. This means that humans, unlike god, cannot contemplate continuously. However they may be different, Kraut simply mentions that a property can be peculiar to humans even if other beings have a similar property. For

instance, Aristotle recognises that some non-human animals display certain qualities that imitate the peculiarly human moral virtues and practical wisdom (1141a26-28, 1149b31-32; cf. *HA* 588a18-588b3). Still, for all the similarities, there is a difference, for although human intelligence and practical wisdom may in some way be analogous to that of certain non-human animals, it is nonetheless different in kind because non-human animals do not actually possess the moral virtues and practical wisdom. This could allow Aristotle to suppose that human contemplation is peculiar to humans, while also allowing the gods to contemplate, because, despite their similarities, differences nonetheless exist between human and divine contemplation. For Aristotle never says that human and divine contemplation are exactly the *same* activity, but seems to confine himself to the point that a difference exists between them: human contemplation, he says, is ‘most akin’ to the activity of god (1178b23; 1179a26), and that the life of humans is blessed like the gods in so far as some ‘likeness’ of this activity belongs to them (1178b27). In this way, Aristotle could think that humans possess a kind of contemplation that is uniquely their own.

Even if this is plausible, Kraut argues that if Aristotle thinks human contemplation is peculiar to us because human and divine contemplation differ in kind, and if the *idion* test in the function argument is set around what good or goods human happiness consists in, then practical thought and moral activity would apparently pass that test with higher marks than theoretical thought and contemplation.⁸⁷ As Ackrill observes:

no argument has been adduced to suggest that one type of thought is any more distinctive of man than another. In fact practical reason, so far from being in any way less distinctive of man than theoretical, is really more so; for man shares with Aristotle’s god the activity of *theoria*.⁸⁸

Thus, even if human and divine contemplation are different, the claim is that practical reason is peculiar to humans to a higher degree than contemplation. When humans are morally good, they are more unlike any other being than when they contemplate. This matters because, if the function argument is aimed at determining the best life or highest good that human beings can achieve, and if the *idion* test is aimed at determining what sets us apart from *all* living things as a criterion for this best life or highest good, it would imply that Aristotle should

⁸⁷ Kraut (1979, 473-474)

⁸⁸ Ackrill (1974, 352)

then adduce practical activity as the best life, not contemplation. This, however, Kraut argues, puts Aristotle in an intellectually awkward position. Although Aristotle could think that the *idion* test simply sets a threshold beyond which something can count as the function of a thing, it would be ad hoc and convenient, Kraut argues, for Aristotle to require that the highest good be peculiar to human beings, and yet to ignore different degrees of peculiarity. If Aristotle answers in this limited way, he cannot deduce contemplation as our highest good. I am not entirely convinced by this response. Aristotle could simply think that he needs to deduce reason, regardless whether it is practical or theoretical, as our function, which would thus set a clear threshold that distinguishes us from other animals. He could then propose further, independent reasons why contemplation is our highest good (e.g. that it is most akin to the gods and so makes us more favoured by them). Nevertheless, it is more important for our purposes to consider the second solution, as this is Kraut's favoured interpretation.

Absolute and Relative Peculiarity

Kraut argues that Aristotle is using *idion* to refer to a property that is peculiar to humans relative to plants and animals.⁸⁹ To support this interpretation, Kraut draws from *Topics* I.5, where Aristotle distinguishes two ways in which a property (*idion*) can be peculiar to a thing: 'absolutely' (*haplôs*) or 'relatively' (*pros ti*) (102a18-30). While learning grammar, for instance, is absolutely peculiar to human beings (as no other being has this property), walking on two feet is peculiar to man only with respect to a certain class of animals, like horses and dogs. If a 'property' can have either of these senses, then, we need to try and establish which of these senses Aristotle has in mind in the function argument. Kraut says that we cannot simply assume that Aristotle has absolute peculiarity in mind, since Aristotle nowhere says that whenever *idion* is unaccompanied by either *haplôs* or *pros ti* the former must be assumed. Surely Kraut is right about this. We must therefore try as much as possible to let the context decide which of these two senses of *idion* Aristotle has in mind. For Kraut, the answer amounts to whether Aristotle requires that the highest good be absolutely peculiar to humans, or whether he requires that it only be peculiar relative to some group. Kraut favours the latter answer. For him, Aristotle is not looking for the function which is absolutely peculiar to humans in the sense of some activity that distinguishes humans from *all* other living beings, including the gods, but for the function that sets us off from all *lower* life-forms

⁸⁹ Kraut (1979, 474ff.)

– plants and animals. Aristotle is not trying to show that humans, and every other kind of living being, will flourish if it focuses on performing an activity specifically appropriate to it, because, according to Kraut, Aristotle does not consider the fact that we are a distinct type of living thing as ethically important.⁹⁰ There is no value in merely being different from other living beings; what is important is whether or not those other forms of life are inferior or superior to us. Thus the value of possessing a function ‘peculiar’ to us lies, according to Kraut, in what makes us superior to lower forms of life. Because Aristotle thinks that we are superior to plants and animals,⁹¹ his main interest is in what is peculiar to us relative to these lower forms of life. But since he also thinks that we are inferior to gods, he is not concerned with absolute peculiarity. To flourish, then, we have to focus on an activity (contemplation) that distinguishes us from inferior beings (plants and animals) and what likens us to superior beings (gods). Though contemplation is not peculiar to humans in the sense of being unique to us, this does nothing to detract from its value. The function argument, then, according to Kraut, presupposes a deep and widely shared metaphysical worldview: although we are superior to some living beings, we are nonetheless inferior to others.

Kraut’s interpretation suggests a solution to our first problem. By saying that we are looking for what is ‘peculiar’ to humans, we should understand Aristotle to mean ‘peculiar relative to plants and animals’, not absolutely peculiar to us.⁹² Thus, whether or not human contemplation differs to that of god, Kraut thinks Aristotle does not require that there be such a difference in order to defend contemplation as being part of the human function and as the best human life, as contemplation of *any* kind is peculiar to us relative to plants and animals.

There are several points that Kraut thinks supports this interpretation. Aristotle explicitly rejects nutrition, growth and perception as being *idion* to humans on the basis that they are common to either plants (in the case of nutrition and growth) or animals (in the case of perception). Therefore, if we want to interpret *idion* according to its context here, then we should take the peculiarity in question to be relative to plants and animals.

⁹⁰ Kraut (1979, 477)

⁹¹ E.g. *Pol.* 1256b20-22: ‘after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man ... if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man.’

⁹² Kraut (1979, 476)

Kraut thinks this is further supported by *EN* I.13 where Aristotle says that the capacity for nutrition and growth are not part of human excellence because its excellence appears to be something common and not human (1102b2-3). According to Kraut, Aristotle cannot mean that this part of the soul is common to *all* living beings, ‘since on Aristotle’s theory god is alive but has no nutritive faculty.’⁹³ Therefore, Kraut argues, Aristotle must have restricted the range of living beings to plants, animals and humans, as only they possess this faculty.

Further, Kraut considers that in *De Anima* II.3 Aristotle argues that one should separately define each of the different kinds of soul and not simply give a definition that will apply to them all: ‘it is absurd in this and similar cases to look for a common definition (*koinon logon*) which will not express the peculiar (*idios*) nature of anything that is ...’ (414b25-27). It is absurd to look for what each of these different kinds of soul have in common; we should instead look for a peculiar definition (*idios logos*) of those living beings that have the same kind of soul, allowing us to group many species together under a single definition (*logos*). Both man and god have rational souls, so they shall be grouped together under a single *logos* that distinguishes them from plants and animals. There will therefore be a single *idios logos* that applies to all rational beings, whether man or god. Kraut argues that we should expect the function argument of *EN* I.7 to adopt the same framework as that of *De Anima* because it draws on the same technical psychology. What is therefore *idion* to man is the highest faculty of man’s soul – reason – and according to *De Anima*, this requires man to have his own *idios logos* that distinguishes him from plants and other animals.⁹⁴ We can also use this point to solve our second problem about the interpretation of *idion*: we can require that *idion* in the relative sense has to be understood against the psychological background of *De Anima*, which allows us to exclude non-psychic activities like cooking food, even if such activities are peculiar to humans.

I think that Kraut makes many good points, and I broadly agree with him that there is some textual support for his claim that *idion* refers to what is peculiar relative to plants and animals. There are, however, a couple of responses to Kraut’s reading of *idion*. First, Kraut’s interpretation does not seem to solve our third problem: there is no connection made between a relative property and what makes someone a good human. This means that his

⁹³ Kraut (1979, 475)

⁹⁴ Kraut (1979, 476)

interpretation does not do the job we need it to do, since it cannot account for why performing the function peculiar to a human relative to plants and animals makes someone a good human. Secondly, the relative reading of *idion* does not seem enough on its own to illustrate all that Aristotle may have in mind. Here I am not sure whether Kraut is right that Aristotle is using *idion* in the function argument in the same sense as that in *Topics* I.5, where Aristotle is clearly referring to the non-essential properties of a thing, such as being capable of learning grammar (102a18-19). For, as I shall discuss more below, Aristotle also understands *idion* to refer to a thing's essence. This would mean that Kraut's relative reading of *idion* would be unnecessary, because we can just claim that Aristotle intends for *idion* to pick out our essence, and a thing's essence alone is enough to distinguish its function. We still then have to explain why essentially rational beings like us are good of their kind if they exercise their rational capacity well.

Essence

Whiting argues that Aristotle is using *idion* in the function argument to refer to what is essential, or to the human essence as a whole.⁹⁵ Like Kraut, Whiting looks to the *Topics* for her interpretation of *idion*. Though, unlike Kraut, she draws on *Topics* I.4, where, as just mentioned, Aristotle says that *idion* is sometimes used to refer to the essence of a thing, and sometimes it is used to refer to one or more of its necessary but non-essential properties (101b20-23). Though Aristotle rarely uses *idion* to refer to a thing's essence, this seems to be how, according to Whiting, he uses it in the function argument. For in the function argument, she argues, Aristotle refers to activities of the soul, and since Aristotle takes the soul of an organism to be its essence and not simply one of its necessary but non-essential properties,⁹⁶ this means that when he refers to activities of an organism's soul, he is referring to activities of its essence. Whiting recognises that this can solve our first problem: 'Only if we interpret *idios* as referring to the human essence as a whole', she says, 'can we allow that contemplation belongs both to human and to divine welfare.'⁹⁷ So, if we interpret *idios* as referring to the whole conjunct of essential properties of a human, we can allow that the human function or essence (including contemplation) is peculiar to humans. That is because any individual conjunct of a human's essence may be shared with that of another being so

⁹⁵ Whiting (1988, 37-8, 47)

⁹⁶ See *DA* 412b11.

⁹⁷ Whiting (1988, 38)

long as there is at least one conjunct of a human's essence which belongs to a human and not to the other being. This suggests a solution to the first problem because Aristotle can allow that both humans and god share in contemplation, since there are other things that are a part of our essence (like the nutritive and perceptive faculties) which are not shared with gods. But this approach also suggests a solution to our second problem: while the capacity for prostitution, for example, is peculiar to us in the ordinary sense of the word 'peculiar' as being something unique to humans, it is not part of our essence to prostitute ourselves, and so it cannot be part of our function. Lastly, we can solve the third problem because it suggests that only those activities associated with the human essence can mark someone out as a good human being.

Whiting's interpretation can solve all three of our problems by suggesting that Aristotle's *idion* claim is metaphysical. Its crucial claim is that when Aristotle says he is looking for what is *idion* to humans, he is employing his metaphysical understanding of the connection between a thing's essence and its function. What a thing is (i.e. its species or *eidos*) is determined by its essence, which is its function.⁹⁸ In short, the peculiarity of the human function derives from the peculiarity of the human essence. If, then, man shared his essence with plants or animals, they would belong to the same species as plants or animals, and thus have the same function. But man is distinguished from plants and animals because the essence of man is to be rational, and hence our function is to be rational. Reason more than anything else defines us as a species.

Whiting is of course right to point out that *idion* can refer to the human essence as a whole. In this sense, there is nothing inherently wrong with this metaphysical reading of *idion*. Moreover, the connection between our essence and our function is consistent with Aristotle's metaphysics and the rest of his philosophy, and so it is certainly possible that, in looking for our function, Aristotle meant that our function is determined by our essence.

Nevertheless, there is no explicit indication that Aristotle is concerned with an account of our essence to deduce our function. Rather, on a textual basis, when Aristotle asks, 'What then can this [function] be?' (1097b33), Aristotle is only concerned with eliminating the kinds of life peculiar to plants and animals in order to know what our function is. We want to know

⁹⁸ *Met.* 1030a11-14. Cf. *Meteor.* 390a10-13; *DA* 412b9-22.

how we should live and what the good life for human beings is, and we can find this immediately by looking for the kind of life peculiar to beings like us. So our function will be the kind of life that enables us to live well, and metaphysics does not matter for this question.

Indeed, there is some indication that Aristotle thought a metaphysical style of argument inappropriate or beyond the scope of the *Ethics*, since doing so exceeds the kind of ‘exactness’ or ‘precision’ necessary for an ethical inquiry. After the function argument, for example, Aristotle says that we must ‘not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry’ (1098a26–31). Aristotle has also argued that each subject has its own standards of precision since the beginning of the *Ethics*: ‘Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts’ (1094b11–14). So, according to Aristotle, we do not always need to speak precisely or with exactness to reach certain conclusions. Rather, we must ‘look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits’, so that we must be content ‘to indicate the truth roughly and in outline’, and to speak about things which are only for ‘the most part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better’ (1094b19–25). It therefore seems to be a mistake to look for further ‘precision’ in ethics beyond what is necessary, and this includes, I think, for Aristotle, why our function is deduced only by deducing the kind of life peculiar to us, and not by explaining our function in terms of our essence. An explanation invoking our essence would, in Aristotle’s terms, be looking for such further and unnecessary ‘precision’, or in other words, would be overly technical. Moreover, he may also have thought that he cannot assume that readers of the *Ethics* will be familiar with his ontology.

But one might respond that even if Aristotle is only concerned with eliminating the kinds of life peculiar to plants and animals, the kind of life appropriate to a living thing is still *determined* by its essence. Thus a full explanation of why such a way of life is in fact peculiar to humans may involve an understanding of our essence. On this point I cannot disagree, for it seems that if we do want to determine or give a full explanation *exactly* why this is the characteristic life of a being (or to provide a more technical explanation), we will need to understand its essence. Hence some metaphysical distinctions are helpful. But if, on the other hand, we just want to know what a being’s characteristic life is (which we find by eliminating

the characteristic lives common to other beings) a metaphysical theory is not necessary to understand Aristotle's view. I am not claiming that this is a decisive criticism against Whiting, as she does not claim that one has to be fully versed in Aristotelian theory of being to understand the function argument, but that all one needs to do to understand *idion* is connect what is *idion* to a thing to its essence. Nor am I claiming that some metaphysical knowledge matters for understanding the *Ethics*. Rather, what I am claiming is that Aristotle does not invoke the concept of essence to deduce what our function is and why performing this function well will be the good life for beings like us. Invoking our essence may be useful in finding the kind of life that is peculiar to us, but it cannot be invoked to explain why this particular life is good for us, or at least such metaphysical explanations are not sufficient by themselves to do so. Hence, even if an understanding of essence is needed to fully understand exactly why a living thing has its own particular kind of life or function, this does not, I think, invalidate my point that Aristotle does not explicitly invoke his metaphysics at this point in the *Ethics*, nor the fact that metaphysics seems to be beyond the scope of an ethical inquiry.

A Kind of Life

Is there a way, then, to provide an interpretation of *idion* that resolves these problems but conforms better to the reasoning that Aristotle explicitly presents? Let's consider Charles' interpretation. Charles asks us first to consider Aristotle's use of the term 'activity'. He rightly points out that in saying 'the function of man is an activity of soul' (1098a7), Aristotle is not talking about activity in general but that of living (*zên*) (1097b33) or life (*zôê*), which is a special case of an activity.⁹⁹ This is evidently crucial for understanding our function, as Aristotle later refers specifically to the human function as 'a certain kind of life' (1098a13). According to Charles, the types of 'life' Aristotle considers – nutritive, perceptive and active (*praktikê*) – are distinguished by (i) the activity which guides or controls the other activities the organism engages in and (ii) the activities so controlled. Human lives differ from those of plants and animals because our lives involve different activities and a different controlling activity. But human lives differ from that of the gods too, because our lives involve activities which we do that the gods do not; e.g. we sometimes act on our desires and emotions, we perceive, and our bodily limitations mean that we have to eat and drink. This solves the first

⁹⁹ Charles (2017, 107)

problem because even if our activities are controlled to some extent by theoretical reasoning, our reasoning controls different activities to those of the gods.

Next Charles asks us to consider Aristotle's concept of 'function'.¹⁰⁰ In addition to saying that our function is a kind of life peculiar to us, Aristotle later adds: 'we say a so-and-so-and a good so-and-so have a function which is the same in kind' (1098a8-9). This tells us that the function of a kind of thing is the activity which good or excellent individuals of that kind do well. Not only this, Charles says, but the function is the type of activity that such excellent individuals *have* to do well if they are to be excellent members of that kind. For humans, it is performing the human function well that marks someone out as an excellent human, and this is the type of activity that excellent humans have to do well if they are to be excellent humans. Hence even if activities such as telling jokes or playing games are distinctively human activities, doing these activities well will not be sufficient to distinguish someone as an excellent human; less than excellent humans can excel at these, but only excellent humans can perform the human function well and thereby be distinguished as excellent humans. What Charles seems to be saying, then, is that it is not that Aristotle identifies the activity which is peculiar to humans and then states what it is to be a good human; rather, he thinks Aristotle employs the idea of doing well and what it is to be a good human in order to distinguish the function peculiar to humans. For Charles, this puts an additional constraint on what it is to be the function of a kind. The function of an A is not simply the life-activity which all and only A's do; it is also that life-activity whose doing well distinguishes an excellent A. This solves the second problem because it rules out all of the other activities that only humans do as being our function because only good humans perform the human function well. It also solves the third problem (one which Charles does not discuss) because it explains why performing our function well makes someone a good human: the peculiar function of a human is the activity that good humans have to do well in order to be good, and so only humans performing the human function well will be good.

Broadly speaking, I agree with Charles' interpretation. Charles rightly emphasises that Aristotle's concern in the *Ethics* in finding the good life for a human involves individuating the kinds of life belonging to different living beings. There is also other evidence in the

¹⁰⁰ Charles (2017, 108)

Ethics that Aristotle took the kind of life appropriate to animals and humans to be important in defining their lives:

Now life is defined in the case of animals by the power of perception, in that of man by the power of perception or thought; and a power is referred to the corresponding activity, which is the essential thing; therefore life seems to be essentially perceiving or thinking. (1170a16-19)

In so far as humans are a species of animal, perception governs our lives, but Aristotle sees humans as being distinguished from other animals by the capacity for thought: in fact, the life of thought is considered here as *the* defining life of humans.

Yet while I broadly agree with Charles, I think more needs to be said as to why Aristotle considers the concept of ‘life’ in the function argument to deduce our function, and therein why individuating the kinds of life belonging to different beings would enable him to determine the good life for humans. More also needs to be said on what Aristotle means by deducing that the human function is an ‘active life’, and whether this is indeed a life peculiar to humans. If we can be clear on why he thinks that a consideration of life and the different kinds of life appropriate to living beings is important, and how an ‘active life’ is peculiar to humans, I think that we will have a clearer understanding of what Aristotle is trying to do in this part of the function argument.

Consider this: given that Aristotle has spent the majority of his discussion preceding the function argument on practicable goods – those ends or *erga* achievable by action – such as in the crafts, why then does he consider ‘living’ (*zên*) as the first possible candidate for the human function? Two suggestions present themselves. The first is that human beings are alive, which means we have souls, and living, more than anything else, is considered a function of the soul.¹⁰¹ Since we are essentially living beings, this means that if we want to live well, some sort of ‘living’, whatever it may be, will be important. Yet I think this gives only a superficial understanding as to why a human being’s *function* is related to the kind of life that only humans live. Additionally, Aristotle’s function argument is focused explicitly on finding the function of *humans*, not the function of the *soul*, and nothing hitherto in the

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Rep.* 353d9-10.

Ethics inclines us to think that in seeking the good life for a human being we should be thinking about living well only in the context of our souls. The second suggestion, which is my preferred answer, draws on what Aristotle says about the best good in the earlier chapters of *EN* I. When he asks what the best good could be, he does so on the basis that ‘both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well (*eu zên*) and doing well (*eu prattein*) with being happy’ (1095a18-22). Yet the problem, as Aristotle observes, is that people *differ* about what they take the happy or good life to be. I take this to mean that they disagree about exactly what *kind* of living well (or doing well) is conducive to happiness, i.e. what kind of ‘life’ is conducive to ‘the good life’. As Aristotle remarks, some take happiness to consist in the life of pleasure or enjoyment, some the life of honour, and others the life of contemplation. Thus, to settle this dispute, we need to find the kind of ‘living’ and ‘doing’ appropriate to a human being, or in other words, the human ‘function’. This explains why Aristotle seeks the human function and why he thinks the function peculiar to humans will be a particular kind of life. Then, just as we would expect on this reading, in the few lines preceding the function argument Aristotle acknowledges that saying that happiness is the best good is a platitude, whereas we want a clearer account of what it actually is, namely what kind of ‘living’ allows us to live well and be happy (1098b22-24). So we can interpret the motivation of the function argument as seeking to provide this clearer account, specifically of how to live well as a *human*. And this is just what Aristotle is looking for when he says: ‘living (*zên*) seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man’ (1097b34) – the ‘what’ refers to the kind of living (*zên*) peculiar to humans, which will be conducive to our living well (*eu zên*).

In seeking what is peculiar to humans, it should now be clear that the *idion* claim must be understood as seeking the kind of *living* peculiar to humans. On what basis, then, does Aristotle deduce the kinds of living peculiar to plants, animals and humans in the function argument? It seems that Aristotle is assuming the results of his biological and zoological researches.¹⁰² Aristotle does not offer a detailed explanation of these kind of lives in the *Ethics*, so he may have assumed that readers of the *Ethics* will have at least some familiarity with his biology, even if detailed biological explanations do not matter for ethics. Anyway, it will be helpful for us to clarify the background to understand Aristotle’s reasoning. Aristotle thinks that ‘living’ (*zên*) is not limited to a single definition for all living things, but that it has

¹⁰² See esp. *DA* II.2-3, 413a20-415a13; cf. III.12, 434a22-30.

several senses, and provided even one of these belongs to a thing we say that that thing is living, namely reason or intellect, perception, self-movement, and self-nutrition and growth.¹⁰³ Hence Aristotle recognises that even plants are living, since even they possess the power to grow and nourish themselves, which is in fact the only psychic power they possess. Consequently, the characteristic life (or function) of plants is a life of nutrition and growth. But while this allows us to define what it means for plants to be living, an animal is living primarily because of perception; some animals lack the power to move themselves around, yet they possess at least one power of perception, namely touch (which is why, according to Aristotle, touch is the primary sense). Accordingly, the characteristic life or function of animals is defined as a life of perception. Humans are different to other animals, however, because we have a rational part of our souls, which is itself divided into a part that actually has reason (the scientific part), which enables us engage in theoretical or contemplative activity, and a part that obeys it (the calculative or deliberative part), which enables us to engage in practical or moral activity.¹⁰⁴ All of this shows that there are just three characteristic lives among mortal beings: the life of nutrition and growth belonging to plants, the life of perception belonging to animals, and an active life of the rational part of the soul belonging to humans. Since we are looking for the characteristic life peculiar to us, our function must, by elimination, be an active life of the rational part of the soul.

In what sense, though, is living an ‘active life of the rational part of the soul’ *peculiar* to us? Recall the passage of *Politics* VII.3 quoted earlier where Aristotle says that an ‘active (*praktikê*) life’ need not only refer to a life involving external or moral actions (e.g. acts of justice or courage) but in fact much more to actions of thought and contemplation (1325b14-23). This is important because it suggests that an ‘active life’ involves both moral activity and contemplation. But is such an active life peculiar to us in the ordinary sense of the word ‘peculiar’ as a life that only humans can live? I believe that Aristotle thinks so. In an important passage, Aristotle says that acts of justice, courage, temperance and other moral acts ‘would be found trivial and unworthy of gods’ (1178b17-18). Put another way, although the gods are alive and active, they are too far removed from us to be concerned with such petty human affairs and moral activities. The only activity worthy of them is contemplation, so that their life would apparently be defined exclusively as contemplative, and so it is

¹⁰³ Cf. *Top.* 148a29: ‘life seems to be not one kind of thing only, but one thing in animals and another in plants.’

¹⁰⁴ See *EN* 1098a4-5, 1102a-3, 1139a3-b5.

‘active’ only in so far as it is contemplative. Yet what is crucial to remember about the ‘active life’ of a human is that it is defined by *both* moral *and* contemplative activity. It is thus possible that the human function is peculiar to humans in the ordinary sense of the word ‘peculiar’ as a life that only humans can live, since only *human* lives involve this combination of rational activities. So we can understand the *idion* claim as aiming to distinguish a life peculiar to us as a life that only humans can live, even if part of that life consists in an activity (contemplation) that is shared with another being.¹⁰⁵

In sum, when Aristotle says he is looking for the function of a human being, he has in mind a particular kind of life for a human – moral and practical, as well as contemplative. The significance of deducing the kind of ‘life’ appropriate to us is that the connection between our way of life or ‘living’ and the good life (or our way of ‘living well’) is more immediate and clear for a reader of the *Ethics* to understand. In short, the emphasis on life leads us to the central topic of the *Ethics* – the good life.

Understanding the peculiar function of a human as the particular kind of ‘life’ for a human suggests a solution to all three of our problems. It solves our first problem because contemplation can be considered peculiar to us, not necessarily because human and divine contemplation are different, or because Aristotle is only interested in the function of humans relative to plants and animals or the essence of a human, but because contemplation is included within the particular life that only humans can live. For when we emphasise that our function is an active *life* – a life which comprises both contemplative and moral activity (involving theoretical and practical reasoning respectively) – we can see that our function involves a different set of activities to that of a god. Importantly, this is also consistent with Charles’ interpretation that the characteristic lives of plants, animals and humans is defined by a controlling life-activity and the activities controlled. His interpretation stresses that the characteristic life of an organism defines *how* the organism lives, and so in my understanding of our function as an active *life*, this will have to entail an understanding about *how* we live such a life (namely, that we use our rational part to guide or control our moral and

¹⁰⁵ I offer no detailed account of this apparent inclusivist conception of *eudaimonia*, which argues that Aristotle includes both practical reason and contemplation within a happy life. Though if both practical reason and contemplation are part of the human function, would the exercise of both be in some way conducive to complete happiness?

contemplative activities).¹⁰⁶ This interpretation also solves our second problem because it allows us to rule out other activities that humans do which are peculiar to us in the ordinary sense but are not part of our function: activities peculiar to us like telling jokes are not part of our function because they are not part of what it means to live an ‘active life’ (i.e. they involve neither moral nor contemplative activity) and so in this sense are not instances of what it means to perform the human function. Lastly, to solve the third problem, recall Charles’ interpretation that Aristotle is interested in distinguishing a function of a kind of thing which good individuals of that kind have to do well if they are to be good. Charles argued that the idea of doing well is important, since the human function will be the activity whose doing well distinguishes excellent humans. But my emphasis on ‘life’ in the function argument shows that the idea of *living* well is equally important. After all, *both* living well *and* doing well are, for Aristotle, agreed to be components of happiness. We can therefore see why peculiarity is significant for being a good human: in so far as someone lives the characteristic life of a *human* well, i.e. by focusing on the characteristic *human* excellences or virtues, rather than, say, living the characteristic life of an animal well (perhaps by focusing more on food and other appetites or excellences of animals), he will distinguish himself as a good human being.

So we can understand our function as a life that involves the peculiar combination of practical and theoretical activity, which only humans can live. One challenge to this interpretation, however, which Charles raises, is that if perceptual activity is excluded from this combination because it is shared with non-human animals, why is theoretical activity included, given that we share it with the gods?¹⁰⁷ The only activity that we do not share with the gods is our practical reason, but restricting our function to practical reasoning encounters the problem discussed earlier, that the function argument would only be seeking to establish the second best life for a human, the life of moral action, not the best possible life for a human, the life of contemplation.

¹⁰⁶ I do not mean to suggest that our reason would control *only* our moral or contemplative activities; we may, of course, use our reason in many other activities, even banal or everyday ones like cleaning or tying shoelaces. Yet these are not part of our function, since they are not part of an ‘active life’; nor will living well in accordance with them make us good human beings.

¹⁰⁷ Charles (2017, 107)

Nevertheless, this is not a real difficulty. Aristotle defines our function as ‘an active (*praktikê*) life of what has reason’ and not, as it is for animals, ‘a life of perception’. For Aristotle, an active life is defined by a life of action in accordance with the rational part of our souls. Such activity is either moral or contemplative, since the rational part is itself divided into two parts, and each part corresponds to the two kinds of rational action that can occur, practical or theoretical activity. A perceptive life, on the other hand, may be defined as a life of activity in accordance with the perceptive part of the soul. What this means is that, in a ‘life of perception’, perception guides or controls the actions of the animal. Moreover, living well in accordance with such a life enables the animal to achieve its good. And crucially, since non-human animals lack reason, this means that they can never include practical or theoretical reasoning within their function, a ‘life of perception’. Theoretical and practical reasoning, on the other hand, as activities of the rational part of the soul, *are* included within our function, as they are both considered part of an ‘active life of what has reason’, that is, types of activity of the rational part of the soul. This doesn’t, of course, mean that perception plays no role in our lives. Perception can contribute to the practical life because it can make us aware of differences that matters for practical reasoning. Perceiving that there is danger ahead allows me to understand that I should avoid it, for example, which I then do. But this is the point: we humans possess the ability to not only perceive our environment but to also reason and understand it. And in so far as we can effectively use these powers of intellect in guiding how we act, we will live well.

In sum, in saying that human beings have a ‘function’, the emphasis is on the kind of ‘life’ characteristic of human beings, one which only they can live. So the peculiarity of the human function derives from the kind of life that only humans live. As we shall examine in the next chapter, Aristotle thinks that living such a life well is the good for human beings.

Chapter 3: Why Performing the Human Function Well is Good for Human Beings

So far, I have argued that Aristotle has an argument that humans have a function, and that by examining the kinds of life shared with different living creatures – the nutritive life shared with plants and the perceptive life shared with other animals – he deduced that our function is a life of action of the rational part of the soul, the characteristic life of a human that only we live. He then uses this conclusion to deduce the human good:

Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say ‘a so-and-so’ and ‘a good so-and-so’ have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. (1098a7-18)

Here Aristotle employs the principle of the connection between a thing’s function and its goodness, excellence or virtue (*aretê*): a thing performs its function well when it performs it in accordance with its appropriate virtue.¹⁰⁸ He uses this to justify the appearance of ‘in accordance with virtue’ in the conclusion of the argument. But does Aristotle give us good reasons for connecting the human function to the human good (the good of human beings),¹⁰⁹ specifically whether performing our function well is something good for us? This question will occupy this chapter.

¹⁰⁸ This is taken from Plato *Rep.* 353b-e, as e.g. Grant (1885, 451) points out.

¹⁰⁹ I take the good *of* human beings to be synonymous with the good *for* human beings – two ways of rewriting ‘the human good’ (*to anthrôpinon agathon*)

A Fallacy about the Good

Glassen points out a supposed fallacy in Aristotle's argument.¹¹⁰ He argues that Aristotle switches from talking about a good human being (or human goodness), to talking about the good of a human being. In doing so, Glassen claims that Aristotle confuses these two notions, the notion of the *goodness of* with the notion of the *good of*. In short, Aristotle's argument is an equivocation: it can only be taken to establish human *goodness*, not the human *good*.

Let's consider Glassen's argument in more detail. Glassen claims that the function argument can be divided into two parts, each part intended to prove something: (1) that man has a function, 'an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle'; (2) that if this is man's function, then the good of man is the performance of this function in accordance with virtue. Glassen does not tell us what the argument for (1) is, but he reformulates Aristotle's argument for (2) as follows:

The function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre.

The function of a good lyre-player is to play the lyre well ... in other words, in accordance with excellence.

Similarly:

The function of man is activity of soul implying a rational principle.

The function of a good man is activity of soul [implying a rational principle] in accordance with excellence.

Therefore:

The good of man is activity of soul [implying a rational principle] in accordance with excellence.

¹¹⁰ Glassen (1957)

However, the conclusion, Glassen argues, is a non sequitur. In *EN* I.1-2 Aristotle argues that the good for man is the final goal of everything humans achieve by action; it is what we choose for itself and not for the sake of anything else. Then in the function argument Aristotle argues that the function of a good man is activity of soul performed well, that is to say, in accordance with excellence or virtue, and that this is the human good. But how does it follow that the final goal of human action just *is* this function? How does it follow that what human beings always choose for itself and never for the sake of anything else is virtuous activity of the soul? Virtuous activity *may* be the final goal of human action, but this, Glassen argues, does not follow from Aristotle's premises. The *most* that can be said to follow from the premises is that the good of a *good* man – and not simply of man – is activity of soul in accordance with excellence, but even this does not strictly follow.

If Glassen is right, Aristotle fails to establish that the human good is connected to the human function. But if 'the good of man is activity of soul in accordance with virtue' does not follow from Aristotle's premises, what does follow? Consider the lyre-player example again. From the premise that the function of a good lyre-player is to play the lyre in accordance with excellence, what follows, Glassen argues, is not that the *good* of a lyre-player is to play the lyre in accordance with excellence, but that the *goodness* of a lyre-player is to play the lyre in accordance with excellence. The crucial point is that since the notion of 'the good' (in the sense of 'the good of an *x*') does not appear in the premises, it cannot validly appear in the conclusion. But, Glassen argues, 'goodness' can, because it is simply the noun corresponding to the adjective 'good' occurring in the premise.¹¹¹ Hence, according to Glassen, given that the function of a good man is activity of soul in accordance with excellence, what follows is not that the good of man is activity of soul in accordance with excellence, but that the goodness of man is activity of soul in accordance with excellence.¹¹²

Glassen supposes that Aristotle became confused: he mistook 'the good' in 'the good (*tagathon*) and the "well" seems to reside in the function' (1097b26-27) to be the same 'good' as that in the conclusion of the argument ('human good', 1098a16). It is easier, he says, to see in English how one might confuse the words 'good', 'goodness' and 'the good', since they are simply different forms of the same word. (The word 'good' can also be

¹¹¹ In Greek the adjective translated as 'good' is *spoudaios*, and its corresponding noun 'goodness' is *aretê* (also translated as 'excellence' or 'virtue').

¹¹² Glassen (1957, 320-321)

ambiguous.) But in Greek there are three different words – *spoudaios* ('good'), *aretê* ('goodness') and *to agathon* ('the good') – so it is more difficult to see how Aristotle could have become confused.

The Good and the 'Well'

So the objection against Aristotle is that he commits a fallacy by equivocating between the goodness of man and the good of man. His argument is therefore invalid in concluding what 'the good' of man is. The issue, then, is where the notion of 'the good' enters Aristotle's argument. I think it enters in the first part of the function argument where Aristotle explains the connection between a thing's function and its good: 'for all things that have a function and action, the good (*agathon*) and the "well" are thought to reside in the function' (1097b26-27). Yet scholars have noted an ambiguity in 'the good and the well' claim.¹¹³ It is not obvious exactly what connection between the good and the well Aristotle has in mind. Barney notes that Aristotle might be making either of two claims:¹¹⁴

- (i) If an *x qua x* has as its function to F, then a good *x qua x* is one which F's well.
- (ii) If an *x qua x* has as its function to F, then the good of *x qua x* – its flourishing as an *x* – consists in F-ing well.

In (i) 'the good and the well' claim is about how being a good thing of a particular kind depends on performing one's function well (e.g. a good flute-player plays the flute well). This reading, as Barney notes, is more obvious, even an analytical truth, and it echoes Aristotle's later intent to say: 'we say a so-and-so and a good so-and-so have a function which is the same in kind ... for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well' (1098a8-12).¹¹⁵ On the other hand, (ii) involves the stronger and more controversial idea that a thing's flourishing – the good *of* (or *for*) that thing – depends on its functioning well.

¹¹³ E.g. Glassen (1957), Wilkes (1978), Barney (2008).

¹¹⁴ Barney (2008, 310-311)

¹¹⁵ The connection between this and (i) may be seen more clearly when this is reformulated: the function of an *x qua x* and a good *x qua x* is to F – the difference is that a good *x qua x* is one which F's well.

Now we have to decide which of these two Aristotle may have in mind. It is possible that Aristotle did not have a clear idea, was simply unclear, or failed to think carefully enough about the two ways that this statement can be taken. Nevertheless, while this is possible, I assume that Aristotle intended the good and the well claim to establish *something*, and that this is precisely what concerns us here. Glassen thinks that Aristotle must mean (i). He thinks that the addition of the phrase ‘and the well’ (*kai to eu*) is epexegetical, to convey that ‘the good’ and ‘the well’ are equivalent in use and meaning.¹¹⁶ Moreover, he thinks that if ‘the good’ stood for the final end of human action,¹¹⁷ its conjunction with ‘the well’ would not be appropriate. But Glassen claims that Aristotle does not give us any reason to accept that ‘the good’ as the final goal of human action resides in the function. Hence:

it would be reasonable to hold that the ‘*tagathon*’ ... does not stand for the final end of action, but is, rather, the substantival use of the ‘*agathos*’ that might have been used to qualify ‘lyre-player’ and ‘man’, as well as ‘flute-player’, ‘sculptor’, and ‘artist’.¹¹⁸

In qualifying a lyre-player, for example, as ‘good’ (*spoudaios*), Aristotle *might* have instead used *agathos*. For Glassen, then, *tagathon* stands for the noun form of the adjective *agathos*. Hence (i) is his preferred reading of ‘the good and the well’ claim.

So again, if Glassen is right in thinking that ‘the good and the well’ claim stands for (i) alone, then Aristotle does indeed commit a fallacy of equivocating between ‘the good of a human being’ and ‘the goodness of a human being’, because ‘the good of’ cannot validly occur in the function argument’s conclusion. However, I am not so sure that Glassen is right about this reading of *tagathon*. Consider some of the points that he makes. Glassen assumes that Aristotle became confused by mistaking ‘the good’ at the beginning of the function argument (1097b27) to be the same as that in the conclusion. But why is this a mistake? Glassen proposes that the ‘the good’ at 1097b27 cannot stand for the final end of human action

¹¹⁶ Glassen (1957, 321-322)

¹¹⁷ If ‘the good’ at 1097b27 has the same sense as that in ‘human good’ at 1098a16 (i.e. that we read them both as ‘the good [of an *x*], so that ‘the good’ were to validly occur in the function argument’s conclusion), and if this ‘the good’ were the same ‘the good’ as that discussed throughout Book I (where it clearly stands for the final end of human action), this means that ‘the good’ at 1097b27 also has to stand for the final end of human action.

¹¹⁸ Glassen (1957, 321)

because he thinks that its conjunction with ‘the well’ at 1097b27 would not be appropriate. Yet we have seen that it is possible to read ‘the good and the well’ in (ii) in such a way where its conjunction with ‘well’ *would* be appropriate, in so far as ‘the good and the well’ says something about a thing’s flourishing. Barney also notes that ‘the good’ here is *tagathon*, neuter, which is more smoothly read as ‘the good [of an *x*]’ than as a placeholder for ‘a good [masc.] *x*’.¹¹⁹ Further, Barney says that it is (ii) that Aristotle will need if he is to apply ‘the good and the well’ claim to the case of human flourishing or happiness.¹²⁰ Hence Aristotle not only needs (ii) for his conclusion to be valid, but the context also demands it.

We can also defend the idea that ‘the good’ of human beings in the function argument stands for the final end of human action. Admittedly, Aristotle expresses himself in a misleading way in saying that he is seeking the highest good, or the good, of everything achievable by action. It is not at first obvious why this good should be *the* human good as such, nor why this ultimate end of everything we seek is also our end (*telos*) as human beings. Still, Aristotle begins the *Ethics* by saying that everything we do seems to aim at some good, and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim (1094a1-3). Then in *EN* I.2 Aristotle says that if there is some end of all that we do, this will be the good (*tagathon*) and the chief good (*to ariston*), and that, this being so, we should try to determine what it is, since the knowledge of this good will have a great influence on our lives and give us a definite mark to aim at (1094a18-26). Thus Aristotle is clear from the beginning of the *Ethics* that his aim is to determine what the good is. Then in *EN* I.7, before the function argument begins, Aristotle asks which of our goods is the highest achievable by action, or, in other words, which of our ends is final, or most final, and he identifies such a highest good or final end with the chief good. An end is ‘final’ when it is always desirable in itself and not for the sake of something else. That is why he identifies our final end or chief good with happiness, because happiness satisfies these requirements (1097a15-b21).

So, as *EN* I.2 and I.7 show, Aristotle reasons that to find the chief good for human beings, we must determine our final end, i.e. that which human beings desire and aim at for its own its sake, the final good of everything achievable by action, and he explicitly identifies this with the human good or chief good. Evidently, then, in seeking the chief good, Aristotle thinks we

¹¹⁹ Barney (2008, 311)

¹²⁰ Barney (2008, 311)

are seeking our ultimate end, which is happiness, and he surely means to identify this chief good or ultimate end in *EN* I.7 with the same chief good in *EN* I.2. But, having identified happiness with the chief good, Aristotle then goes on to say, in the opening lines before the function argument begins, simply saying that the chief good is happiness does not get us very far, since this is something agreed on by everyone, and so we should aim to give a clearer account of what it is (1097b22-24). Once again, then, Aristotle is saying that we need to determine what the chief good (i.e. our final end) is, and the function argument is intended to be his own answer. So Aristotle surely expects the ‘chief good’ mentioned at 1097b22 to refer back to the ‘chief good’ at 1097a28, and, by implication, to the ‘chief good’ at 1094a22. In which case, the chief good in the function argument stands for our final end, i.e. the final end of all that we do. Moreover, Barney is surely right that Aristotle can hardly expect ‘the good’ (1097b27) in the case of man to refer back to anything other than the chief good (1097b22), i.e. happiness. Hence, in seeking ‘the good and the well’ of man, it makes sense for Aristotle to remain consistent in connecting ‘the good’ here with the same ‘good’ that he has identified as our final end throughout *EN* I. This seems to support the idea that, *contra* Glassen, ‘the good’ of man in the function argument *does* stand, as elsewhere in *EN* I, for our final end.

So does Aristotle still commit a fallacy? Is there a gap between human goodness and human good? For Aristotle, there is not. To see this, we need to understand the relation between a good (*spoudaios*) thing, its excellence (*aretê*), and the good of (*tagathon*) that thing. We have seen that a good (*spoudaios*) thing performs its function well; in other words, ‘well’ is the way the good thing performs its function. And Aristotle tells us that ‘any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence’ (1098a14-15). Thus, a good thing performs its function in accordance with its excellence. In fact, for Aristotle, there is an inseparable connection between a thing which performs its function well, is good, and possesses its excellence:

We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also

will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well. (1106a15-24)

If, then, we take ‘the good and the well’ claim in the sense of (ii), we can see that for an x thing to have achieved its good (i.e. ‘the good [*tagathon*] of x ’) is just to say that it is in state that makes it good (*spoudaios*), which will be one by which it performs its function well, which means it possesses its appropriate excellence or virtue (*aretê*). If so, this answers Glassen’s objection that Aristotle commits a fallacy by equivocating between human good and human goodness (or excellence). There is no equivocation because in Aristotle’s framework there is no gap between x ’s goodness and achieving ‘the good of x ’: the good of x is directly connected to functioning well *as* an x . A good x functions well, i.e. in accordance with excellence, and thereby achieves the good of x . Or as Broadie puts it, in Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophical usage, to say that a thing possesses its ‘excellence’ (*aretê*) is to say that in having it, the thing is good (*agathon*) of its kind, and to say that it is good of its kind is to say that it is in a state or condition by which it can perform its function well.¹²¹ Hence there is no gap between the human good and human excellence, since human excellence refers to the state that makes a human being good, which will be one by which a human being performs his function well, and to be in such a state is to have achieved the good of human beings (the human good), i.e. a human being’s flourishing or happiness.

Benefit

Glassen’s challenge to Aristotle focuses mainly on the assumption that Aristotle became confused by mistaking x ’s goodness and the good of x in his argument. We have seen, however, a way to overcome this problem, and for Aristotle’s argument to be valid, providing we understand Aristotle’s conceptual framework. Whiting, however, responds to the problem of whether being a *good* human being is also something *good for* a human being by considering the instrumental and beneficial ‘for the sake of’ relations. She calls this problem the ‘fundamental challenge’ to Aristotle’s argument. To assess her response, it will be helpful to state this challenge in her terms: from an understanding of what it is to be a man (or the function of man), it *may* follow that a *good* man is one who has the virtues and capacities to perform characteristically human activities, but it does not follow that it is *good for* a man to

¹²¹ Broadie (2002, 277)

have these virtues or perform any of these activities, in the sense of something of value or benefit to the man himself.¹²² From an understanding of what it is to be a knife, for example, we may say that a knife has the function of being sharp and cutting, and that a good one is sharp and cuts well, but it does not follow that it is *good for* the knife to do this well, in the sense that being sharp and cutting well is something of benefit to the knife itself.¹²³ Likewise, nothing about what is beneficially good for flute-players follows from their playing the flute well. If, then, this is true of functional things like artefacts and other craftsmen, why should one suppose that being a good human being is something *good for* a human being in the sense of something beneficial to a human being? Even if the human function is a life of rational activity, and a good person lives and acts virtuously, it does not follow that acting virtuously is beneficially good for a person. In dangerous situations, for example, someone may actually be better off by acting cowardly, rather than put his life at risk by acting courageously. Or someone might think that being powerful or rich is what is good for him, as opposed to being just and only taking his fair share. The worry is that Aristotle assumes too much in connecting a thing's function to what is beneficially good for that thing. Namely, he conflates the good in the sense of the beneficial (what is good *for* human beings) with a different good (what the good man does), when he says that the good for an *x* (flute-player, human-being) will be what the good *x* does. Why should I care if living well as a human by acting virtuously is what is good for me if prefer to spend my time in other pursuits? Hence Aristotle needs to explain why performing the human function well is supposed to be beneficially good for a human being, in the sense of something of value, not merely instrumentally good.

Whiting argues that while there is no connection between a *good x* and what is *good for* an *x* in the case of knives or flute-players, there is in the case of natural kinds.¹²⁴ She draws on Aristotle's distinction that there are two ways in which one thing is 'for the sake of' another thing (*DA* 415b20-21): 'that on account of which' and 'that for which'. The former is the instrumental sense in which one thing is instrumental (or a means) to bring about something else, with the further question whether someone is benefited in the process; the latter is the beneficial sense in which a thing's occurrence benefits someone. Whiting argues that this

¹²² Whiting (1988, 34)

¹²³ Indeed, even if the knife I am using is performing its function well, it seems inappropriate to say that the knife is *benefited* by this functioning well.

¹²⁴ Whiting (1988, 35-36)

distinction between the instrumental and the beneficial senses is important because Aristotle claims that the notion of benefit is appropriately applied *only* to living things or natural kinds. Inferences from being a good x to what is good for x involving non-natural kinds (e.g. artefacts and craftsmen) fail precisely because the goods involved are merely instrumental and dependent upon the further purposes and ends of the members of those kinds. Thus, Whiting argues, Aristotle can claim that inferences from being a good x to what is good for x are warranted only in the case of natural kinds. In other words, Whiting is claiming that while the good for knives or flute-players does not consist in what a good knife or a good flute-player does, the good for human beings, animals and plants *does*, precisely because these goods are beneficial rather than instrumental.

Accordingly, Whiting takes Aristotle's reasoning about what is good for an x to be restricted to natural kinds. The problem, however, as Barney notes, is that this ends up excluding some of the examples Aristotle *does* give, namely the craftsmen.¹²⁵ Look again at the examples alongside 'the good and the well' claim: 'For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the "well" is thought to reside in the function' (1097b25-27). If I am right that 'the good and the well' claim needs to be understood in the sense of (ii), following the earlier distinction, then by giving examples of craftsmen alongside 'the good and the well' claim, this suggests that Aristotle explicitly rejects the idea that the function argument is intended to establish only the good for natural kinds – in the sense of their flourishing – and that he intends for it to apply at least to craftsmen as well. Moreover, Aristotle seems, at least on occasion, to ascribe a good to tools: 'between craftsman and tool, soul and body, master and slave; the latter in each case is benefited by that which uses it' (1161a34-b1). There is therefore nothing in Aristotle's argument that suggests that he intends to restrict his argument to natural kinds; in fact, there is evidence to the contrary – the craftsmen.

So, if Aristotle does not think that his conclusion about what is good for us follows because we are a species of natural kind, what does he think? When Aristotle says he is looking for the human good, he seems to be looking for the good for human beings as far as human beings are concerned, so that the good for humans is good for them in so far as they are a

¹²⁵ Barney (2008, 300, n. 18)

specific kind of thing.¹²⁶ This is crucial. Just as the good for flute-players is good for them in so far as they are good specimens of flute-players, which is directly connected to their functioning well as flute-players, so the good for human beings is good for them in so far as they are good specimens of human beings. To be clear: when Aristotle speaks of a ‘good’ human being, he thinks of him as being a good specimen of the kind ‘human being’, in the way that a good flute-player is a good specimen of the kind ‘flute-player’, or the way that a good oak tree is a good specimen of the kind ‘oak tree’.¹²⁷ Therefore when Aristotle says that the human good consists in functioning well, he thinks of this as functioning well as good specimens of the kind ‘human beings’, and thereby to have achieved *the* good for human beings, namely the good that refers to how excellent they are of their kind or how well they perform their function.

So, what type of functioning ‘well’ applies to human beings? As we saw in chapter 2, Aristotle argues that what sets humans apart from other living things is the kind of life that we lead, a life of action of the rational part of the soul. We have the capacity to live a better life than plants and lower animals, namely a ‘life of action’ in the sense of a moral life in accordance with practical wisdom and the moral virtues, as well as, from time to time, being able to share in the life of a superior being, where ‘life of action’ refers to contemplative activity. Crucially, our function is a kind of ‘life’ peculiar to us, which means (as I argued in chapter 2) that the connection between the kind of life appropriate to us (or our way of ‘living’) and the good life (or our way of ‘living well’) is more immediate and clear for a reader of the *Ethics*: performing this function is directly connected to living the good ‘life’ because when we perform our function well, we live well as human beings. Therefore a human being who lives well will achieve the good for human beings – a human being’s flourishing or happiness. Or, since our function is a life of rational activity, performing the human function well by being virtuous and acting well (which a good human being does) is the good for human beings because it makes us good *as* human beings, or good specimens of our kind. On this interpretation, human welfare will differ from, say, a plant’s or animal’s welfare in so far as each kind of living being has their own peculiar way of living well, that

¹²⁶ See Brown in her introduction (2009, xii).

¹²⁷ Cf. Foot (2001)

is, its own way of functioning well as the kind of being it is. For whereas the good for animals will consist, broadly, in living 'a life of perception' well, Aristotle thinks that someone is 'living well' as a human being when he is living 'a life of action of the rational part of the soul' well, the way the good man lives. But, Aristotle adds, happiness does not consist in living well temporarily; we have to live well and perform good deeds over a full or 'complete' life. 'For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy' (1098a18-20).

Conclusion

In this thesis I have analysed the function argument into three parts, arguing for three things, in three chapters. First, I argued that Aristotle does have an argument to support his claim that humans have a function – an argument from the crafts and an argument from the bodily parts. Secondly, on the assumption that our function is peculiar to us, Aristotle deduces that our function is an active life of the rational part of the soul. Moreover, I argued that such an ‘active life’ must include, to some extent, both moral activity and contemplation. Thirdly, since the good for a thing consists in performing its function well, Aristotle concludes that the good for a human being – a human being’s flourishing or happiness – consists in performing our function well; ‘well’ is just what it means to perform the human function in accordance with virtue, which is what the good man does and how the good man lives. Given that our function involves moral activity and contemplation, our good will involve moral activity and contemplation. Furthermore, happiness consists in living well over the whole of one’s life.

The function argument, so understood, is an argument that we have a function, and that this function is a life of action of the rational soul, so that the good life is directly connected to functioning well as a human. In short, the function argument is about how to live well. But to know how to live well, we need to know how to live well as a human, which requires understanding the kind of ‘living’ which befits a human, which is related to the kind of beings that humans are. Aristotle does not make any explicit attempt in the function argument to argue that we will be better off by being virtuous, just as we might consider ourselves better off by being wealthy, for example. Rather, Aristotle’s point is simply that we live well as human beings when we live in accordance with the excellences or virtues peculiar to the human life. And since Aristotle understands happiness to consist in living well, when we live well as human beings, we are living the good or happy life. Still, if living such a life well enables us to be happy, we might think that there is at least a chance that we will also, in the long run, be better off by living virtuously, if Aristotle is right that happiness is, after all, the goal of life.

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