



Fakultät für Philosophie und
Bildungswissenschaft

Institut für Philosophie

Assoz.-Prof. Dr. George Karamanolis,
Privatdozent, MA
Stv. Institutsvorstand
Universitätsstraße 7 (NIG)
A-1010 Wien

T +43-1-4277-46476

george.karamanolis@univie.ac.at

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Response to Jacob Jirsa's Habilitation Thesis

In his Habilitation Thesis Jacob Jirsa examines in great detail the so-called *ergon* argument, which we find mainly at the end of *Republic* I and then in Aristotle's ethical treatises, the *Protrepticus*, the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* I. The structure of his thesis is clear enough. The first chapter focuses on Plato, mainly on *Republic* I, the following chapters center on the *Protrepticus*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, while the final chapter discusses the role of *ergon* argument in establishing what happiness (*eudaimonia*) is.

In this chapter we encounter one of Jirsa's bold and controversial claims, namely that Aristotle differentiates between *eudaimonia*/happiness and happy life and that throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle considers *eudaimonia* to amount to the activity of contemplation (*theoria*). I will discuss this position at the end of my report.

Before I examine the claims that the author makes in the chapters of his thesis, let me stress from the outset how central and how significant in ancient philosophy is the topic that he has chosen. Indeed, the *ergon* argument is crucial for the Socratic opposition of Thrasymachus' argument about justice and pivotal in Aristotle's enterprise to explain what *eudaimonia* consists of for humans. Most importantly, the *ergon* argument is part of the classical philosophers' attempt to ground ethics in human nature. And this has been considered exemplary by contemporary philosophers, especially the founders of virtue ethics.

In the first chapter Jirsa focuses on the *ergon* argument in *Republic* I and discusses various interpretations of it, focusing especially on the similarity of this argument with the one we find later in Aristotle. Jirsa does well to examine this argument in the framework of the debate between Thrasymachus and Socrates. Jirsa shows well that *ergon* is tightly related to virtue/*aretê* of a thing, something has a virtue if it performs its *ergon* well, or, in other words, virtue helps something perform its *ergon*. The *ergon* argument is based, Jirsa argues, on the nature of things. And this applies to justice as well, which is the



topic of *Republic* I. Justice is not a social or psychological construct, but it has to do with the nature of man. Jirsa ends this chapter by arguing that the *ergon* argument keeps resonating in the rest of the *Republic* and is also used in dialogues such as the *Meno* and the *Philebus*. This last part of the chapter is extremely interesting. Some of those passages discussed there have not been examined very carefully in the existing literature and even Jirsa could have devoted some more attention to them. He can certainly do that in the published version of this book (I very much hope that he will publish a revised version of it).

The second chapter deals with the *ergon* argument in the *Protrepticus*. Jirsa first informs the reader about the reconstruction of the *Protrepticus*, mainly on the basis of Iamblichus *De communi mathematica scientia*. Jirsa argues that *ergon* in the *Protrepticus* signals something that has to be achieved as a perfected state or condition of a certain activity. The relevant section of the *Protrepticus* speaks of two *erga*, ἀληθεύειν, being true, and φρόνησις, practical wisdom. After a careful analysis of the passage, Jirsa concludes that φρόνησις, practical wisdom, is both a capacity of the soul and truth is its *ergon*. This presupposes though that φρόνησις perfects both character virtue and contemplation. This is not far-fetched but is rather justified by the text of the *Protrepticus*. This is an important conclusion on which Jirsa will capitalize at the end of his thesis.

The next chapter centers on the *Eudemian Ethics*. The chapter begins with an introductory section dealing with the relationship between the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a vexed question. In what follows it focuses on the *ergon* argument in *Eudemian Ethics* 2.1. One important feature is that virtue is the best condition of whatever has an *ergon*. Jirsa draws our attention to the fact that Aristotle says that the *ergon* can be expressed in two ways (διχῶς): in some cases, the *ergon* differs from the given activity as its product, in other cases, though, the *ergon* and the activity are one (1219a11-17). As in *Metaphysics* (1050a21-28), the *ergon* is often described as the end (*telos*) of an activity. And for the humans this end is *eudaimonia*, which Aristotle specifies as the activity of a good soul (*EE* 1219a34-35). The “perfect virtue” which leads to *eudaimonia* (1219a38-39) is specified as the *kalokagathia* in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Jirsa does well to dwell on the point of what *kalokagathia* is -it is supposed to be a summary of all virtues, although this is also debated in scholarship. Although, Jirsa suggests, this is one major difference between *EE* and *NE*, this does not mean that in the *EE* contemplation does not play an important role, as it does in the *NE*, and he refers the reader to the last chapter of the *EE*, which speaks of the activity of *nous* and especially to the final lines of the argument concerning *horos* as the contemplation of god (*EE* 1249b21-23) This may well be true, yet in the *EE* contemplation is at least overshadowed by *kalokagathia*, on my reading, and this is an important difference between the two treatises that invites reflection. Jirsa concludes that the *ergon* of each thing amounts to its goal. The further important finding that Jirsa brings to our attention, and which is new in my view, is that the version of the *ergon* argument in the *EE* reacts to problems in the *Protrepticus*.



The following chapter focuses on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While revisiting the much debated *ergon* argument there, Jirsa rightly connects it with the Aristotelian discussion of *eudaimonia*. The *ergon* argument is the way in which Aristotle sets out to specify what *eudaimonia* should be for humans. Aristotle claims that activities and body parts have an *ergon*, and so the entire man also has. Unlike the *EE* and the *Protrepticus*, in the *NE* Aristotle claims that the *ergon* in question should be peculiar to the given entity, i.e. one's bodily parts or the entire man. As Jirsa claims (p. 205) focusing on the relevant passage of *NE* I.7, Aristotle seeks what is proper to us, humans. This, of course, has to do with the human soul and especially with the best part of it, that which has reason. Aristotle, following Plato, maintains that two parts of the soul have reason, one has reason and thinks while the other has reason in the sense of being obedient to the former. Aristotle concludes that the *ergon* of human being is the activity of the soul with reason or not without reason, and this turns out to be activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, "and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most perfect" (1098a17-18). Jirsa argues that until that point Aristotle has not specified what virtue is, or what perfect virtue is (p. 221). This seems right to me. It is only later that Aristotle specifies what he understands with virtue and with complete virtue. Jirsa suggests that this complete virtue is wisdom (*sophia*). This is important for the conclusion he wants to establish later regarding the character of *eudaimonia* and his exclusivist interpretation of it.

Jirsa addresses the objection whether the good of a man amounts also to the good for a man. The goodness of a flute player as flute player consists in playing the flute well, but this does not mean that the good for this man is playing the flute. This is true, but as Jirsa rightly points out, the *ergon* is a kind of perfection, and the *ergon* of man is one's perfection qua man. And he also right in arguing that the *ergon* argument serves as a bridge from specifying *eudaimonia* to specifying what virtue is. One further and crucial question that preoccupies Jirsa is whether Aristotle's introduction of contemplation (*theoria*) in *NE* 10 squares with the *ergon* argument in *NE* I and the rest. Jirsa argues that the *ergon* argument of *NE* I is not explicitly recalled in *NE* 10 but resonates there. Jirsa deals with this question in the last section of his thesis.

In this last section Jirsa inevitably enters the debate between the inclusivist and the exclusivist interpretation of Aristotle's *NE*. Jirsa appeals to Aristotle's claim that practical wisdom is inferior to theoretical wisdom (1143b34). He then examines the arguments offered by Aristotle to the effect that *eudaimonia* is contemplation (*theoria*) in *NE* 10.7-8. And he distinguishes between best life and secondary best. Jirsa again appeals to Aristotle who states that political life is for the sake of leisure, which can be used for contemplation, rather than vice versa (*NE* 1177b4-6), which means, according to Jirsa, that the life of contemplation presupposes the political life and what this brings with it. Jirsa wants to establish a distinction between *eudaimonia* as continuous activity and a fulfilled or complete life, arguing that the goal



of the latter is the former, and this is implied by the *ergon* argument. In this sense the *NE* squares well with the *Protrepticus* and (at least partly with) the *EE*, which means that contemplation is the goal of human beings throughout Aristotle's ethical works.

Jirsa has written a philosophically interesting, clear and judicious habilitation thesis, which deserves to be published as a monograph. It contains a number of original features. The thesis discusses closely all passages where the *ergon* argument occurs and offers us an important overview. This may not be new but it is new the perspective from which it does this. The thesis aims to show that the *ergon* argument crucially refers to the activity of the soul in the texts of both Plato and Aristotle and regarding Aristotle in particular it sets out to show how the *ergon* argument connects to *eudaimonia* and argues that the latter amounts to contemplation (*theoria*). This is notoriously controversial with regard to *NE* but Jirsa carefully argues for the inclusivist position appealing to some important passages of the *NE*, yet his understanding of *eudaimonia* is the exclusivist, according to which contemplation is the main form of *eudaimonia*. The *ergon* argument serves to establish this thesis in Aristotle's ethics, Jirsa claims.

Jirsa's argument can be debated and disputed, though. One could accept the difference that Jirsa argues for between *eudaimonia*/happiness and happy life, in that the former consists in contemplation and the latter in a virtuous political life and one could further accept that the latter enables the former. Yet Jirsa himself has argued that the *ergon* argument in *NE* I.7 works as a bridge between the specification of *eudaimonia* and that of virtue (p. 240) Aristotle specifies what virtue is in the last part of *NE* 1 and of course in *NE* 2-5. This surveys the impression to the reader that the virtue Aristotle speaks about in I.7 is that which is specified in what follows, *NE* 2-5. Jirsa may reply, though, that there Aristotle speaks of the perfect virtue, which in his view is that of *sophia*, wisdom, the product of contemplation. This is possible, but still one may retort, the reader of the *NE* 2-5 understands virtue of character as perfect virtue insofar virtue is perfection. Jirsa may still reply that this is revised in *NE* 6 and 10, appealing in particular to passages like *NE* 1143b34 where practical wisdom is said to be inferior to theoretical knowledge, and *NE* 1177b4-6, where Aristotle argues that the political life is for the sake of leisure, which can be used for contemplation, rather than vice versa.

At any rate this is most interesting habilitation thesis, clearly written and philosophically sophisticated. Once published as a book, it will be of interest to all students of ancient philosophy and especially of ancient ethics. Finally, I would like herewith certify that Dr. Jirsa has fully and convincingly shown his abilities as scholar of ancient philosophy with this habilitation thesis and I am happy to recommend him for the title of the associate professor.



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