

July 9th, 2021
Claremont, California

Oponentský posudok habilitačnej práce v odbore filozofia
Mgr. Jakub Jirsa, Ph.D., *The Ergon Argument in Aristotle's Ethics*

Jakub Jirsa's habilitation thesis offers a full-fledged interpretation of Aristotle's theory of happiness (*eudaimonia*). Jirsa works out his interpretation by focusing on one of the most distinctive features of Aristotle's ethical project, namely his use of the concept of *ergon* (function) in arguments that, at crucial junctures of his ethical writings, yield (preliminary) specification or definition of happiness. Coupled with Jirsa's systematic study of not only the three instances of the *ergon* argument in Aristotle's works (*Protrepticus*, *Eudemian Ethics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*) but also in Plato's *Republic*, his thesis presents a unique and valuable contribution to the study of Aristotle's ethical philosophy.

From the point of view of expertise, Jirsa's thesis is outstanding. He shows not only very impressive mastery of both Aristotle's and Plato's writings but also equally impressive knowledge of the vast secondary literature on the subject. It is in fact one of the most useful features of his thesis that it contains judicial overview and critical evaluation of the ongoing scholarly discussions with regard both to the *ergon* argument as well as to many other issues in Aristotle's ethics. Another distinctive feature of Jirsa's thesis is the way in which he connects all four versions of the *ergon* argument he discusses (one in Plato and three in Aristotle). In Jirsa's view, Aristotle builds on Plato's use of the concept of *ergon* found in the *Republic* but subsequently adjusts and refines the concept in view of his own (developing) theories. Jirsa thus creates an interpretative arch that connects, through the concept of *ergon*, Socrates' arguments with Thrasymachus about the way we should live in *Republic* 1 with Aristotle's claim that happiness is contemplation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 10. This is an impressive achievement.

Jirsa's book can be divided into three parts. In the first part, he focuses on the *ergon* argument that appears in Plato's *Republic* 1, discussing both the context in which it occurs (i.e., as part of Socrates' response to Thrasymachus) as well as further uses or occurrences of the concept of *ergon* in the *Republic*. One of the most valuable aspects of Jirsa's discussion in this part is the way he highlights the connection between *ergon* (function), *phusis* (nature), and *aretē* (virtue). It is also this connection that then carries over to Aristotle's use of the concepts in similar contexts and enables Jirsa to develop his particular interpretative story.

The second part of the book consists of three chapters, discussing the *ergon* argument as it occurs, in different forms, in the *Protrepticus*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Each of these chapters is highly complex and detailed, with many moving parts. Although each chapter constitutes an independent investigation, they also form a single narrative. The story goes, roughly, as follows. In the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle uses the concept of *ergon* to argue that *phronēsis* (thought or intelligence) and *alētheia* (truth) – understood as the grasp of truth by a fully informed or knowledgeable reason – are the most proper and so also the best human activities. However, Aristotle's use of the concept in the *Protrepticus* is, if not inconsistent, then highly problematic. On Jirsa's interpretation, Aristotle uses the term *ergon* in distinct ways: (1) descriptively, in relation to some functional unity (say, a substance or a capacity) and (2) normatively, in relation to the perfected state of such functional unity. Aristotle can thus speak of the *ergon* of the capacity of thought (i.e., of the activity of thinking - *phronēsis*) as well as of the *ergon* of the virtue of that capacity (i.e., of active grasp of truth through an exercise of knowledge). Although this ambiguity does not vitiate the argument, it both complicates its structure and, more

importantly, makes it unclear whether *ergon* refers to an activity or to a goal (of a given activity). It is, among others, this ambiguity that is addressed in the *Eudemian Ethics*. In the *EE*, Aristotle explicitly identifies *ergon* with the goal (*telos*). This enables him to not only offer a more elegant argument but also to put the concept of *ergon* to good use in specifying happiness (*eudaimonia*). In the *EE*, Aristotle also clarifies how the two distinct uses of *ergon* (i.e., 1 and 2 above) are related. If (1) and (2) could have been thought of as two distinct *erga* in the *Protrepticus*, *Eudemian Ethics* makes clear that they are in fact the same activity just thought of in a different way (i.e., Aristotle effectively distinguishes descriptive and normative use of the concept). In the chapter on the *ergon* argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Jirsa then shows how Aristotle both builds on the *Eudemian* version, but also adds distinctive *Nicomachean* features, such as that the *ergon* needs to be *proper* to the thing of which it is the *ergon*. Given the work done in the previous chapters, Jirsa is able to relate these distinctive features to both the *Protrepticus* and Plato's *Republic*. The upshot is that Jirsa is in a position to substantiate his claim that the *ergon* argument in the *NE* enables Aristotle to move from a purely formal discussion of the requirements for the human good to a substantive discussion of *eudaimonia*.

The third part of the books consists of a chapter devoted Aristotle's conception of happiness in *NE* 10 as contemplation (*theōria*). The treatment of *eudaimonia* in *NE* 10 has long been the subject of intense controversy since, as it seemed to a number of scholars, it appears inconsistent with Aristotle's discussion of happiness and the value of virtue in books 1-9. The basic problem can be stated as follows. In *NE* books 1-9, Aristotle appears to treat virtues (whether of character or intellectual ones) as having intrinsic value and their exercise as constituting happiness, in book 10 Aristotle constraints happiness to one particular activity, namely contemplation. Aristotle's discussion of happiness in *NE* 1 has been at the center of scholarly attention insofar as some scholars have argued that, despite the appearances, Aristotle even here already prepares the way for his specification of happiness as a single activity, whereas other maintain that the discussion strongly favors the view which locates happiness in the exercise of all virtues. The former interpretation is known as the exclusive or dominant, while the latter as the inclusive one. Jirsa is a proponent of the exclusive interpretation and interprets book 1, including the *ergon* argument accordingly. However, as all those who favor this view, he then faces the problem how to square this interpretation of happiness with Aristotle's treatment of virtues as having intrinsic value (rather than merely instrumental one). Jirsa's solution lies (roughly) in drawing a distinction between happiness (*eudaimonia*) and a happy (*eudaimōn*) life. This distinction enables him to claim that Aristotle's definition of happiness as contemplation in book 10 is compatible with his treatment of virtues as having intrinsic value since (1) when Aristotle treats virtues as having intrinsic value he does so with reference to a happy life as a whole whereas (2) when he speaks of happiness as contemplation, he does with reference to what constitutes happiness as such. Although it remains true that what makes life happy is its being organized with a view to the goal of contemplation, it is also the case that a happy life requires the exercise of all practical virtues. It does so, because we cannot, as human beings, engage in contemplation unless in appropriate social and political environment. Such environment is not possible without virtues and virtuous actions.

Within the constraints of this review, it is impossible to do justice to Jirsa's discussion in even one of the five chapters of his thesis, much less to the whole thesis. Accordingly, my summary is only a rough overview of what I take to be the main themes and significant conclusions animating his discussion. I would like to emphasize that Jirsa's work displays undeniable philosophical and scholarly quality and that I have learnt much by reading it. As is the custom in philosophy, however, I would like to add a few critical observations. These are concerned mainly with the structure of the thesis rather than

with its content. First, Jirsa is extraordinarily careful when it comes to ensuring the validity of his interpretative moves. This is, of course, commendable, but it can also lead to a rather baroque (if not rococo) style of discussion, including many lengthy digressions that sidetrack the main argument and make for difficult reading. Although some of these digressions are interesting and informative, they often contribute little if anything to the main issues of the thesis. Examples include the sections dealing with recovering the text of the *Protrepticus*, the discussion of the scholarly debates concerning the relationship between the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or several lengthy rebuttals of particular scholars (e.g., Norbert Blössner on p. 50-53).

Second, Jirsa shows an occasional tendency to apply his interpretative perspective to a wider context that seems warranted (or advisable). This is perhaps most evident in the section on the use of *ergon* arguments in *Crito* and *Alcibiades I* which I found rather too brief and, in consequence, unpersuasive. Third, there are occasional problems with translations of certain philosophical terms. In most cases, this made little difference, but the translation of *phronēsis* as practical wisdom in the context of *Protrepticus* should be amended. It is very clear that *phronēsis* does not refer to the special kind of intellectual virtue that one finds Aristotle discussing in *NE 6* but, rather, to a general intellectual ability of (most likely, informed) thought (or its exercise), and should be translated accordingly (say, as 'thought' or 'intelligence'). Here *Protrepticus* shows rather clear (if not straightforward) connection to Plato's use of the term (for whom it signifies the highest form of knowledge). Finally, given the truly painstaking and, in its intention, exhaustive discussion of *ergon* arguments in Aristotle, it is a bit surprising that no mention is made of the parallel *ergon* passage in *Magna Moralia* (1184b23-5a1). Given the dubious nature of the treatise as well as the brevity of the passage, this omission pardonable. Still, it would have been nice to have it included (at least for the sake of completeness).

Let me emphasize, however, that these problems are all minor and they in no way detract from the high value and quality of Jirsa's work. I have no doubt whatsoever that his thesis is a significant contribution to the study of Aristotle's (and Plato's) ethical theory, displaying much scholarly erudition and philosophical maturity. In my mind, it fulfills all that is (or should be) required and expected of an excellent habilitation thesis. Accordingly, I **fully and without reservation recommend** his thesis to be accepted for the next steps in the habilitation process.

7/9/2021

Jozef Müller
 Associate Professor
 Department of Philosophy
 University of California, Riverside
 Personal Tel. +1 609 721 2139
 Email: jozef.muller@ucr.edu
www.jozefmuller.org