Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.07 hours page 1

Offprint from

OXFORD STUDIES IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

EDITOR: DAVID SEDLEY

VOLUME XXXIV

SUMMER 2008

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2008

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 293

ARISTOTLE'S ARGUMENT FOR A HUMAN FUNCTION

RACHEL BARNEY

> Practising your craft in expert fashion is noble, honorable and satisfying.
>
> (ANTHONY BOURDAIN, *Kitchen Confidential*)

> Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?
>
> (OSCAR WILDE, *The Importance of Being Earnest*)

IN the famous 'function argument' of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 7 (1097^b22–1098^a18) Aristotle gives an outline account of human virtue and happiness by relating them to our function or work [*ergon*]. If something has a function, he argues, its function determines what counts as 'the good and the well' for that thing. Human beings do have a function; and since the function of a thing consists in the activity proper to or characteristic of it, the human function must consist in rational activity. The virtue or excellence [*aretē*] of a thing is what makes it perform its function well; so, Aristotle concludes, the human good—that is, happiness—is activity of the soul involving rational virtue.

The function argument is one of the most discussed and debated arguments in all of ancient philosophy.[1] But little attention has

© Rachel Barney 2008

My thanks for helpful comments on this paper go to audiences which heard early versions of it at Williams College, UC Davis, and the University of Western Ontario; and in particular to Melissa Barry, Victor Caston, Joe Cruz, John Thorp, and James Wilberding. Earlier drafts have been much improved by helpful, and deeply sceptical, comments from Sarah Broadie, Michael Green, Tom Hurka, Brad Inwood, Monte Johnson, Richard Kraut, and Jennifer Whiting.

[1] Recent readings include: P. Destrée, 'Comment démontrer le propre de l'homme? Pour une lecture "dialectique" de *EN* I, 6' ['Comment démontrer'], in G. Romeyer Dherbey and G. Aubry (eds.), *L'Excellence de la vie* (Paris, 2002), 39–61; A. Gomez-Lobo, 'The Ergon Inference', *Phronesis*, 34 (1989), 170–84; C. Korsgaard,

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 294

been paid to the opening moves of the argument, which lead up to Aristotle's claim that human beings do have a function—a claim I shall call the *function thesis*.[2] Strikingly, Aristotle introduces the function thesis in advance of any claims as to what our function might consist in:[3]

> Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that

'Aristotle on Function and Virtue', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 3 (1986), 259–79; G. Lawrence, 'The Function of the Function Argument' ['Function'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 21 (2001), 445–75; id., 'Human Good and Human Function' ['Good'], in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics (Malden, Mass., 2006), 37–75; and J. Whiting, 'Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defense' ['Defense'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1988), 33–48, in addition to those offered in more general studies, such as D. Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* [*Ethics*] (Oxford, 2000), 15–21; S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* [*Ethics*] (Oxford, 1991), 34–41; S. Broadie and C. Rowe (trans., intro., and comm.), *Aristotle:* Nicomachean Ethics [*Commentary*] (Oxford, 2002), 276; D. S. Hutchinson, *The Virtues of Aristotle* (London, 1986); T. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* [*Principles*] (Oxford, 1988), 363–5, 607 n. 37; M. R. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* [*Teleology*] (Oxford, 2005), 217–22; R. Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* [*Aristotle*] (Oxford, 2002), 82–4; M. C. Nussbaum, 'Aristotle, Nature, and Ethics', in J. E. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, 1995), 86–131 at 112–13; M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics*: An Introduction* [*Ethics*] (Cambridge, 2005), 74–7; C. D. C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason* [*Practices*] (Oxford, 1995), 123–8; G. Santas, *Goodness and Justice* (Oxford, 2001), 236–50; and F. Sparshott, *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the* Nicomachean Ethics [*Life*] (Toronto, 1994), 40–5.

[2] The only studies I know of which focus on the argument for the function thesis are B. Suits, 'Aristotle on the Function of Man: Fallacies, Heresies and other Entertainments' ['Fallacies'], *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1974), 23–40; and T. Tuozzo, 'The Function of Human Beings and the Rationality of the Universe: Aristotle and Zeno on Parts and Wholes' ['Function'], *Phoenix*, 50 (1996), 146–61 (cf. n. 22). Other particularly helpful discussions include those in Broadie, *Ethics*, Destrée, 'Comment démontrer', Kraut, *Aristotle*, Pakaluk, *Ethics*, and Sparshott, *Life*, as well as that of Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, trans. C. Litzinger (Notre Dame, 1993), sects. 119–22, 40–1.

[3] A question this raises is what work the function thesis does in the function argument as a whole. If we take $1097^{b}33$–$1098^{a}3$ as establishing *independently* the more precise claim that the human function is rational activity, then the thesis may serve only a propaedeutic, formally dispensable role. Alternatively, the specification of the human function as rational activity could be read as *depending* on the prior claim that there is such a function. I am inclined towards the latter reading, but to argue for this would require a fuller discussion of the argument as a whole than I can here undertake. My understanding of the agenda of the function argument as a whole largely follows the 'formal' reading of Lawrence, 'Function', but this leaves the status of $1097^{b}28$–33 underdetermined (cf. his 454 n. 17).

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 295

have a function [*ergon*] and action [*praxis*], the good and the 'well' are thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if[4] he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the shoemaker certain functions [*erga*] and actions, and man none—is he by nature idle [*argon*]? 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? What then can this be?[5]

The proliferation of conditionals and rhetorical questions here suggests an acknowledgement on Aristotle's part that his reasoning is quick, sketchy, and less than demonstrative. Still, it seems clear that the conditions are supposed to hold; that his rhetorical questions are to be answered no and yes respectively; and that lines $1097^{b}25$–33 are supposed to add up to an argument for the conclusion that human beings have a function. My purpose in this paper is to figure out what that argument is.

1. Preliminaries

At a first glance, Aristotle's argument for the function thesis has the look of an induction (*epagōgē*) or argument by analogy: a survey of ostensibly analogous cases leading up to either a general rule or, as here, a conclusion about a target case.[6] Carpenters and shoemakers (standing in for all practitioners of the crafts) have functions; so do eyes, hands, and feet (standing in for all the organic parts of the body); therefore human beings have functions too. So read, the passage has a claim to be—among stiff competition—Aristotle's very

[4] εἴπερ is marked in comparison to simple εἰ, but ambiguously so; it can mean either 'if/since in fact' (i.e. given that it is so) or 'if indeed' (but I am sceptical that it is so) (cf. LSJ s.v.). My translation is intended as neutral; but given Aristotle's soon-to-be-announced position on the question, the former connotations are more likely to be in play.

[5] *NE* 1. 7, $1097^{b}22$–33. Quotations from *Nicomachean Ethics* are from the revised Ross translation, with further revisions in some cases; other quotations from Aristotle are from the Revised Oxford Translation, sometimes with revisions, except as noted (W. D. Ross (trans.), *Aristotle:* The Nicomachean Ethics, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford, 1980); J. Barnes (ed.), *Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (2 vols.; Princeton, 1984)).

[6] For readings of the argument as inductive, see e.g. J. Burnet (ed. with intro. and notes), *The* Ethics *of Aristotle* [*Ethics*] (London, 1900), ad loc.; J. M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 70. *Epagōgē* is a standard mode of non-demonstrative, dialectical argument in Aristotle, discussed in the *Topics* (1. 12; cf. $108^{b}7$ ff. and *Post. An.* 71^{a-b}, $80^{a}40$ ff., $100^{b}4$) and mentioned in the *Metaphysics* as a distinctively Socratic innovation (*M* 4, $1078^{b}27$–9).

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 296

worst induction ever. From the fact that five other not-very-similar things have functions, why would it follow that human beings must as well?[7]

But on closer examination, it seems unlikely that an induction is really intended here at all.[8] If it were, we would expect Aristotle to cite uncontroversially function-bearing objects, such as tools and other artefacts; or perhaps beings relevantly *like* human beings, such as other animals and natural substances. In fact he does neither.

Some sympathetic interpreters conclude that there is no argument here at all, but merely an exercise in clarification. According to Sarah Broadie, 'An inductive argument from these examples to the case of man would be weak, but perhaps the examples are meant rather to illustrate the concept of *characteristic function* (*ergon*).'[9] Likewise Terence Irwin suggests that Aristotle's first examples are simply 'one of his normal expository devices, an appeal to crafts'; the passage as a whole is an 'analogical exposition, to show what Aristotle has in mind, but is not in itself an argument to show that a human being has a function'.[10]

[7] As David Bostock puts it (*Ethics*, 16): 'Aristotle makes little attempt to argue for this . . .. Clearly one can admit that the various special skills he cites . . . do have functions . . . without supposing that the same applies to man as such. For being a man does not appear to be a similar and special kind of skill. Similarly, it would seem that we could admit that the various parts of the human body . . . have functions, without supposing that this applies to the human being as a whole.'

[8] The corresponding passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* does include an induction, but in support of a different step in the argument: '(Let it be assumed of) excellence, that it is the best disposition, state, or capacity of anything that has some employment or function. This is evident from induction: in all cases this is what we suppose. For example, a cloak has an excellence—and a certain function and employment also; and the best state of the cloak is its excellence. Similarly too with a boat, a house, and other things. So the same is true also of the soul; for there is something which is its function' (*EE* 2. 1, $1218^{b}37$–$1219^{a}5$: translations from the *Eudemian Ethics* are from M. Woods (trans. and comm.), *Aristotle:* Eudemian Ethics *Books I, II and VIII* (Oxford, 1992)). Here what requires inductive support is the claim that an excellence always presupposes a function—a claim not in play in the *NE* version of the argument (though it comes up later, at *NE* 2. 2, $1106^{a}14$–20, and 6. 2, $1139^{a}16$–17). The *NE* version is sufficiently different in structure that it seems best to read it independently—if we take the *NE* to be the later work, as an attempt to come up with a new and more perspicuous line of argument.

[9] Broadie and Rowe, *Commentary*, 276; in *Ethics* Broadie notes that the argument taken inductively is 'dismally weak', but defends the underlying thought (34–5).

[10] Irwin, *Principles*, 607 n. 37. Cf. also Lawrence, 'Function', 454 n. 17: 'it seems doubtful to what extent Aristotle would suppose it possible to argue *that* humans have a nature—and thus that talk of function is in place—as against arguing about *what* it is (cf. perhaps *Phys.* ii 1. $193^{a}3$–9). If so, the lines are more an orientation of

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 297

It is hard to imagine a more undemanding reading than this. But so read, Aristotle still bungles the job. His examples serve him only awkwardly, since the functioning of a craftsman, unlike that of a human being, is not essential to him. The parts of animals 'are better examples', as Irwin says, but still not quite right; for their function is a matter of their usefulness as instruments.[11] And a natural substance as a whole, such as a human being, is not an instrument at all.

Now we have reason to suspect that Aristotle's text is both more careful and more ambitious than this. For while the instances of function he gives are not induction-supporting, neither are they random. Rather, they are closely related to the case of human beings, in two different ways. The builder and the shoemaker *are* human beings, identified *qua* practitioners of a particular craft [*technē*]: they are socially constructed *kinds* of human being, or *roles* or *identities* which a human being may take on. Eye, hand, and foot are organic *parts* of an animal's body. In fact, the hand is, as Aristotle emphasizes elsewhere, a distinctively human part (*PA* 4. 10, $687^{a}3$–$^{b}22$); so the argument here is not just from natural functioning in general but from the parts of a *human* body to the whole of a human being. Likewise, the carpenter and shoemaker are here said to have *praxeis*, 'actions', as well as *erga*: and *praxeis*, since they require *prohaireseis*, deliberate choice, are a distinctively human form of behaviour (*NE* 6. 2, $1139^{a}31$–$^{b}5$; *EE* 2. 10, $1225^{b}26$–7).

So Aristotle seems to be offering two distinct lines of argument for the function thesis, neither inductive and both appealing to the distinctively human. First, *the argument from the crafts* claims that if the practitioners of the crafts (such as carpenters and shoemakers) have functions, a human being as such must have a function. Second, *the argument from the organic parts* claims that if parts such as the eyes, the hands, and the feet of a human being have functions, a human being as such should be taken to have a function over and above them.

the reader, than strict argument'; and Reeve, *Practices*, 124: the argument is 'not so much a direct argument that human beings have a function as an indirect one, which relies on the implausibility of the view that they lack a function. For the alternative to having a function is being by nature inactive, and it is no more credible that human beings are by nature inactive than it is that they might be *eudaimōn* while asleep ($1095^{b}31$–$1096^{a}2$)'. Reeve thus rightly brings out the dialectical significance of Aristotle's invocation of 'inactivity' as the alternative; I have something to say about this in sect. 3.

[11] Ibid.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 298

Of course, this preliminary sketch presses anew the question of why the all-important inferences here are to be accepted. We may also wonder just how the two arguments are supposed to fit together, whether as independent or complementary. In this paper, I shall focus on the question of how the argument from the crafts is supposed to work; but my reading will also suggest a role for Aristotle's second argument.

2. Platonic and Aristotelian functions

If a shoemaker has a function, then a human being as such must have a function. Why would Aristotle believe that? Obviously the answer will turn on what it means for Aristotle to attribute a function (*ergon*) to anything: if the claim that a shoemaker has a function were merely the uncontroversial descriptive claim that shoemaking is a socially recognized job, it is hard to see how any pertinent inference could get off the ground. Now to many modern readers, Aristotle's concept of function is the great stumbling-block presented by the function argument as a whole. For instance, W. F. R. Hardie answers Aristotle's rhetorical question 'May one lay it down that man similarly has a function?' with a resounding No: 'The obvious answer is that one may not, unless one is prepared to say that a man is an instrument designed for some use.'[12] Hardie assumes that a thing can have a function only if it is a tool or instrument, with a designer and a user (or 'customer'). But, rightly or wrongly, Aristotle simply does not accept this contemporary conception of function as instrumentality.[13] And this is not because there is anything exclusively modern about that conception: rather, I believe we can see Aristotle deliberately *rejecting* it in the function argument itself. To see this, we need to view the function argument in relation to an important predecessor passage in book 1 of Plato's *Republic*. Here Socrates introduces the concept of a function in order to argue that justice is necessary for human happiness. He asks:

[12] W. F. R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* [*Theory*] (Oxford, 1968), 23.

[13] That is: the contemporary intuitive conception relied on by Hardie, and by those of my students who find the function argument obviously fallacious. I shall not be concerned here with ideas of function in contemporary biology and philosophy of science.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 299

SOCRATES. Tell me, do you think there is such a thing as the function [*ergon*] of a horse?

THRASYMACHUS. I do.

SOCR. And would you define the function of a horse or of anything else as that which someone can do only with it or best with it?'

(*Rep.* 352 D 9–E 4)[14]

Socrates explains what he means using examples of bodily organs and man-made instruments. You can prune a vine with a dagger or a carving knife; but you can do a better job with a pruning knife than with anything else, which is why pruning is its function. And each thing which has a function also has an *aretē*, a virtue or excellence (such as the power of sight in an eye), by means of which it performs its function well. We use our souls to deliberate, make decisions, and generally manage our lives; and the proper excellence of the soul is justice. So, Socrates concludes, a just man will live well and happily, and an unjust one badly and wretchedly (353 E 4–354 A 5).

This conception of function as instrumentality—that is, as necessarily connected to *use* and a user—is evidently an important point for Plato.[15] He reaffirms the principle in book 10 of the *Republic*: 'Then aren't the virtue or excellence, the beauty and correctness of each manufactured item, living creature, and action related to nothing but the use [*χρεία*] for which each is made or naturally adapted?' (601 D 4–6).[16]

As has long been recognized, Aristotle's function argument

[14] Translations from the *Republic* are by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, in some cases with some further revisions (Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper with D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, 1997)).

[15] Sufficiently important to warrant Plato's treating the soul as distinct from the person who uses it, which not only sounds odd but very likely conflicts with his own considered view: cf. *Alc. I* 129 B 5–130 E 6. The *Alc. I* identification of the self with the soul seems to me likely to represent Plato's position accurately, whatever the authorship of the dialogue, since this identity provides the necessary basis for two central Platonic principles: that the goods and evils of the soul are far more important than those of the body or one's external possessions; and that *I* am immortal by virtue of the immortality of my soul (or at any rate its rational part). Cf. L. Gerson, *Knowing Persons* (Oxford, 2003), ch. 1, esp. 22 ff.; but cf. n. 16 below.

[16] Perhaps this text helps to explain the puzzling fact that Plato nowhere (excluding the *Alcibiades*) explicitly states that the self and the soul are identical, though the *Alcibiades* seems likely to be accurate in presenting this as the Platonic view (cf. n. 15). If only what has a function can have an excellence, and only instruments can have functions, then in order for the soul to be capable of virtue Plato must hold that it is distinct from the self which uses it (unless he is prepared to hold, more oddly still, that we ourselves are somehow instruments with users).

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 300

closely recalls the function argument of *Republic* 1.[17] Its basic agenda is identical: to prove that the happy person, one who lives well, does so by having the proper virtues of the soul. It reiterates Socrates' two crucial claims: that the soul has a function, and that its successful functioning depends on virtue (1098^{a}7 ff.). It repeats the canonical examples of eyes and other bodily organs. But (and this is not so often recognized)[18] Aristotle departs from Plato—and, I suggest, consciously corrects him—in one crucial respect. There are no references to tools in Aristotle's version; nor to other organisms *used as* tools, like Plato's instance of the horse; nor to any user. There is nothing in Aristotle's argument comparable to Plato's phrase 'that which someone [*τις*] can do only with it or best with it' (352 E 2–3). In short, Aristotle avoids anything which would suggest the Platonic conception of function as instrumentality.

It is worth briefly noting that there are at least two good reasons—and I shall later note a third—for Aristotle to reject this Platonic conception of function. (I do not intend to claim that these reasons are actively deployed in *NE* 1. 7, only that they shed light on Aristotle's assumptions about function there.) Function is a concept with an important role to play in Aristotle's teleological physics and metaphysics; and in that context, the function (*ergon*) of a thing is closely tied to its final cause (*hou heneka*) or end (*telos*). Indeed, Aristotle tells us that 'everything that has a function is for the sake of [*heneka*] its function' (*De caelo* 2. 3, 286^{a}8–9; cf. *Metaph.*

[17] See e.g. Burnet, *Ethics*; A. Grant, *Aristotle's Ethics* [*Ethics*], 4th edn. (2 vols.; London, 1885), vol. i; and H. Joachim, *Aristotle:* The Nicomachean Ethics (Oxford, 1951), ad loc.

[18] With the exception of Sparshott (*Life*, 42), who notes how different Aristotle's analogues are, and a brief mention in Lawrence ('Function', 449 n. 10). The power of the Platonic precursor can be seen from the fact that it often leaches into reports of Aristotle's version. For instance Irwin, in the context of an otherwise accurate and helpful account of Aristotle's passage, says: 'Having illustrated his concept of function from artifacts and organs Aristotle asks if a human being has a function in the same way' (*Principles*, 607 n. 37). Likewise Santas, in what otherwise looks to be a discussion of our passage: 'Both Plato and Aristotle illustrate their definitions of function with artifacts, roles and occupations, organs of animals and animals' (Santas, *Goodness and Justice*, 238). And Grant reports the argument as one 'by which, 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', and says that it 'comes almost *verbatim* from Plato's *Republic*'—a claim which would be more accurate if the 'different animals' were indeed in Aristotle's text (*Ethics*, i. 449). Whiting ('Defense') rightly points out that an argument from artefacts would be a significant departure from what we have in the text (46 n. 4); but, by taking Aristotle's reasoning to be restricted to natural kinds, her reading ends up excluding some of the examples he *does* give—namely, the craftspeople.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 301

B 2, 996^{b}7); and that 'the function of each thing is its end' (*telos*, *EE* 2. 1, 1219^{a}8). He associates both function and end with activity (*energeia*): 'the function is an end, and the activity is the function, hence also the word '*energeia*' is based on '*ergon*' and points towards the "actuality" [*entelecheia*]' (*Metaph.* Θ 8, 1050^{a}21–3). Thus function determines identity: as Aristotle says in the *Politics*, 'all things are defined by their function [*ergon*] and power [*dunamis*]' (1. 2, 1253^{a}24). This relation to end and identity makes *ergon* a powerful normative concept, closely linked to the good of a thing and determining what counts as its excellence or virtue (*aretē*).[19] The upshot is that for Aristotle as a biologist, the end of an organism is to lead a good life for organisms of that kind, one constituted by a certain kind of successful activity. And so the function of a horse is *not*, 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 such as to do.

Second, Aristotle must also reject Plato's account of how functions are to be attributed. For he will eventually, at *NE* 10. 6–8, identify our function with contemplative activity. And contemplation is something which the gods also do, and do better than us—for one thing, they can do it continuously and eternally. So for Aristotle, unlike Plato, the human function *cannot* be *idion*, 'peculiar to' us, in the sense that it is something we do better than anything else does—let alone what some mysterious user does *with* us better than could be done with any other tool.[20] Rather, it must be what is distinctive of or proper to us, in the sense that it best realizes our nature: we do it best and most characteristically of the things *we* do.

So Aristotle does not and should not grant the Platonist assumption that all function is instrumental. Rather, for Aristotle, to say that a human being has a function is to say that a human being has a nature, an end, a characteristic activity, and so also a distinctive

[19] To us, it might sound odd to ascribe a good to some of the subjects to which Aristotle attributes functions. But for Aristotle every natural substance has its own distinctive good, teleologically construed (*NE* 1141^{a}20–33; *EE* 1217^{a}25–9: cf. Johnson, *Teleology*, 222–9). And at least on occasion he is willing to ascribe a good to tools: 'the latter in each case ⟨craftsman and tool, soul and body, master and slave⟩ *is benefited by* that which uses it, but there is no friendship or justice towards lifeless things' (*NE* 8. 12, 1161^{a}34–^{b}2, emphasis added).

[20] The problem of reconciling this with the *idion* criterion is discussed by R. Kraut, 'The Peculiar Function of Human Beings', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1979), 467–78, and *Aristotle on the Human Good* [*Good*] (Princeton, 1989), 312–19 at 313; and Whiting, 'Defense', 37–8.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 302

excellence and good. No doubt in the special case of tools or instruments Aristotle will agree with Plato that function consists in being correctly used; for natural substances such as animals and humans, however, functioning consists in an activity which has its value *not* instrumentally but intrinsically, as a realization of the subject's own end.

Now the extent to which these (meta)physical principles are actually brought to bear in the function argument is another question. Scholars often do present the argument as if it were just a device for wheeling in the fundamental principles of Aristotle's natural teleology. On this line of interpretation, whatever Aristotle may say here, the *real* basis for presuming that human beings have a function is simply that, like the members of any other biological kind, our natures are constituted by a set of capacities exercised in a characteristic mode of activity. I shall call this the 'biological' reading of the function argument.[21] Though fair enough as a presentation of general Aristotelian doctrine, such readings operate at an unsatisfying remove from the text of the *Ethics*: this line of argument cannot be one that Aristotle expects his readers to extract from the reasoning he presents. And it threatens to wreck the reasoning he *does* present. For in so far as function is assumed to be a strictly biological concept, uniform across members of a species, being a shoemaker is not a function at all. (I shall argue in Section 4 that this tension can be resolved; but it still tells against any assumption that we are expected here simply to read in principles from Aristotle's natural science.[22])

[21] Cf. Irwin, *Principles*, and 'The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics', in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* [*Essays*] (Berkeley, 1980), 35–53; also Whiting, 'Defense', and Kraut, *Aristotle*, 83–5 (but note sect. 3 and nn. 27 and 29 below); against such readings cf. T. Roche, 'On the Alleged Metaphysical Foundation of Aristotle's *Ethics*' ['Foundation'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1988), 49–62.

[22] A broadly 'biological' or metaphysical reading on which Aristotle's text does present an argument for the function thesis is provided by Tuozzo, 'Function'. Tuozzo makes a powerful case for reading both the argument from the crafts and the argument from the organic parts as arguments from the parts to the whole. As he notes, for Aristotle, 'the function of a bodily part, or of a trade, is only fully intelligible when its role in a larger, complex functional whole is understood' (148). Tuozzo carefully notes that this does not entail what would be false for Aristotle, namely that the function of the whole is simply *composed* of the functions of the parts: rather, the relation is a teleological one, and 'the function of the whole is also the function of some one pre-eminent part' (148 n. 7). As with the bodily organs, so too in the case of the crafts: 'the functions of the various craftsmen are not fully intelligible independently of the one activity to which they contribute and which

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 303

The biological reading becomes even more unsatisfactory if we ask what sort of argument we might expect from Aristotle at this point, given his well-known claims to begin his arguments from the reputable opinions (*endoxa*) or appearances (*phainomena*), and from 'what is better known to us' (*γνωριμώτερον ἡμῖν*).[23] Of course, exactly how these claims should be interpreted, and what they can tell us about Aristotelian practice, is enormously controversial.[24] Still, it seems fair to say that nothing at $1097^{b}24$ ff., or earlier in the *Ethics*, looks much like a cue to the reader to import wholesale the teleological framework of Aristotelian natural science. 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. I shall call this strategy of interpretation 'dialectical',[25] and in the rest of the paper will attempt to offer such a reading.

The challenge for the dialectical reading is to identify some argumentative support for the function thesis which avoids both the Scylla of dubious induction and the Charybdis of surreptitious natural science. This paper will locate that support in a conception of function which is more robust than the merely descriptive but falls well short of assuming the full framework of Aristotelian natural teleology. I shall argue that, for Aristotle, the claim that shoemaking is a function is offered as shorthand for a set of *normative* claims.

they subserve' (150). As a claim about intelligibility this may seem far-fetched; but Tuozzo is right that the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* establishes a hierarachical and teleological relation between the crafts and the human good (as pursued by the city) which may well match the relation between the organs and the human good (as pursued by the individual). In effect, Tuozzo's reading offers to bolster the architectonic reading (cf. sect. 3) with the teleological principle that if the parts of a whole have a function, the whole must have one as well. Aristotle may well believe this: Tuozzo argues plausibly for its being entailed by his conception of part–whole relations (147–51; cf. Johnson, *Teleology*, 218–19 with n. 8). On the other hand, the principle is controversial to say the least, and needs to be very carefully articulated to avoid the 'fallacy of composition'; and I see no evidence that Aristotle invokes it here.

[23] *NE* 7. 1–3; *Phys.* 1. 1; *NE* 1. 4, $1095^{b}2$–4; *Metaph.* *B* 1 and *H* 3, $1029^{b}1$–12. Cf. also the argument of Roche, 'Foundation', from the 'autonomy of the sciences' (53–5).

[24] On these methodological issues, cf. J. Barnes, 'Aristotle and the Methods of Ethics', *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 34 (1981), 490–511; Roche, 'Foundation'; Destrée, 'Comment démontrer'; and M. C. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's* De motu animalium (Princeton, 1978; rev. edn. 1985), 103–6.

[25] Cf. Destrée, 'Comment démontrer'.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 304

There is nothing peculiarly Aristotelian about this: *ergon* is often a normative concept, for the work appropriate to and incumbent on a particular person or kind of person.[26] In the *Iliad* Hector tells Andromache to busy herself with her own *erga* (6. 490), and the two Aiantes urge that there is work (*ergon*) for everyone to do (12. 271). In Aeschylus' *Eumenides* Athena says that it is her *ergon* to cast the final vote, as she does to acquit Orestes (734, cf. also *PV* 635; *Cho.* 673). Likewise for Aristotle, to say that shoemaking is a function is not (or not merely) to make the descriptive point that some people pay other people to do it: it is to say something about what it is incumbent upon certain people to do, and what norms are rightly applicable to them. Read along these lines, Aristotle's reasoning here does not assume natural teleology but argues towards it, as being presupposed by what we might call *social* teleology. His claim is that the normativity of social functions must derive from their relation to a function embedded in human nature.

3. The hierarchy of crafts and the architectonic reading

There are two very different ways in which a reading along these lines may be spelt out. One takes Aristotle's point to be that shoemaking must contribute to a functional good on the part of the broader shoe-wearing community. As Richard Kraut puts it:

> This train of thought rests on the assumption that when one finds a nested series of functions, they ultimately serve one highest function. The various functions of craftsmen must ultimately serve some higher function—and what else could that be but our functioning as human beings?[27]

We may call this the *architectonic* reading of the argument: if a shoemaker as such has a function, the end of shoemaking must contribute to some further end which is functional in nature, and ultimately to the functioning of human beings as such.

Aristotle might well expect the argument to be read in this way. For the *Ethics* opens, in 1. 1, with a vision of the crafts and sciences as ordered into a hierarchy, corresponding to the ends or goods which they serve. Every craft serves some useful end, but some crafts are subordinate to others: for instance, 'bridle-making

[26] Cf. LSJ s.v., esp. IV.1 for *ergon* as 'proper work'; cf. Lawrence, 'Good', for function as normative.

[27] *Aristotle*, 82.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 305

and the other crafts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the craft of riding, and this and every military action under generalship' (1094[a]10–13). To avoid an infinite regress, these hierarchies must culminate in a single architectonic craft which directs the whole system. This is political science (*politikē*), which supervises all the others; and 'the end of this science must encompass [περιέχοι] those of the others, so that this end must be the human good' (1094[b]6–7). This ideal of politics or practical wisdom as an architectonic science is inherited from Plato, and the *Republic* and *Charmides* in particular. It builds on traditional Greek conceptions of the crafts (*technai*) as serving specialized ends or goods, conjoined with Platonic worries about the need for their rational ordering and philosophical supervision.[28]

Now in the earlier part of 1. 7, by way of leading up to the function argument, Aristotle recalls this passage at length (1097[a]15–34). He emphasizes that in each sphere the good consists in an end achievable by action—in medicine health, in strategy victory—and notes that some ends (e.g. the making of a flute) are clearly chosen for the sake of others. Happiness is then identified as the highest good, the end of action which is always choiceworthy for its own sake: 'something final and self-sufficient, and . . . the end of action' (1097[b]20–1). Aristotle then launches the function argument by noting that it is something of a platitude to say that happiness is the chief good (or more literally the 'best', τὸ ἄριστον); he proposes to give the platitude content by recourse to our function (1097[b]22–5).

The architectonic reading of the argument from the crafts takes it, plausibly, as putting this argumentative context to work. The conception of a human community as organized in terms of functional activities is used to suggest that the highest good to which they are oriented is the same in kind. However, this suggestion falls well short of a conclusive argument.[29] Indeed it opens the way for a threatening objection: perhaps the functional nature of the subordinate goods is actually a symptom of their subordinate status.

[28] I have discussed this architectonic conception more fully in 'The Carpenter and the Good' ['Carpenter'], in D. Cairns, F.-G. Herrmann, and T. Penner (eds.) *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's* Republic (Edinburgh, forthcoming). It is perhaps worth noting that builder and shoemaker are two of the first five members of the First City in *Republic* 2 (369 D): these are the most primordial and necessary of the crafts, and thus are paradigmatic for *technē* as such.

[29] Accordingly Kraut, as it seems to me, eventually throws in the towel and shifts to a version of the biological reading (*Aristotle*, 83–5).

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 306

This objection might go with a range of alternative, non-functional conceptions of the ultimate good.[30] Perhaps the good is pleasure, and shoemaking contributes to it by providing shoe-based hedonic units. Perhaps it consists in a life of leisurely amusement, *paidia*—a possibility that still worries Aristotle near the end of the *Ethics* (10. 6)—and shoes serve it in so far as they amuse. Perhaps the good for you is whatever you happen to think it is, so that shoes contribute to your good if you think they do. On any of these accounts, shoemaking turns out to be of strictly instrumental value to the shoemaker and society alike; and the activities or states in which our good consists (pleasure, leisure, mindless amusement, subjective satisfaction, etc.) do not themselves have the structure of a function.

I shall call this loose cluster of hedonist and subjectivist objections the *instrumentalist objection*. This way of putting it should recall Plato's conception of function as instrumentality; and we can now see another reason, perhaps the most important, why Aristotle must reject that conception. For it provides a natural grounding for the instrumentalist objection. Instrumental goods are conditional goods: if function is understood as instrumentality, the hierarchy of functional goods provided by the crafts must, on pain of infinite regress, ultimately serve some unconditional and non-functional end, both for society (if the craft is have any value) and for the individual practitioner (if he is to be motivated to practise it). (And we cannot assume that these two ends will converge: there is no *necessary* relation between the satisfactions of the shoemaker and of the shoe-wearer.)

The instrumentalist conception of function thus threatens to ground a conception of human society and functioning which was recognized by Plato and Aristotle as a dangerous alternative to their own—a kind of evil twin to the hierarchical vision of Platonic–Aristotelian *politikē*. As Aristotle complains in the *Politics*, many people take the value of crafts and even virtues to be purely instrumental, with money (presumably as a proxy for pleasure) as the end:

> And even those who do aim at living well seek what serves bodily enjoy-

[30] I here discuss just one prominent ancient version of anti-functionalism about the good. Obviously, as Tom Hurka has emphasized to me, there are many other ways to reject Aristotelian functionalism, even within the framework of a broadly perfectionist or teleological ethics; I do not claim that Aristotle even attempts to exclude them all.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 307

ments, so that since this too seems to be found in the possession of property, they spend all their time on making money . . . using each of the abilities, but not in accordance with its nature. For courage is for the creation not of wealth, but daring; nor is generalship or medicine ⟨for wealth⟩, but rather ⟨for⟩ victory and health respectively. But these people turn everything into a form of moneymaking, taking it that this is the end [*telos*] and that everything must contribute to the end. (1258ª2–13, my translation)

The view recalls that of Thrasymachus in book 1 of the *Republic* (340 D–344 C): the shepherd fattens his flocks not for any distinctive end intrinsic to the practice of shepherding, but as an instrument of his own self-interest—just like the practitioner of every other craft, including the expert ruler. All the crafts thus serve the *same* end, a point emphasized when this stance is articulated in Aristophanes' play *Wealth*. Here Chremulos and Karion sing the praises of their new-found friend, personified Wealth himself; their speech deliberately recalls Prometheus' great speech in *Prometheus Bound* (441–506), probably the most deeply influential text for Greek thinking about the *technai*.[31] The canonical examples of craft are once again the shoemaker and the carpenter:

CHREMULOS. All crafts and clever inventions of the human race have been discovered because of you. For one of us sits making shoes—
KARION. Another works metal, or as a carpenter—
CHREM. Or is a goldsmith, taking gold from you—
KAR. Another steals clothes, or breaks into houses—
(Ar. *Plut.* 160–5, my translation)

And so on through wool-making, clothes-washing, hide-tanning, onion-selling, political bribery, mercenary warfare, story-writing, and love, to the resounding conclusion that *all* things done in the world are done for the sake of Wealth (182–3)—as if in a parodic anticipation of Plato's claim that we do all things for the good, or Aristotle's claim that all activities aim at happiness. Aristophanes here presents the instrumentalist conception carried to its logical conclusion: carpentry and burglary are the same sort of enterprise, since there is no salient dividing line between the *technai* and other strategies for obtaining profit.

This instrumentalist vision of crafts and the good represents a prominent contemporary alternative to that of Plato and Aristotle.

[31] As noted ad loc. by J. Van Leeuwen (ed. and notes), *Aristophanes:* Plutus, 2nd edn. (Leiden, 1968).

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 308

But on the architectonic reading, the argument from the crafts offers nothing to convince anyone inclined towards this rival view. Indeed, by raising the question of what occupies the 'top' of the hierarchy of crafts, it is likely to *provoke* the instrumentalist objection; and that objection is not easily answered. It recurs in the *Ethics* like a toothache, a peripheral irritant which Aristotle can neither get rid of nor entirely ignore (e.g. *NE* 1. 5; 10. 6). His habit is to dismiss it with a rhetorical appeal to the reader's shame and self-respect, as expressing a vulgar, slavish, and childish point of view (1. 5, $1095^{b}19$–23; 10. 6, $1176^{b}16$–$1177^{a}11$).[32]

Does this show that the architectonic reading of the argument should be rejected? Should we suppose that Aristotle must have known better than to lay himself open to the instrumentalist objection here? Not necessarily. For Aristotle seems to acknowledge the objection, and to try to stare it down, immediately following his invocation of the crafts, when he asks, in what registers as an incredulous tone of voice, whether it can be that a human being as such has *no* function: 'is he by nature idle [*argon*]?' ($1097^{b}29$–30).[33] The key term *argos* here is by origin *a-ergos*, literally *ergon*-less. And this is no coinage or technical term, but rather a standard term for idle, lazy, or unemployed (LSJ s.v.). So the question operates simultaneously, and rather sneakily, on two levels. On the one hand Aristotle is simply specifying the logical alternative to his proposal that human beings have a natural function; but on the other he is using the pejorative connotations of *argos* to suggest, with a strong hint of *reductio*, that this would amount to claiming that human beings are by nature *lazy* or *unemployed*. That is, he suggests that the rival view is committed to a degrading conception of human nature—just the sort of shaming move Aristotle offers against instrumentalism in 1. 5 and 10. 6.

Moreover, Aristotle's argument for the function thesis is far from over. For his rhetorical question is immediately followed by the

[32] Indeed, Aristotle never seems to offer a systematic argument against the instrumentalist objection, though such an argument could be provided by his analysis of the nature of pleasure (*NE* 7. 11–14 and especially 10. 1–5). Since pleasures are not fungible, and are epiphenomenal on activities, 'pleasure' as such is not really an independent and homogeneous candidate for the human good; and the life of amusement is in any case not the most pleasant life. It seems to me debatable whether the rejection of the life of amusement in 10. 6 should be read as a (rather sketchy) deployment of these results, or as just another rhetorical sideswipe.

[33] Cf. Suits, 'Fallacies', 27; Sparshott, *Life*, 43–4.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 309

argument from the organic parts; and we are now, I think, in a position to see where this can do some work. The organs of the body are, as always for Aristotle, the most uncontroversial instances of function in nature. He expects us to find it intuitively plausible, even obvious, that the eye and hand have functions. Eyes are for seeing, and good eyes are ones which see well—claims which are not reducible to facts about what I happen to like to do with mine. If we assent to this much, we thereby assent to the general point that there *are* functions to be found in nature (and human nature in particular), and that they impose normative standards independent of our contingent desires.

If this is the point of the argument from the organic parts, there is no need to read it as an attempt to evoke Aristotle's full account of natural teleology from elsewhere, or as sketching a (rather tricky) deductive argument from the parts of the human body to the whole of a human being. Rather, I would suggest, we may take it 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.

To sum up: on the architectonic reading, Aristotle's argument for a human function involves three moves. The argument from the crafts recalls the nested hierarchy of human functions and goods to suggest that all the crafts ultimately serve a human function as such. Aristotle then meets the obvious instrumentalist objection with the insinuation that the alternative view involves a degrading conception of human nature (as 'lazy'). His invocation of the organic parts then offers reassurance that functions *can* belong to the realm of nature, and to human nature in particular. This does not add up to a deductive argument for the function thesis, but it might reasonably be taken to shift the burden of argument against an instrumentalist opponent; more important, it might reasonably carry along a reader who has received the right preliminary moral education and is thus predisposed to Aristotle's side of the argument.

4. Social teleology and human nature: the realization reading

There is also a very different way to read the argument from the crafts: as imputing a human function, not to the community served by shoemaking, but to the shoemaker himself. On this reading, Aris-

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 310

totle's reasoning is that if shoemaking is the function of any particular shoemaker—Simon, say, the well-known follower of Socrates and author of Socratic dialogues—it must be because of some connection between that function and a function naturally belonging to Simon as a human being.[34] My general hypothesis, again, is that Aristotle's argument depends on taking the crafts to have, as functions, a certain normative standing. On the architectonic reading, Aristotle takes this standing to depend on Simon's work subserving a human good, realized by his *polis* as a whole, which is likewise functional in nature. On the *realization reading*, as I shall call it, Aristotle holds that Simon's functioning as a shoemaker can have normative standing only if it realizes or instantiates Simon's own function as a human being.

The realization reading is suggested by the initial invocation of the crafts—the 'good and the well' claim, as I shall call it—with which Aristotle introduces the idea of function at 1097^{b}25–8:

> For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist [τεχνίτης], and, in general, for all things that have a function and action, the good and the 'well' are thought to reside in the function [ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ δοκεῖ τἀγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ], so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function.

Now scholars have noted an ambiguity here in the phrase 'the good and the well', as regards 'good' in particular.[35] Aristotle might be making either or both of two claims:

> If an *x qua x* has as its function to φ, then *a good x qua x* is one which φ's well.

or:

[34] Simon was also a character in Socratic dialogues written by others, including Phaedo's *Simon*: cf. D.L. 2. 122–4, and C. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1996), 9–11.

[35] Cf. P. Glassen, 'A Fallacy in Aristotle's Argument About the Good', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1957), 319–22, and the more sympathetic K. Wilkes, 'The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle's Ethics', *Mind*, 87 (1978), 553–71, repr. in Rorty (ed.), *Essays*, 341–57. If Aristotle simply equivocates between 'the human good' and 'goodness in a human being', then the charge of fallacy is hard to avoid. But as I understand it, Aristotle's claim that a human being has a function is intended precisely as a substantive claim that these two kinds of good are inseparable. The human good is happiness, which consists in living well; and well is the way the excellent person lives.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 311

> If an *x qua x* has as its function to φ, then the good *of* an *x qua x*—its flourishing as an *x*—consists in φ'ing well.[36]

I shall call the first of these the 'weak' claim, the latter the 'strong' one. The weak claim seems to be an analytic truth, though perhaps it does not quite go without saying: we do sometimes need to be reminded that fame, income, and worldly success are simply irrelevant to the evaluation of professionals, unless they are somehow part of the end of the profession in question. The weak claim also paves the way for Aristotle to say, as he will, that, given a human function, the good or excellent person will be one who performs that function well. The strong claim involves the more controversial idea that the extent to which one flourishes in relation to some role is dependent on one's functioning in that role. It paves the way for Aristotle to claim, as he will, that given a human function, human *happiness* is constituted by functioning well.

The two claims are not exclusive: they are combined in the claim that the good *of* a functional entity consists in its being active *as* a good entity of that kind. And while the weak claim is obvious, the context clearly requires the strong claim as well. For Aristotle has just identified the human good with happiness; he can hardly expect the reader to take 'the good' here (1097^b27) as referring back to anything other than the 'best' which he has just undertaken to explain, i.e. happiness (1097^b22). (Note too that 'the good' here is *tagathon*, neuter, which is more easily read as the abstraction 'the good [of an *x*]' than as a placeholder for 'good [masc.] flute-player' *et al.*) Moreover, as I have noted, it is the strong claim that Aristotle will need when he comes to apply the 'good and the well' claim to the case of human functioning. So Aristotle is best read as here asserting a three-place relation connecting functioning well, excellence, and flourishing.

The upshot so far is that if shoemaking is a function, and the function of Simon in particular, then the good of Simon *qua* shoemaker is to be active as a good shoemaker. Now this idea of the good of the craftsperson—to stick with Aristotle's example here, the sculptor *qua* sculptor—should be a familiar one. We also rely

[36] Karen Nielsen has pointed out to me that this is a problematic general principle: an axe presumably has an *ergon* but no 'good of'. But since Aristotle specifies at 1097^b26 (as at $^b29$) that he is talking about things with an *ergon* and a *praxis* (taking καί as 'and' rather than Ross's 'or'), we can take the context here to be restricted to human beings. Cf. also *NE* 8. 12, 1161^a34–$^b2$, quoted in n. 19 above.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 312

on it whenever we speak of what is good *for* someone as a sculptor, since the good *for x* is (typically) what promotes the good *of x*.[37] Plant food is good *for* plants because it promotes the good *of* plants, namely healthy growth. It might seem that the 'good of' a sculptor *qua* sculptor is ambiguous, between excellence as a sculptor and flourishing or success as one. But on reflection, if we are careful to bracket irrelevant considerations of 'wage-earning', there is plausibly no real gap between the two: to flourish as a sculptor, strictly speaking, *just is* to excel in one's artistic activity. And that is why the sculptor is introduced here: this is precisely the pattern of connection between excellence and the good which Aristotle wants to establish for human beings as such.

Of course, this is not yet sufficient for the function thesis. For the sculptor *qua* sculptor might be dismissed as a metaphysical abstraction, and one of dubious relevance to what Aristotle needs to establish.[38] If Simon is a shoemaker, then 'Simon the shoemaker' is what Aristotle would class as an 'accidental unity', since being a shoemaker is not essential to him. And the attributes of an accidental unity cannot automatically be predicated of the underlying substance (cf. *SE* $177^{b}14$–15; *De int.* $20^{b}33$–5).[39] So what Aristotle needs to get to the function thesis is a stronger claim still, which I shall call the *transitivity* claim:

> If an *x qua x* has as its function to φ, then the good of the substance which is *x* consists (at least in part)[40] in φ'ing well.

[37] Sometimes the 'good for *x*' picks out what serves to make an *x* a good *x*: sharpening is good for knives because it makes them good (as) knives. This ambiguity dovetails nicely with the Aristotelian view that doing well and faring well are not fundamentally separable. (For a fuller discussion of 'good of', 'good as', and 'good for', cf. my 'Carpenter'.)

[38] Cf. Hardie, *Theory*, 23–4; and likewise Irwin, *Principles*, 607 n. 37: 'The usefulness of this appeal to function, however, depends on the character of the description under which the function is ascribed to the subject; if Socrates is a tailor, and idler, and a gourmand, we can find what is good for him qua each of these, and be none the wiser about what is good for Socrates. If the description identifies an essential property of the subject, then the description of the function will be useful.' I take the range of relevant descriptions to be broader than the explicitly essential; but they must pick out identities which help to realize the individual's good, which is dictated by his essence.

[39] This is brought out by the fact that *some* claims we can make about the '*x qua x*' lead nowhere normatively. A good hit man *qua* hit man is one who always carries out his assignment; but nothing follows from this about what Martin Blank, who is a hit man, ought to do, since being a hit man is *not* properly an *ergon*.

[40] Nothing so far rules out the possibility that a number of different activities

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 313

Applied to the case at hand: if shoemaking is a function, and the function of Simon in particular,[41] then it is (at least part of) the good of *Simon* to be a good shoemaker, and to make shoes well.

The transitivity claim gives Aristotle an attractive and even elegant basis for the function thesis. And we might well think that transitivity is entailed by Aristotle's metaphysical commitments: for the connections among function, end, and identity which I outlined in Section 2 would seem to entail that Aristotelian functions can belong to their bearers only essentially, not under a *per accidens* description. (That is, Simon can have a function *qua* shoemaker only if it is also Simon's function *simpliciter*—*qua* Simon, or *qua* human being.[42]) However, as a line of argument for the function thesis this begs the question of why we should suppose that shoemaking *is* a function in the metaphysically loaded Aristotelian sense. And it might be objected that for Aristotle craftspeople *cannot* in fact count as exercising the human function.[43] After all, in the *Politics* Aristotle repeatedly denounces the 'banausic' or menial occupations as degraded and corrupting: since banausic labour

might all be expressions of the human function for Simon; whether Aristotle would want to reject this sort of pluralism or inclusivism is a complicated question. Simon's functioning is second-rate anyway, relative to the exercise of perfect virtue available only in the life of *theōria*; so it is not clear that shoemaking would have to be the sole locus of his functional activity even if *theōria* has that status in the *best* life. To explore this issue would require entering much more fully into the later stages of the argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[41] I take it that this is a distinct condition, over and above (1) shoemaking is a function and (2) Simon is a shoemaker. For presumably it is a condition of the normativity of a function that it be appropriate to one's nature: shoemaking would not be the *ergon* of Socrates even if hard times forced him to the bench. Aristotle has little to say about the fundamental Platonic thesis, central to *Republic* 2–7, that occupations should be allocated in accordance with the nature of the worker; but his discussion of the 'natural slave' shows that he accepts the basic principle (*Pol.* 1. 1–2). It might be objected that the cases are different, since as Aristotle says, 'a slave is among the things by nature, but no one is by nature a shoemaker or any of the other craftsmen' (*Pol.* 1. 12, 1260^{b}1–2). But his point here is only, reasonably enough, that by and large our natures underdetermine which functions are appropriate to us, not that they do not determine their range at all.

[42] For the identity of what Simon is essentially, what he is *qua* human being, and what he is as Simon, cf. *Categories* 5 and *Metaphysics Z* 6; cf. Broadie, *Ethics*, 38.

[43] Another objection would be, more simply, that in the *Ethics* itself the human good will turn out to consist in *theōria*, of which shoemaking is pretty obviously not a species. But Aristotle's interest in the *Ethics* seems to be in the best human life, and the good for Simon does not necessarily coincide with *that*: what matters for our purposes is whether his work can instantiate the human function of rational activity *at all*.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 314

precludes leisure, free thought, and virtuous action (and with it happiness), Aristotle argues, its practitioners cannot really be capable of citizenship (*Pol.* 1264^{b}22–4, 1277^{b}33–1278^{a}21, 1319^{a}24–30, 1328^{b}33–41, 1329^{a}19–29). The principal criterion for the banausic is hand-work; the category is clearly one to which most of the *technai* belong to some extent, shoemaking included. And, as with his discussion of slavery, Aristotle is shockingly ready to assume that the actual occupants of these roles are naturally suited to them.

Still, this cannot quite be the whole Aristotelian story. If the shoemaker could not to any degree at all attain the good independently, so that the value of his life were purely instrumental, he would be a natural slave; and this is in fact a distinct and much more restricted category (cf. *Pol.* 1260^{b}1–2: 'independently' because even the slave can attain a good of sorts, coinciding with that of his master (*Pol.* 1252^{a}34–5)). Moreover, in *NE* 6. 4 *technē* is said to be one of the intellectual virtues, with *logos* as a defining feature (1140^{a}1–23). A *technē* properly speaking is a rational practice, correlative with *epistēmē* rather than mere experience (*Metaph. A* 1, 981^{a}12–^{b}24); to exercise *technē* must therefore count as an exercise (however imperfect) of rational virtue, which the function argument itself will identify with the human good (*NE* 1098^{a}7–18). So it would be a mistake to take Aristotle's deprecations of the lower *technai* in the *Politics* as entailing an identity of the technical and the banausic, and as excluding Simon altogether from the human good.[44]

A difficulty in the argument which I have so far ignored points in the same direction. As noted above and in Section 2, within the structure of Aristotelian teleological (meta)physics, an object's function is correlated with its nature or essence; so there should strictly speaking be no non-essential functions. Moreover, Aristotle holds that functions are common to the members of a species: 'Every animal is thought to have a proper pleasure, as it has a proper function; viz. that which corresponds to its activity' (*NE* 10. 5, 1176^{a}3–5). This suggests, disastrously, that *on any reading* the argument from the crafts depends on a premiss Aristotle considers false: shoemaking is not in fact a function. But on the realization reading this difficulty is resolved: for shoemaking *can* be Simon's

[44] And though their voices are not much heard in our surviving texts, there can be little doubt that in the Greek world as now, professional identities were an enormous source of meaning and value for ordinary people, and the practice of a craft (even a 'banausic' one) often a source of pride. Cf. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY, 1981), 274–5.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 315

function if it coincides with or instantiates his function as a member of the human species.

I conclude that, his contempt for the lower orders notwithstanding, Aristotle is committed to allowing that a range of ways of life may attain the good in different degrees, ordered by the degree to which they express rational activity.[45] Within its limitations, shoemaking must constitute a realization of the human function and the human good for those who can aspire to no better. So read, the argument from the crafts is reminiscent of a very odd passage of *Republic* 3. The context is Socrates' denunciation of decadent modern medicine, which will be banned from the *kallipolis*:

> SOCRATES. Everyone in a well-regulated city has his own work [*ergon*] to do and . . . no one has the leisure to be ill and under treatment all his life. It is absurd that we recognize this to be true of craftsmen while failing to recognize that it is equally true of those who are wealthy and supposedly happy.
>
> GLAUCON. How is that?
>
> SOCR. When a carpenter is ill, he expects to receive an emetic or a purge from his doctor or to get rid of his disease through surgery or cautery. If anyone prescribed a lengthy regimen to him, telling him that he should rest with his head bandaged and so on, he'd soon reply that he had no leisure to be ill and that life is no use to him if he has to neglect his work [*ergasia*] and always be concerned with his illness. (406 C 3–D 7)

Socrates suggests that this is 'because his life is no profit to him if he doesn't do his work [*ergon*]' (407 A 1–2). The rich person, by contrast, is generally assumed to have no work without which his life is not worth living: but this assumption ignores the all-important truth that 'once you have the means of life, you must practise virtue' (407 A 7–8). Socrates' point seems to be that the person of leisure should consider life not worth living except in so far as it enables him to live *well*, i.e. in the pursuit of virtue.

On the face of it, this passage has the air of a creepy aristocratic joke. Socrates purports to suggest that the carpenter's life is 'unliveable' without his work because of a dedication which the rich person should emulate, when the sense is rather, as Socrates knows perfectly well, that without it he will starve to death. Yet the idea

[45] This point has often been made, more thoroughly than I can do here, in relation to Aristotle's higher-level candidates for the good, i.e. the lives of contemplation and politics, and on the basis of more general considerations about the argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: cf. Kraut, *Good*.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 316

being introduced is a deeply serious one, and normative rather than descriptive. The lowly craftsperson provides a humble small-scale model of what should be expected from his betters—a favourite Platonic move we might call *argument from the lowly* (cf. e.g. *Rep.* 374 B–E; 467 A). This shaming trope can be traced back to Socrates, who in the *Apology* insists that only among the craftsmen, not the politicians and not the poets, did he encounter any real knowledge at all (22 A–E). The reader is presumed to look down on shoemakers and carpenters, as incapable of pursuing the highest human good. And yet—having no alternative—they are getting something important right.

This account of the sickly carpenter expresses one of the central themes of the *Republic*, the idea that happiness is to be found in the way of life for which one is naturally suited. The principle comes out most clearly when Socrates mounts a defence against Adeimantus' charge that, lacking wealth and property, the Guardians will not be happy (419 A 1–420 A 2). Part of his response is that he has to consider the happiness of the whole city: this means supplying its citizens with only an appropriate, politically sustainable happiness, of a sort compatible with their roles. Neither the Guardians nor the productive class, Socrates affirms, will be 'happy as at some festival but not in a city' (421 B 2–3). Rather, 'as the whole city grows and is well governed, we must leave it to nature to provide each group with its share of happiness' (421 C 3–6). But Socrates also hints heavily that the Guardians will indeed be very happy in their way of life (420 B), a suggestion he later claims has been proven true (465 E–466 C). What the sickly carpenter brings out is that, as we would expect, the same principle applies to the members of the other classes: their good is realized not in holiday-making or skiving off but in doing their appropriate work. And since craftspeople themselves tend to recognize this fact even in existing societies (albeit for lack of any alternative), they have something to teach their ostensible betters. Aristotle, it seems to me, inherits and assumes this perspective on the good of the craftsperson. The transitivity claim puts it to work, identifying Simon's good as a shoemaker with Simon's good *simpliciter*.

This line of argument might prompt a kind of aristocratic variant on the instrumentalist objection. Perhaps the good of *Simon*, such as it is, is realized by his function; the highest good of the highest sort of person might still be of a very different order. Strikingly,

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 317

Aristotle moves to block just this possibility later in the function argument, when he specifies that a good *x* and an *x simpliciter* have the same function:

> 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 . . . (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well). (*NE* 1. 7, 1098ª8–12; cf. *EE* 2. 1, 1219ª19–24)

This passage seems at first oddly gratuitous, differing only in emphasis from the weak version of the 'good and the well' claim already stated: for any craft or function, the good practitioner is the one who performs well. It is worth Aristotle's while to repeat the point here because the application to human beings as such might well encounter resistance. For we might see ourselves as better than Simon precisely in having some nobler function or, aristocratically, none at all. Aristotle insists that, on the contrary, what goes for Simon goes for all of us: a good human being has the same function as a human being, together with the responsibility of performing it better.

On the realization reading, Aristotle's argument seems to me to touch on some important truths implicit in our everyday ways of thinking about social functioning and the ends of action. Our agency is almost always embedded in some social role which we accept as normative, and which involves just the unity of doing well and faring well to which Aristotle draws our attention. The good doctor typically enters the consulting room aiming not to maximize utility, nor to obey the categorical imperative, nor for that matter to maximally serve her own interests, but simply *to do a good job*[46]—that is, to act successfully as a good doctor, just as she might at other times of the day aim to act as a good friend, sister, dog-owner, party member, and so on for every description she takes as contributing to her identity. In ancient ethical theory, it is the Stoics who most fully work out this way of thinking about

[46] Tom Hurka has objected to me that this sounds inappropriately self-referential: the aim is rather to bring about the patient's health using the medical art. But these are two ways of saying the same thing; and which thought we should ascribe to the doctor may well depend on context and emphasis. I discuss the alleged problem of inappropriate self-reference in the virtuous person's thoughts in 'Comments on Sarah Broadie, "Virtue and Beyond in Plato and Aristotle"', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 43, suppl. (2005), 115–25.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 318

the ethical life: as Epictetus puts it, we can discover what actions are appropriate to or incumbent on us, *ta kathēkonta*, from looking at the names we bear.[47] But the basic principles here (notably the conception of crafts as paradigmatic functions, and of functions as norm-giving) go back to Plato; indeed what interests Aristotle is not this picture in its own right, which he largely takes for granted, but the pathway it offers to his conception of human nature. His point, surely a plausible one, is that it would be perverse for us to look for the human good in some distinct 'lazy' way of being, different in kind from the activities of the doctor, party member, etc. in which our everyday social ends are realized. The human good is not some extra, specially structured business to be worked awkwardly into our spare moments: it is just like what the doctor experiences when she is working well; it *is* what the doctor experiences when she is working well. Or rather, it is the common denominator which gives value to all such activities, but is far more fully present in some than others: the exercise of human rationality.

As on the architectonic reading, Aristotle's appeal to the organic parts of the human body can serve to reassure us that such functions are a natural phenomenon. The instrumentalist looks at the shoemaker, hunched over and slaving away in his shop, and construes *ergon* as mere work: a social construct of strictly instrumental value to practitioner and society alike. The shoemaker's good, he infers, would be to close up shop for ever, if only he could: what would suit him best, or any of us, is the life of leisure and amusement. Aristotle's appeal to the organic parts is a sharp reminder that this inference is invalid, and rests on a misconception. *Erga* are not just social roles serving extrinsic ends: nature is pullulating with them, human nature included. What suits my eyes best is not an endless holiday from the labour of seeing, but to be active in the way best suited to their capacities. So why assume that my own case—or the shoemaker's—will be any different?

5. Conclusions

The architectonic and the realization readings are complementary. Each brings out one dimension of a plausible understanding of crafts as functions and functions as normative: the architectonic

[47] Epict. *Diss.*, 2. 10.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 319

reading notes the value of the crafts as contributions to an architectonic hierarchy of social goods, while the realization reading points to the norms of excellence and flourishing they enable their practitioners to realize. Taking both readings together, we can see Aristotle proposing that to make sense of these normative features of craft (or, presumably, of any social function), we need to see them as deriving their standing from natural teleology.

In a famous passage of the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle complains about students who, by the sound of it, protested at having to study the parts of animals. He insists, with unusual warmth:

> We must avoid childish complaints about examining the less honourable animals; for in all natural things there is something wonderful. The story goes that when some strangers wanted to see Heraclitus, they stopped on their way in, since they saw him warming himself at the oven; but he kept urging them, saying, 'Come in, and don't worry; for here too there are gods.'[48] In the same way, then, we must go forward without embarrassment with our search into each type of animal, assuming that there is something natural and fine in each of them. For what is for something and not a matter of luck is most characteristic of the products of nature; and the end for which these things are constituted or have come to be counts as something beautiful. (*PA* 1. 5, 645^{a}15–26)[49]

Crafts too are 'for something': as Aristotle emphasizes, they imitate and complete the workings of nature (*Phys* 2. 3, 194^{a}20–1; *Meteor.* 4. 3, 381^{b}4–6). And Aristotle's appeals to the crafts, like those of Socrates and Plato before him, are in the same spirit as this appeal to the beauty of frogs and bugs. Such arguments from the lowly are not just a shaming trope, but a species of reasoning from what is better known to us to what is better known by nature. They use a lower object to make visible features which are more fully present in some higher one, but less obviously and uncontroversially so. And in the social version of the argument as in the zoological, what we are directed to observe is, above all, the pervasiveness and importance of teleology. Unfortunately, Aristotle was less interested in shoemakers and carpenters than in frogs and bugs: he has much less to say about them, and what he does say is often distorted by class prejudice. But it is still enough to convey a vision—largely

[48] For the significance of this anecdote, see P. Gregoric, 'The Heraclitus Anecdote: *De partibus animalium* i 5. 645^{a}17–23', *Ancient Philosophy*, 21 (2001), 73–85.

[49] The translation is from T. Irwin and G. Fine (trans., intro., and notes), *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis, 1995), with revisions.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 320

inherited from Plato's *Republic*—of our ethical lives as structured around activities which at once express our natures, realize our good, and contribute to our communities. If this is a way of thinking about work and success which continues to deserve attention, so too does Aristotle's claim that it presupposes a conception of human nature as functional already.

University of Toronto

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aquinas, Thomas, *Commentary on Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, trans. C. Litzinger (Notre Dame, 1993).

Barnes, J., 'Aristotle and the Methods of Ethics', *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 34 (1981), 490–511.

—— (ed.), *Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (2 vols.; Princeton, 1984).

Barney, R., 'Comments on Sarah Broadie, "Virtue and Beyond in Plato and Aristotle"', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 43, suppl. (2005), 115–25.

—— 'The Carpenter and the Good' ['Carpenter'], in D. Cairns, F.-G. Herrmann, and T. Penner (eds.), *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's* Republic (Edinburgh, forthcoming).

Bostock, D., *Aristotle's Ethics* [*Ethics*] (Oxford, 2000).

Broadie, S., *Ethics with Aristotle* [*Ethics*] (Oxford, 1991).

—— and Rowe, C. (trans., intro., and comm.), *Aristotle:* Nicomachean Ethics [*Commentary*] (Oxford, 2002).

Burnet, J. (ed. with intro. and notes), *The* Ethics *of Aristotle* [*Ethics*] (London, 1900).

Clark, S., *Aristotle's Man* (Oxford, 1975).

Cooper, J. M., *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

—— with D. S. Hutchinson (eds.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997).

de Ste. Croix, G. E. M., *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY, 1981).

Destrée, P., 'Comment démontrer le propre de l'homme? Pour une lecture "dialectique" de *EN* I, 6' ['Comment démontrer'], in G. Romeyer Dherbey and G. Aubry (eds.), *L'Excellence de la vie* (Paris, 2002), 39–61.

Gerson, L., *Knowing Persons* (Oxford, 2003).

Glassen, P., 'A Fallacy in Aristotle's Argument about the Good', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1957), 319–22.

Gomez-Lobo, A., 'The Ergon Inference', *Phronesis*, 34 (1989), 170–84.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 321

Grant, A., *Aristotle's Ethics* [*Ethics*], 4th edn. (2 vols.; London, 1885).
Gregoric, P., 'The Heraclitus Anecdote: *De partibus animalium* i 5. 645ª17–23', *Ancient Philosophy*, 21 (2001), 73–85.
Hardie, W. F. R., *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* [*Theory*] (Oxford, 1968).
Hutchinson, D. S., *The Virtues of Aristotle* (London, 1986).
Irwin, T., *Aristotle's First Principles* [*Principles*] (Oxford, 1988).
—— 'The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics', in Rorty (ed.), *Essays*, 35–53.
—— and Fine, G. (trans., intro., and notes), *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis, 1995).
Joachim, H., *Aristotle:* The Nicomachean Ethics (Oxford, 1951).
Johnson, M. R., *Aristotle on Teleology* [*Teleology*] (Oxford, 2005).
Kahn, C., *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1996).
Korsgaard, C., 'Aristotle on Function and Virtue', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 3 (1986), 259–79.
Kraut, R., *Aristotle on the Human Good* [*Good*] (Princeton, 1989).
—— *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* [*Aristotle*] (Oxford, 2002).
—— 'The Peculiar Function of Human Beings', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1979), 467–78.
Lawrence, G., 'Human Good and Human Function' ['Good'], in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics (Malden, Mass., 2006), 37–75.
—— 'The Function of the Function Argument' ['Function'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 21 (2001), 445–75.
Nussbaum, M. C., 'Aristotle, Nature, and Ethics', in J. E. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, 1995), 86–131.
—— *Aristotle's* De motu animalium (Princeton, 1978; rev. edn. 1985).
Pakaluk, M., *Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics*: An Introduction* [*Ethics*] (Cambridge, 2005).
Reeve, C. D. C., *Practices of Reason* [*Practices*] (Oxford, 1995).
Roche, T., 'On the Alleged Metaphysical Foundation of Aristotle's *Ethics*' ['Foundation'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1988), 49–62.
Rorty, A. O. (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* [*Essays*] (Berkeley, 1980).
Ross, W. D. (trans.), *Aristotle:* The Nicomachean Ethics, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford, 1980).
Santas, G., *Goodness and Justice* (Oxford, 2001).
Sparshott, F., *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the* Nicomachean Ethics [*Life*] (Toronto, 1994).
Suits, B., 'Aristotle on the Function of Man: Fallacies, Heresies and other Entertainments' ['Fallacies'], *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1974), 23–40.

Created on 9 February 2008 at 17.09 hours page 322

Tuozzo, T., 'The Function of Human Beings and the Rationality of the Universe: Aristotle and Zeno on Parts and Wholes' ['Function'], *Phoenix*, 50 (1996), 146–61.

Van Leeuwen, J. (ed. and notes), *Aristophanes:* Plutus, 2nd edn. (Leiden, 1968).

Whiting, J., 'Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defense' ['Defense'], *Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1988), 33–48.

Wilkes, K., 'The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle's Ethics', *Mind*, 87 (1978), 553–71; repr. in Rorty (ed.), *Essays*, 341–57.

Woods, M. (trans. and comm.), *Aristotle:* Eudemian Ethics *Books I, II and VIII* (Oxford, 1992).