Aristotle on Ergon and Eudaimonia

Creating a Coherent Interpretation of the Nicomachean Ethics

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by

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Aristotle on *Ergon* and *Eudaimonia*

I. Introduction

The prime question of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* is this: How ought a human being lead his or her life? Attempting to arrive at an answer, Aristotle presupposes a teleological framework and then asks a series of subsidiary questions. First, he recognizes that all actions and choice aim at some good. Sometimes this good is an activity and sometimes a product. Moreover, there must be some good for the sake of which human beings take all their actions. In other words, there must be some final good to which all other goods and actions are a means.\(^1\) If indeed this good exists, and Aristotle has already proclaimed that it does, then knowledge and understanding of it is of the utmost importance for the conduct of human life (*NE* 1094a23-26). Hence, Aristotle proclaims that everyone knows what the name of the final good is, as he writes, “… for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness (*eudaimonia*), and identify living well and faring well with being happy…” (1095a17-21). *Eudaimonia*, then, is the final good at which all human action aims.

a. *Eudaimonia* and Its Characteristics

*Eudaimonia* is generally translated, indeed as it is above, to happiness. However, many scholars have criticized this translation as being misleading\(^2\). Aristotle

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\(^1\) Some scholars, such as Urmson, have made an objection to the statement Aristotle makes here. He compares Aristotle’s move here to moving from the statement, “Every nice girl loves a sailor,” to, “There is a sailor whom every nice girl loves.” Aristotle is moving, that is, from a statement whose truth is guaranteed by its constituent words to a statement describing the universe whose truth is by no means guaranteed (Urmson, 1988, p. 10). Ackrill makes a similar objection (Ackrill, 1980, p. 25).

\(^2\) (Urmson, 1988, p. 11).
tells the reader what *eudaimonia* is. It is living and faring well (1095a16-21). Aristotle also stipulates that *eudaimonia* must be held throughout one’s life if one is to properly be called *eudaimon* (1100a31-35). In other words, *eudaimonia* is the thing whose presence in a life makes that life worth living. It has also been translated as human flourishing, and this translation certainly does the concept more justice than the previous one. Throughout this paper, we will transliterate *eudaimonia* both for the sake of clarity with respect to the former translation and for the sake of brevity with respect to the latter.

Everyone agrees that *eudaimonia* is the final good, but not everyone, according to Aristotle, agrees on what form it takes. In his usual fashion, Aristotle lists the *endoxa*, or popular and good opinions, about what *eudaimonia* is. Some human beings, he says, equate *eudaimonia* with pleasure, others with honor, and the last group with virtue (1095b15-30). The first of these groups of people order their lives with regard to the maximization of pleasure, which are lives that are suitable to beasts. Aristotle claims that accordingly *eudaimonia* cannot be based on pleasure. The second possible form of *eudaimonia* equates it to a life lived in accord with honor. Aristotle objects to this notion, however, on the grounds that honor depends on bestowal of it by other people. Surely one’s own *eudaimonia* cannot depend on others, so the life of honor cannot be the one sought either (1095b22-26). The last candidate is the life of virtuous, moral activity, and this is indeed the life Aristotle holds to be *eudaimon*.

Aristotle then continues the conversation onto what the primary characteristics of *eudaimonia* are. There are three definitive characteristics that *eudaimonia* must
have. First, it must be the most final of all goods. In other words, there is no good for the sake of which human beings pursue eudaimonia (1097a29-31). It is always sought for itself, and all other goods are sought for the sake of it. There exists the possibility, however, of there being many final goods that are sought only for their own sakes and never for the sake of anything else. Moreover, none of these goods is sought for the sake of each other. It seems that Aristotle is at a standstill until he introduces another criterion.

Eudaimonia must also be the most complete good. The criterion of completeness is an extension of the previous criterion of finality. In other words, if there are two most final ends, which is indeed linguistically confusing, there must exist one end containing the two. This end is the most complete end. Each end may indeed be sought for its own sake, but both ends are sought for the sake of this new, most complete end (1097b5-7). Ackrill explains this concept perfectly by using his analogy of types of breakfast: “It is best, and better than everything else, not in the way that bacon is better than eggs and than tomatoes (and therefore the best of the three to choose), but in the way that bacon, eggs, and tomatoes is a better breakfast than either bacon or eggs or tomatoes – and is indeed the best breakfast without qualification.”\(^3\) Quite eloquently, here, Ackrill explains the concept of most complete. Eudaimonia contains all intrinsically and instrumentally valuable goods.

And third, eudaimonia must be self-sufficient. The self-sufficiency criterion is the tail side of the coin whose head side is the completeness criterion. Where

\(^3\) (Ackrill, 1980, p. 21)
**eudaimonia** on the completeness criterion contains all intrinsically and instrumentally valuable goods, *eudaimonia* with respect to the self-sufficiency criterion lacks nothing whose presence would make a specific like more worth living (1097b14-16). To use Ackrill’s bacon, eggs, and tomatoes analogy to demonstrate the self-sufficiency criterion, one would have to imagine a world in which orange juice or any other breakfast drink did not exist. There is nothing that would make the bacon, eggs, and tomatoes breakfast more worthwhile. Correspondingly, there is no good the addition of which would make the life containing *eudaimonia* more worth living.

Aristotle has his three criteria for *eudaimonia*, and he now focuses in on human beings more closely. In order to attain the chief good for humankind, Aristotle postulates that one must first understand the function of human beings. This passage has come to be known as the *ergon* argument (1097b22-1098a20). The argument is comprised of three separate parts.

**b. The Ergon Argument**

First, Aristotle shows that all things have a function, and humans are no different. This part of the argument we will label E1. The function, or *ergon*, of each thing is its characteristic activity. For instance, the *ergon* of a flute player is to play the flute, and the function of an eye is to see. When the flute player plays the flute, and when the eye sees, they are said to be performing their *erga*. A flute player playing the flute well is a *good* flute player. The case is the same for the eye. Aristotle then asks

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4 *Eudaimonia* by definition, not by criteria, is that to which nothing can be added (Urmson, 1988, p. 13).
5 The breakdown of the *ergon* argument here necessarily largely parallels Roche’s breakdown (Roche, 1988, p. 178).
why human beings should be any different from these things, which leads him into the second part of the _ergon_ argument.

Naturally, Aristotle answers the question above by saying that there is no reason to believe that human beings should be excluded from having _erga_. E2 seeks to find the function of human beings by looking at the structure of their souls and examining what is unique, or _idion_, to these souls. Aristotle divides the human soul into three parts: the nutritive, the perceptive, and the rational. He later divides the rational part into two. The nutritive part corresponds to a life of nutrition and growth, the perceptive to a life of perception, and the rational to a life guided by reason. From here, Aristotle looks for what is unique to humans. The life of nutrition and growth is shared with plants, so this clearly is not what the _ergon_ of man can be. Similarly, animals experience the life of perception, so human _eudaimonia_ should not be primarily constituted in this sort of life either. The remaining part is the rational part, so this must be that with which the _eudaimon_ life is in accord. Aristotle divides this rational part into two. One part is rational in the sense that it obeys reason, and other in the sense that it has reason. E2 is the last premise Aristotle needs to declare wherein human _eudaimonia_ lies.

If everything, including human beings, has an _ergon_, and performing their _ergon_ well makes them a good member of their kind, and if the specific _ergon_ of man is activity in accordance with the rational part of the soul, then human _eudaimonia_ corresponds to active utilization of the rational part of the soul. Virtuous activity, Aristotle says, exists through the exercise of this rational part. So, E3 states that
human *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous activity. The *ergon* argument itself takes the form of, “If E1 and E2, then E3.” The argument until now has been relatively straightforward, but then Aristotle adds the caveat that if there are several virtues, then *eudaimonia* corresponds to activity in accordance with “*ariste kai teleiotate*” virtue (1098a17-20). This caveat, along with several other troubling passages in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, has led to several different interpretations of the *ergon* argument and of the *Nichomachean Ethics* as a whole.

c. Difficulties Within the *Nichomachean Ethics*

The largest difficulty in the *NE* actually has little to do with specific passages but more with the structure of the work as a whole. Book I is dedicated to examining the nature of *eudaimonia* and sets the stage for Aristotle to detail the specific virtues that are the constituent parts of *eudaimonia*. Book II discusses the nature of virtuous activity itself and the process by which it should arise and be sustained. There is much discussion here of choosing the right actions for themselves and habituating virtuous tendencies within people. Indeed on Aristotle’s view, virtue is a habitual tendency to act in the right way for the right reasons. From Books II through IX, the *NE* functions as a coherent work whose main goal is to describe human *eudaimonia* as grounded in virtuous, civic activity. However, Book X claims that the virtuous life of action is only *eudaimon* in a secondary manner to the life of theoretical activity. It seems as if Aristotle has stepped back from the theory he spent nine books trying to postulate.

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6 For further analysis of the *ergon* argument, including the presence of “virtuous activity” in E3, see pg. 4
Instead, the civic activity he had given so much importance it seems should take secondary priority to cultivating contemplation.\(^7\)

Indeed Aristotle recommends two types of lives at two different places in his work, and there are specific manifestations of this apparent inconsistency. Ackrill points out that Aristotle recommends the contemplative life because contemplation aims at no end further than itself. However, he also recommends the life of virtuous activity for the same reason.\(^8\) Another confusing difficulty manifests itself when Aristotle in Book II proclaims that a virtuous action must be chosen for itself in order to really be virtuous. However, he has already claimed in Book I that all actions are chosen for the sake of some end, and indeed virtuous actions are chosen for the sake of eudaimonia. There are several other inconsistencies within the *Nichomachean Ethics*, and these have given rise to several interpretations that attempt to make the *NE* a coherent, consistent work.

\textbf{d. Interpretations of Eudaimonia}

There are several methods by which one can deal with the inconsistencies that allegedly arise within the *Nichomachean Ethics*. The easiest, and perhaps most appealing, is to admit that the *NE* is an inconsistent work and salvage the valuable lessons it teaches without attempting to understand it as a whole. This sort of segmentation of the argument of the work is likely not what Aristotle had in mind.

\(^7\) Not surprisingly, this is a fundamental, though rarely mentioned, source of division among scholars. Some scholars want to know why Aristotle would spend nine books working on a theory he just seems to throw out. On the other hand, isome wonder why Aristotle ends with different theory than that with which he begins.

\(^8\) Ackrill highlights many inconsistencies within the *NE*, and those listed here are taken from him (Ackrill, 1978, p. 595).
when he wrote his work, so admitting the work’s inconsistency and salvaging it should only be a last resort.

One may also admit that the *NE* contains inconsistencies without discarding the work as a whole. Instead, it would be acceptable as an experiment to modify certain parts of Aristotle’s argument if the modifications make his work coherent. Some scholars have admitted to doing this, but even this approach should be used as a second-to-last resort.

The last and most popular approach is to interpret Aristotle so as to avoid inconsistencies. The majority of scholars have taken this approach. Two schools of thought have taken form with respect to this approach: intellectualism and inclusivism. The intellectualist view maintains that the contemplative life is the good with which human beings are to equate *eudaimonia*. In this camp are, among others, Thomas Nagel, John M. Cooper, and Richard Kraut. In the inclusivist camp, one can find scholars such as Terrence Irwin, Julia Annas, and Timothy Roche, who maintain that *eudaimonia* consists of both moral action and contemplative activity. There is also a third viable interpretation, which is effectively a hybridized interpretation. This interpretation, advanced by J.L. Ackrill, holds that both moral action and contemplative activity contribute to *eudaimonia*, but contemplation is given primacy within the context of a composite good.9

e. The Course of This Paper

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9 (Ackrill, 1980, p. 17). Rorty discusses a similar concept, that of the contemplative *phronimos*. Someone who has achieved both practical wisdom and contemplation (Rorty, 1980, p. 386).
What follows is a detailed discussion of the three primary interpretations of the NE. First, we will characterize each interpretation with respect to the relative importance it gives to contemplative activity and moral action. We will then examine supporting arguments for each view. Last, we will attempt to reconcile each view with specific passages and concepts within the *Nichomachean Ethics*. I intend to argue that the all currently available interpretations run into difficulties that create inconsistencies within them. I will then show that these inconsistencies can find their base within the *ergon* argument, as the argument itself is contradictory to both the *Nichomachean Ethics* as a whole and specific passages within it. As all attempts of using the third method, that is to interpret the *NE* in such a way that it avoids contradiction, will have failed, it will then be permissible to use the second method. I will then propose a modified *ergon* argument, indeed one that Aristotle himself seems to be willing to defend elsewhere in his work, and create an interpretation based off of this new argument. This new interpretation will avoid many, if not all, of the difficulties that present themselves to the other three views.

II. Three Interpretations

a. The Place of Contemplation and Ethical Activity

Although there are thought to be two contemporary schools of thought with respect to the nature of *eudaimonia*, there seem to actually be three different interpretations within these two schools. The first is referred to as the intellectualist or dominant interpretation. The intellectualist interpretation maintains that *eudaimonia* is to be equated with contemplative activity. On this view, *theoria* is the only good that
is sought for its own sake and indeed is *eudaimonia* itself.\(^\text{10}\) Kraut, expounding the intellectualist interpretation, describes the interaction between contemplation and ethical activity by explaining that a life lived in accord with something gives primacy to that thing within it. So, the life lived in accord with contemplation gives primacy to it. Kraut reminds us, however, that the philosophical life in giving primacy to contemplation does not exclude ethical activity: “A life can contain ethical activity without giving primacy to that activity – that is, without being a life in accordance with ethical virtue.”\(^\text{11}\) Later, Kraut says the philosopher will engage in moral activity, but only as a means to contemplation. By contrast, the political life will have no need to engage in contemplation, as it is a good that is desirable only for its own sake (1177b-4).

On the other hand, there is the inclusive interpretation, whose proponents say that *eudaimonia* is actually a composite good whose constitutive parts are contemplative activity coupled with ethical activity. Ackrill explains that Aristotle’s assertion that there is more than one final end indicates the existence of many goods that are sought for only their sake. The most final of these is the composite of all ends.\(^\text{12}\)

Last, there is what I shall deem the hybridized view, which maintains that the combined life of contemplative and ethical activity corresponds to *eudaimonia* but borrows from the intellectualist interpretation by giving primacy to contemplative

\(^{10}\) (Kraut, 1989, p. 25)  
\(^{11}\) (Kraut, 1989, p. 25)  
\(^{12}\) (Ackrill, 1980, p. 23)
activity in this combined life. Ackrill has shown that there is more than one final end and that the end containing all final ends will be the most final end. Indeed, this argument is the basis of the inclusive interpretation. In advancing his own interpretation, however, he also makes the distinction between a dominant end that is monolithic, in the sense that it is the only thing worth pursuing, and a dominant end that is the supreme part of a greater, inclusive end. It is the latter type of end that Ackrill has in mind.

Most scholars have regarded this third interpretation as a particular type of inclusive interpretation. Indeed, Ackrill’s interpretation is inclusive, but it also contains a dominant interpretation. Some may object by saying that just because the intellectualist view and the hybrid view give a special role to contemplation in eudaimonia, that is no reason to assume that the two interpretations are related. For one, the intellectualist view goes much further and states that contemplation itself is eudaimonia. The hybrid view does no such thing. It only gives contemplation a special place among all of the other virtues. This special role of contemplation, however, is precisely the defining characteristic of the dominant interpretation! Where the dominant interpretation claims contemplation to be the chief good, Ackrill’s interpretation says that contemplation is the chief good within the chief good. Certainly the dominant view goes much further in assigning importance to

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13 (Ackrill, 1980, p. 23, p. 29). Ackrill’s view is generally regarded as an inclusive view, and it has many of the characteristics of one. In fact, Ackrill’s arguments are precisely the ones later inclusivists used to justify their own views. It should not strike one as odd, therefore, that I use Ackrill’s work to explain the inclusivist view.
14 (Ackrill, 1980, p. 17.)
contemplation, but the criterion for me in deciding into what camp a particular interpretation falls is not whether contemplation in that interpretation is *eudaimonia*. Rather, I distinguish interpretations on *how* important contemplation and the other goods are to *eudaimonia*. The statement the intellectualist interpretation makes that contemplation is one among the other virtues constituting *eudaimonia* is entirely different than that of the position making the claim that contemplation is the prime part of *eudaimonia*.

The three interpretations, then, give a differing type of importance to contemplative activity and ethical activity. The intellectualist holds that contemplation is sought for its own sake and that ethical activity is done only for the sake of contemplation. The inclusivist says that both contemplative and ethical activity are sought for their own sakes and for the sake of the composite good. The hybrid view, insofar as categorization of goods is concerned, seems to agree with the inclusive view. The objections that one may have made here are sure to manifest themselves in the discussion of the characteristics of each interpretation of *eudaimonia*.

### b. Criteria for *Eudaimonia*

*Eudaimonia* has already been said to have three defining characteristics. It is final. All other goods are sought for its sake, and it is not sought for the sake of anything else. It is most complete. It contains all intrinsically valuable goods. And it is self-sufficient. There is nothing the addition of which can increase it. How does each view’s conception of *eudaimonia* account for these characteristics, then?
The intellectualist interpretation has already been said to maintain that *eudaimonia* is contemplation and only contemplation. This interpretation is derived from Aristotle’s comments in Book X on contemplation. He says that it is best, most continuous, most pleasant, most self-sufficient, and final. Contemplation is most self-sufficient in the sense that the person exercising ethical virtues will need all the external goods necessary for life. By contrast, the philosopher is able to study by himself. Of course, Aristotle admits, even the philosopher needs some external goods, but he does not require them to contemplate as the political *eudaimon* requires them to practice the virtues of his or her life. Similarly, it is final. The ethical virtues, Aristotle says, are all pursued to gain something beyond the action itself. Contemplation, however, has no product other than act of contemplation itself (1177b-4).

There are several objections apparent here. Howard Curzer makes the first objection. He argues that this passage says nothing about the self-sufficiency of contemplation. Rather, it just states that the person who contemplates is more self-sufficient than the one who practices the ethical virtues.\(^\text{15}\) The second objection to self-sufficiency here is that contemplation can be increased by the addition of colleagues, which Aristotle says allows the philosopher to contemplate better than he or she would have alone (1177a30-1177b). The first part of Aristotle’s statement is that one can contemplate better. It makes sense that better contemplation can lead to better products of contemplation, which in this case is just a better sort of contemplation. By the rules of the intellectualist interpretation, then, better

\(^\text{15}\) (Curzer, 1990, p. 423)
contemplation equals better eudaimonia. The only respect in which eudaimonia can be made better is with respect to its goodness. So, one may conclude that colleagues can increase the goodness of eudaimonia for the intellectualist. Who are these colleagues? I propose that these colleagues are supposed to be friends who exhibit the same virtues. Indeed, Aristotle says that the self-sufficient person needs no friends, but one cannot achieve perfect happiness without the help of friends (1169b-22). So, the philosopher without friends is certainly most self-sufficient, but his life is not. The philosopher who has friends, by contrast, is not himself most sufficient but the eudaimonia of his life is. Thus, the contemplation alone as eudaimonia is not self-sufficient because it lacks a thing, friendship, whose presence would increase its own goodness.

Nor would contemplation be the most complete good, as the good containing both friendship and contemplation would be a greater good, and Aristotle maintains that of goods the greater is always better (1097b16-19). Accordingly, contemplation would not seem to be most final either, as on Aristotle’s principle above it would be more logical to pursue the composite good of friendship and contemplation. Eudaimonia then is more plausibly portrayed in a life of contemplation and friendship. At any rate, contemplation alone does not seem to be self-sufficient, most complete, or most final. This a serious blow to the intellectualist interpretation.16

16 Gavin Lawrence shortly discusses the no-aggregation argument, which basically states that if A is a perfect good, then the combination of A + B is actually worse off than A alone because less of a perfect good exists. The argument is the basis for most intellectualist interpretations, including Kraut’s. As the passage above regarding friendship has shown, this argument seems to have some difficulty relating to Aristotle’s comments (Lawrence, 1993, p. 28).
Now, the composite good of the inclusivist interpretation may fare better with respect to the criteria of *eudaimonia*. The composite good, by its very definition, is the most final, most complete, and self-sufficient good. It encompasses all goods, so the problem that posed itself to contemplation alone cannot stand as an obstacle to the composite good. One objection may, however, be made to the nature of the composite good. Aristotle says of the properly virtuous man, “First, he must [know that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state” (1105a21-26). Essentially, in order for a human being to be virtuous, he or she must do virtuous actions and do them for their own sake, that is to say that they are an end in themselves. However, the final nature of the composite good suggests that all virtuous actions and contemplation itself must be chosen and done for the sake of this final composite good. There seems trouble here in choosing a virtuous action for its own sake while also choosing it for the sake of *eudaimonia*.

Aristotle is able to explain away the trouble. There are actually three types of goods in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. First, there are those goods that are only chosen for the sake of something else. These goods we will name Type 1 goods – The notion of types of goods will come up again in this paper, so for the sake of space and clarity it is best to distinguish between types here. Then, there are Type 2 goods, those goods that are only chosen for their own sake. There are also goods, Type 3, that are hybrids of these two. They are chosen both for their own sake and for the sake of some other
greater good (1097a26-31). Moreover, this passage here seems in accord with the difficulty of putting contemplation solely as eudaimonia. If contemplation were most final, most complete, and self-sufficient, then there would be reason to doubt if eudaimonia were a composite good. However, it has been proven that contemplation cannot meet any one of those criteria, therefore eudaimonia must be of a composite nature.

The eudaimonia of Ackrill’s hybrid interpretation meets the criteria established in the same way as that of the inclusive interpretation. Ackrill’s interpretation, however, goes further. So, the composite good is indeed on this view final, most complete, and self-sufficient, but it is the relative importance of its constituent parts that is of interest. Within this composite good are several moral virtues and contemplation itself. Ackrill gives contemplation primacy over the moral virtues. How is this view, then, any different from the intellectualist view? This objection is admittedly a problem for Ackrill, as he says, “It might be suggested that… actions are virtuous insofar as they promote theoria, even if that answer is not argued for or implied in the first book.” So, Ackrill ends his article maintaining that contemplation receives primacy over moral actions within the greater composite good, but he cannot explain how. Without an explanation of how contemplation and ethical activity fit together in the ideal life, this interpretation leaves us with no way to understand what the ideal life should be or how one may achieve it. While this difficulty alone should not and does not render

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17 Ackrill explains this concept as well (Ackrill, 1980, p. 21). Irwin breaks down three different types of goods also. Urmson does something similar but distinguishes between goods and activities (Urmson, 1988, p. 11).
18 (Ackrill, 1980, p. 30)
Ackrill’s interpretation unusable, it certainly makes it significantly more difficult – impossible in some cases – to test than the other two interpretations. Moreover, Ackrill’s response simply reduces itself to a copy of the intellectualist interpretation. There is a way to make this interpretation functional still, but there is much groundwork necessary before that can be done.

It has been shown that eudaimonia on the dominant view is not consistent with comments that Aristotle makes elsewhere in the Nichomachean Ethics. The inclusivist interpretation seems promising, however. The composite good has no problem meeting all the criteria set forth by Aristotle in Book I. The hybrid view, however, has lost viability because there is currently no way for it to maintain the primacy of contemplation within the context of the composite good without succumbing to the same arguments as the intellectualist interpretation. Now the discussion must move on to consider other aspects of these views.

c. A Guiding Principle

Before we can begin discussion of any ethical principles derived from the Nichomachean Ethics, it is necessary to discuss whether the work should give a principle at all. The argument against this notion is that the NE is a descriptive work, so it does not establish any normative criterion off of which one should base one’s life. Now, part of this argument is true. Aristotle’s goal in the NE is to describe what the highest good, eudaimonia, and accordingly what the ideal life for human beings is. Though this may be the purpose of the NE, it is not the point of it. The point of the NE is to describe the best life so that we may lead our lives with the hope of achieving the
best possible life. Aristotle explicitly states the point of his work by asking, “Will not then knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life? Will it not better enable us to attain our proper object, like archers having a target to aim at?” (1094a23-26). Only by knowing what the best life is, then, are we most able to actually achieve it. Moreover, Aristotle here is suggesting that eudaimonia is our target in life, our normative criterion so to speak. This notion of using ethical knowledge for ethical action is very important to Aristotle, as he reminds the reader near the end of Book X that, “…to know what virtue is is not enough; we must endeavor to possess and to practice it, or in some other manner actually ourselves to become good” (1179a19-b23). How are we to practice virtue if the NE is solely a descriptive work? We cannot.

Clearly the NE provides something at which a good person should aim, but does it leave it to the person to decide how he or she should reach that aim? It may partially do so. The NE gives us our goals and some priority among them, and it seems to leave it to us to decide how we must go about achieving these goals. Perhaps this is what Aristotle means when he says that we do not deliberate about ends but about means (1112b15-24). It is the purpose of the NE to describe the ends. It is our job to figure out how to get to those ends. The ‘how’ is simply the next logical step after the ‘what’ here, and I believe that our deliberation of means should yield some principles by which we can arrive at eudaimonia.

If eudaimonia is the goal, then the principle of how to achieve it should be painfully obvious: Order one’s life so as to achieve the most eudaimonia. As we have
seen before, however, the separate interpretations do not agree on what eudaimonia is. Accordingly, their derivative principles should yield different ways to lead the good life. There is little to be gained from examining the hybrid interpretation, as it is unfortunately not fully developed. The dominant and inclusive interpretations will present very different answers to the question of what is the guiding principle of the best life.

The principles that may be derived from the inclusive interpretation are relatively simple. There are indeed two principles, one of which derives from a composite good that is the mere aggregate of other intrinsic goods and the other from a composite good whose constituent parts must meet some sort of proportion. The latter of the two principles may seem as if it is being derived from Ackrill’s hybrid view, but that observation is not correct. Ackrill indeed distinguishes between eudaimonia as aggregate and organized system, but he does not develop that distinction any further.19

The principle derived from the aggregated composite good is relatively simple: Act so as to have as many goods and as much good in one’s life as is possible.20 So simple a principle, however, does little to inform the reader of the Nichomachean Ethics on how he or she should act. What should one do when confronted with a situation in which one may choose between acting with courage and acting with magnanimity? There is a host of situations in which one does not have to choose, of

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19 (Ackrill, 1980, p. 30)
20 No scholar has put forth this principle from their inclusive interpretation of eudaimonia. This looks very similar to utilitarianism, and one may object by saying that this sort of principle has little do with what Aristotle has said in his work. But without some sort of principle, how would we get from knowing what eudaimonia is to actually achieving it. There clearly must be some sort of plan we should follow to get there, and that is what the principles derived from these interpretations should do.
course, but here one must choose between being less magnanimous than one could have possibly been or being less courageous. The inclusive interpretation does not provide a mechanism. Moreover, if all moral virtues contribute to happiness equally, then there is indeed no principle of guidance. Kraut attacks the inclusive interpretation on the grounds that someone pursuing aggregated *eudaimonia* would have to find an infinite number of goods.\(^\text{21}\)

Clearly there must be some system in place to decide between goods and to decide which goods are worthwhile. Irwin, reviewing Kraut, presents just a system by giving two characteristics of it; he says, “(1) It has some internal structure and hierarchy, corresponding to the relative importance of different activities. (2) A good is good for an agent only if it plays the appropriate role in the agent's life; and it does this only if the agent uses it correctly.”\(^\text{22}\) Irwin has set up a system here, but he recognizes Kraut’s objection to this system as well. While there may be a more specific principle on how to lead one’s life here, Kraut argues that there is no way to know to which good primacy should be given. In other words, Aristotle gives no weighting system by which one can decide how to act.\(^\text{23}\)

The intellectualist interpretation, by contrast, has a very strong principle: Live one’s life in order to have as much contemplation throughout one’s life as possible. Kraut emphasizes that there is no circumstance under which one can contemplate too much for one’s own good, as contemplation is the good.\(^\text{24}\) Now, Kraut does make the

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\(^{21}\) (Kraut, 1989, p. 305)

\(^{22}\) (Irwin, 1991, p. 389)

\(^{23}\) (Irwin, 1991, p. 389)

\(^{24}\) (Kraut, 1989, p. 32)
stipulation that one should act so as to have the greatest amount of contemplation throughout life, not simply at any given time.\textsuperscript{25} So inevitably, as Kraut says, one will have to take a break from contemplation to eat or to go to battle in order to defend one’s city. He summarizes his position by saying, “Such a plan will occasionally involve having less contemplation in the short run; for overwork will ruin one’s health, and as a result one will in the long run have less time for philosophical activity… none of them [the ethical virtues] sets an upper bound on the extent to which contemplation is desirable.”\textsuperscript{26} There is no lifetime in which someone will have contemplated too much, for the greater the extent of the contemplation the more eudaimon the life.

Kraut notes that one may make an objection here and say that his interpretation seems to be promoting a form of ethical egoism, which is problematic to human intuitions of ethics.\textsuperscript{27} The typical scenario used to demonstrate the difficulties with this egoism is this: Imagine you are walking near a lake and contemplating, but then you spot a young girl drowning. You may either rescue the young girl, thereby reducing the amount of eudaimonia you could have had in your life, or you can keep on contemplating and walk on by. The ethical egoist would choose the latter option, which is not only problematic but offensive to our intuitions of what it means to lead a good life.

\textsuperscript{25} (Kraut, 1989, p. 33)
\textsuperscript{26} (Kraut, 1989, p. 33)
\textsuperscript{27} (Kraut, 1989, p. 32)
Kraut, however, maintains that he is not an egoist and that his position is compatible with caring for others. Attempting to explain his position, he says, “Now, if a person should in certain circumstances give up some philosophical activity for the sake of others, then there are cases in which one can contemplate too much. But these are not cases in which one contemplates too much for one’s own good… The person who philosophizes when he should be helping others might not be making a mistake about the value of contemplation; rather his mistake may consist in his insufficient concern for the good of others.”

This reply, however, is deeply problematic for the intellectualist interpretation. If the intellectualist admits that he or she had insufficient concern for others, then he or she is admitting that contemplation is not the sole criterion for eudaimonia. There must be times during which some other ethical concern takes primacy over contemplation. Now, if Aristotle were discussing the life of contemplation alone as the best possible life in theory, then this objection begs the question. Aristotle would never have claimed that the life of only contemplation is possible. However, Aristotle’s remarks that ethics is a discipline in which theory will not suffice and action must be taken seem to suggest that he is viewing the contemplative life as one that is entirely possible (1179a19-b22). Kraut must view it as Aristotle does. So, the intellectualist must admit that contemplation is not always the prime ethical concern. If, on the other hand, he or she maintains that contemplation is the only criterion for determining eudaimonia, then he or she is committed to the view there is no such thing as insufficient concern for others.

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28 (Kraut, 1989, p. 32)
It seems, then, that both interpretations fail to yield a workable and ethically acceptable principle on which one may order one’s life. The inclusive interpretation fails to yield a coherent or practical principle, while the dominant interpretation yields one that is offensive to our ethical intuitions. Clearly, the absence of a workable principle demonstrates the need for a more coherent interpretation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

d. External Goods

The opposition of the place of external goods within Aristotle’s work and within interpretations of it also presents another interesting problem. On most inclusive interpretations, external goods are seen as a means to the ethical virtues. They have no intrinsic value but are only valuable insofar as one is able to use them to pursue morally virtuous activity. The importance of external goods in the dominant interpretation should be easily assumed at this point. In an interpretation in which even ethical activities seem to be a means to contemplation, external goods are clearly only a means, and Kraut’s hierarchy of goods gives explicit support to this conclusion.²⁹ Both of these interpretations seem to be in conflict with what Aristotle says throughout the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

The first mention Aristotle makes of external goods is before he even establishes what *eudaimonia* is or in what it consists. He says that someone might have virtue, but if he endures terrible evils and misfortunes, then no one would consider him to be *eudaimon* (1095b31-1096a4). The most detailed defense of the need for external

²⁹ Kraut’s hierarchy of goods (Kraut, 1980, p. 6).
goods, however, occurs later. After Aristotle has established that *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous activity, he writes, “Nonetheless, happiness evidently also needs external goods to be added… since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources.” (1099a31-b). He goes into further detail and admits that sometimes we use instrumentally friends, wealth, and political power. His next argument is that an excessive deprivation of external goods – he cites good birth, good children, and beauty – makes *eudaimonia* impossible. In the next few paragraphs Aristotle seems to diminish the importance of external goods in the acquisition of *eudaimonia* by arguing that it is not the avoidance of misfortune and the presence of external goods that causes *eudaimonia* (1099b25 – 1100a5). He returns, however, to admit again by citing the example of Priam of Troy that if someone who otherwise would have lived an *eudaimon* life suffers terrible misfortunes, then there is no way that anyone would claim that his life was *eudaimon* (11016-13a).

Aristotle returns to his original point with a further distinction between blessedness and *eudaimonia*. He admits that a person suffering terrible misfortunes would certainly not be blessed, but he or she could still be considered *eudaimon* because of his or her resolve in maintaining virtue (1101b-5). It is also of significance to note that shortly before claiming this, Aristotle suggests, “… while small strokes of good fortune or ill fortune clearly will not influence his life, many great strokes of good fortune will make it more blessed, since in themselves they naturally add adornment to it, and his use of them proves to be fine and excellent.” (1100b34-1101a7). Here, Aristotle seems to be claiming that external goods are not only valuable instrumentally
but also intrinsically. Keeping both points in mind, Aristotle concludes that great misfortunes may remove someone from being considered happy, though not easily. Furthermore, a return to happiness will in the best of circumstances take a long amount of time with great good fortunes (1101a10-12).

What principles, then, may one draw from these passages? It is manifest that external goods are significant to the acquisition and maintenance of *eudaimonia*. It is also not difficult to argue that the external are goods important as instruments to the ethical virtues. Indeed Aristotle says this explicitly. However, Aristotle seems to suggest that the external goods are not simply chosen for the sake of something else. Rather, they are Type 3 goods, valuable both for the sake of something else and for their own sakes. External goods are important from another aspect, that of presence and absence and the degree of presence and absence. Clearly, their presence is necessary, and accordingly their absence critical. However, Aristotle has suggested above that the more of the external goods one has, the more *eudaimon* one is. It is time to move on to the interpretations of the nature external goods.30

The intellectualist interpretation must necessarily view external goods as only a means to *eudaimonia*. Kraut has already distinguished between a life of primary *eudaimonia*, that which is focused on contemplation, and a life of secondary *eudaimonia*, focused on the ethical virtues. Even for this secondarily *eudaimon* life, however, Kraut says, “Every other good should be pursued to the extent that it

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30 Julia Annas makes several points about external goods as well. She notes that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the only one of Aristotle’s works that even makes a mention of the external goods (1999, p. 37). The *Eudemian Ethics* skips over them. Furthermore, she cites that Aristotle was taken by his historical and philosophical successors to have valued the external goods (1999, p. 45).
promotes such excellences as justice, courage, and generosity.”31 This argument seems to conflict with what Aristotle has himself established. Aristotle above has already shown that the external goods are valuable both as a means to the ethical virtues and in and of themselves. Now, it may be the case that one can value the external goods for themselves while still pursuing them for the sake of contemplation, but, given the primacy that Kraut gives contemplation, this interpretation seems difficult to advance. It seems confusing how one may value a thing for itself but give it up as soon as it conflicts with what one really values. Of course, this does not mean that the intellectualist’s view of external goods is impossible to hold. Perhaps the inclusive interpretation will have more success with respect to the criterion of external goods.

There are two inclusivist interpretations on external goods. The first, defended by John Cooper, gives external goods the same instrumental value as does the dominant interpretation.32 Whereas the intellectualist avoids it or diminishes its overall importance, Cooper acknowledges Aristotle’s point that the presence of external goods is needed for the exercise of some virtues. Indeed, he agrees with Aristotle, money is extremely important to the exercise of magnanimity.33 Cooper also recognizes Aristotle’s second point in 1099b-3 that the absence of some particular external goods can mar one’s blessedness.34 Cooper explains the distinction eloquently. The first criterion, that of the presence of certain external goods, he has already explained will make the exercise of certain virtues easier. The second criterion, however, is a

31 (Kraut, 1989, p. 322)
32 Annas calls this the “proto-Stoic” interpretation (Annas, 1999, p. 43).
33 (Cooper, 1985, p. 178)
34 (Cooper, 1985, p. 179)
description of the position at which one stands potentially to achieve eudaimonia. He writes, “Some external conditions … put him [the virtuous person] in the position where the options for action that are presented to him by his circumstances allow him to exercise his virtues fully and in ways that one might describe as normal for the virtues.”\(^{35}\) It is entirely possible, therefore, that a person’s ability to achieve the fullest form of eudaimonia can be limited by the absence of some external goods. Cooper here certainly seems to be suggesting that the external goods have some value the absence of which limits one’s possibility of acquiring eudaimonia to its fullest extent. But Cooper then makes the statement that external goods’ contribution only begins once, “… to whatever extent the virtuous person may himself have aimed at getting and preserving these goods, actually has them.”\(^{36}\) External goods, for Cooper, do not play a role in eudaimonia until one has the ability to use them as instruments for exercising the ethical virtues.

Cooper’s interpretation faces trouble, however. Aristotle notes the example of Priam and explicitly states that no one would consider him to have led an eudaimon life (1101a10-12). But Cooper is arguing that Priam could still be considered eudaimon because he may use the external goods he has remaining to achieve eudaimonia to the extent he is able. Cooper, I think, is missing the point. The argument Aristotle has advanced with the case of Priam is precisely that one needs enough external goods to achieve a certain threshold of eudaimonia. Absence of this amount of external goods excludes one from eudaimonia. And one is not excluded

\(^{35}\) (Cooper, 1985, p. 182)
\(^{36}\) (Cooper, 1985, p. 184)
because one cannot use those nonexistent goods as instruments in achieving a greater form of eudaimonia. One is rather excluded because the very absence of these external goods guarantees that one will never be able to achieve eudaimonia. In other words, these external goods have some intrinsic value that contributes to eudaimonia, while they may certainly also have some instrumental value when present. If they had no intrinsic value, then their absence would have no effect on the acquisition of eudaimonia. For example, the life of virtue is good looks may be eudaimon, but the life of virtue and great looks is likely to be more eudaimon. They would be sufficient conditions to it, easy to maneuver around in achieving eudaimonia. Rather, Aristotle finds them to be necessary conditions to eudaimonia. If one is to be considered eudaimon, one must have had a certain threshold of external goods X, Y, and Z throughout one’s life.

The second interpretation avoids the problem above by presupposing that external goods have both intrinsic and instrumental value.\(^{37}\) Julia Annas summarizes the view succinctly: “I am happy if I am living a life of virtuous activity and have adequate external goods.”\(^{38}\) She also addresses the point of an adequate level by presupposing that some adequate level can be arrived at. This is a huge problem with this interpretation. There is little sense in reading an ethical work if it cannot explain what is the ethically correct thing to do or how to arrive at the notion of ethical correctness.

Annas cites another problem that relates to the completeness of happiness and the intrinsic value of external goods. Eudaimonia is supposed to be complete and self-

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\(^{37}\) The “Peripatetic” interpretation. Irwin and Nussbaum defend this view. (Annas, 1999, p. 45)

\(^{38}\) (Annas, 1999, p. 46)
sufficient. If, however, external goods are intrinsically valuable, then the addition of them to one’s life should increase one’s eudaimonia. But if eudaimonia is complete and self-sufficient, then it cannot be increased. There is clearly a contradiction here. Annas mentions that Irwin attempts to solve the problem by setting a threshold of external goods external goods necessary. Any further accumulation of external goods does not increase how complete eudaimonia is. It simply increases the extent of eudaimonia.39 Annas notes, however, that there is no textual evidence to believe this interpretation.40

No interpretation, then, is able to avoid contradiction in reconciling itself with Aristotle’s remarks on external goods. The dominant interpretation denies the intrinsic value of external goods, and this denial leads to inconsistencies. The first inclusive interpretation commits the same mistake. The second inclusivist interpretation is able to give external goods intrinsic value and thereby avoid the contradiction made by the first two, but there is unfortunately little textual evidence to support such an interpretation. Furthermore, Aristotle on this view has given no mechanism by which one may decide how much of each external good would be an adequate measure to achieve eudaimonia. The absence of a mechanism, in my opinion, is the larger problem of the two, as scholars are generally able to contrive clever textual solutions for textual problems. Aristotle himself does little to help the interpretations. Indeed his own account seems to be full of apparent contradictions, and if not contradictions then confusions.

39 (Annas, 1999, p. 46)
40 (Annas, 1999, p. 47)
e. The Ergon Argument and Interpretations

The *ergon* argument is the foundation for all ensuing claims made about *eudaimonia* that follow it. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine each view’s interpretation of it, as this interpretation will likely be to blame for all of the difficulties a view faces. The *ergon* argument will be the last aspect of each interpretation that this paper will examine. It will then move on to discuss problems with the argument itself and one possible solution. The *ergon* argument, to recapitulate, takes the following form:

**E1:** The function, or *ergon*, of each thing is its characteristic activity.

**E2:** The specific *ergon* of man is activity in accordance with the rational part of the soul.

**E3(C):** Human *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous activity.

Then, of course, there is the caveat that the good for man ends up being activity of the soul in accordance with best and most complete virtue. Depending on how one interprets this argument, one’s interpretation can change drastically.

Kraut makes an interpretation of E3 when he claims, “Aristotle is not saying that virtuous activity is just one good among many… clearly, he needs a special argument because he is singling out virtuous activity and giving it a special status.”\(^41\) The relation between Kraut’s interpretation of the conclusion of the *ergon* argument and his conception of *eudaimonia* should now be very clear. It is precisely the same thing; contemplative activity is the sole constituent of *eudaimonia*, and all actions are done

\(^{41}\) (Kraut, 1989, p. 199)
for its sake. As we have seen, there are many problems with this conclusion, but those have already been addressed. However, scholars still have some objections to Kraut’s conclusion.

Irwin, in his review of Kraut, argues that Kraut has taken the wrong sense of the phrase ‘in accordance with’ here.42 There are two senses in which one may interpret the phrase. The first, Irwin says, is the ‘prescriptive’ sense, and indeed this is the way in which Kraut seems to have interpreted it. In the prescriptive interpretation, ‘in accordance with’ means, “… happiness consists wholly in actions that are fully characteristic of, and prescribed by, the different virtues – actions that fully manifest bravery, temperance, and so on.”43 So, the only things that constitute eudaimonia for someone are his or her actions that exhibit virtue. By doing something not exhibiting virtue, one has reduced one’s possible eudaimonia. It should be easy to see what sorts of difficulties this interpretation will encounter. Irwin also advances another interpretation, one which he calls ‘regulative’. As the name suggests, a life is virtuous if it is regulated by virtue. In other words, not every action must be a full exhibition of some particular virtue. This interpretation is much more forgiving in its account of the good life.44

This distinction ‘prescriptive’ and ‘regulative’ is also the distinction between the notions of an intellectual and an inclusive end as eudaimonia. To demonstrate the problems for each, Irwin uses the example of the… “… recreations and amusements

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42 Jon Miller takes a similar interpretation. A good life, according to Miller, is committed to a certain good. In other words, it is in accordance with that good primarily (Miller, 2011, p. 67).
43 (Irwin, 1991, p. 390)
44 (Irwin, 1991, p. 390)
of virtuous people.”45 Let us assume that person X is virtuous (We must also assume that we know what it means to be a virtuous person, but that is beside the point for now.). Person X watches a film or takes a walk. Is person X doing something virtuous? Is he or she leading a virtuous life? According to the prescriptive interpretation, no he or she is not. A virtuous life must consist of actions that actively exhibit virtue. Person X, because of his or her walk, cannot now be as virtuous as he or she could have been, thereby sacrificing the highest possible eudaimonia he or she could have acquired by choosing to walk instead of choosing to do a virtuous action. But people walk all the time, and certainly eudaimon people must walk from time to time. On this view, however, it would seem that no one is fully eudaimon. Is that the view that Aristotle is advancing? Certainly, there is no textual evidence against this interpretation of the ergon argument, but such a life is difficult to conceptualize and likely impossible to lead. Now, the intellectualist could object here by saying that non-virtuous actions do not take away from one’s eudaimonia so long as they are sought instrumentally with the long term goal of virtuous activity in mind and not for their own sakes. Perhaps person X is walking to better his or her health, which would in turn allow him or her a longer life of virtue. Indeed, there are real world constraints on how much virtuous activity one may partake in. Person X has to eat, but it does seem in line with the ergon argument that he or she only eats with the goal of maximal contemplation in mind. It seems ridiculous, however, that person X is not allowed to walk just because he or she derives some pleasure out of walking. Perhaps it is the

45 (Irwin, 1991, p. 390). The rest of this paragraph draws from the same passage.
case that Aristotle’s *eudaimon* person is something inconceivable to us, but let us look
at the other interpretation before concluding so.

According to the ‘regulative’ interpretation, by contrast, person X would still be
living a good life if he or she chose to walk instead of relentlessly choosing to do
virtuous actions. This interpretation, nevertheless, reduces to an equally problematic
conclusion. It is entirely acceptable that person X is able to choose to go on a walk and
still live a life in accordance with virtue. After all, he or she is not torturing or
humiliating other people, so he or she is certainly not doing anything vicious to reduce
the amount of *eudaimonia* in his or her life.\(^46\) However, this forgiving sense of ‘in
accordance with’ will also pose problems. What if after person X goes on a walk he or
she decides to take a shower? Now, suppose this is a very long shower. Has person X
done anything harmful or vicious to anyone else? The answer is no. So, the level of
*eudaimonia* in person X’s life has gone neither up nor done. Person X is still
*eudaimon*. If one takes the concept further and further, however, the problem becomes
increasingly apparent. As long as person X has accomplished one virtuous action in
his or her life, then he or she will be able to spend the rest of his or life doing simply
neutral actions and still be *eudaimon*. Of course, Aristotle himself rejects this sort of
life as a candidate for the *eudaimon* life when he mentions that one must be virtuous
throughout life (1098a17).

One may try to work with Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* and maintain a
regulative interpretation. One may argue that it takes a certain threshold of virtuous

\(^{46}\) (Kraut, 1989, p. 390)
activity to achieve eudaimonia. For instance, if a brave person is cheap, then that person is not truly eudaimon, for he or she has not fully realized all of the ethical virtues. The same objection that applied to the more simple manifestation of this conclusion, however, still applies to this more intricate version. What shall person X do after he or she has done some number of virtuous act in accordance with each of the virtues? Is it not perfectly permissible according to this interpretation that person X can live his or life in any way desired after achieving a specific threshold of eudaimonia? Indeed it is, and that conclusion is just as ridiculous as saying that every action in one’s life must lead to virtue or else eudaimonia is impossible.

So, eudaimonia simply cannot be something that is measured in absolute terms. A certified amount of virtue X + a certified amount of virtue Y cannot equal an eudaimon life. The primary concern here is familiar: It is impossible to know how to arrange one’s life. Indeed one may know which virtues to include in one’s life, but knowledge of the degree to which is equally imperative. The only way to understand eudaimonia is proportionally, and for this reason the conclusion of the ergon argument must be prescriptive to some extent. There must be some hierarchy of goods to follow in ordering the best possible sort of life. However, an interpretation of the best possible life should not produce a life unlivable. It should account for aspects of human life that would not make the interpretation ridiculous. So, the current prescriptive interpretation and the regulative interpretation of the conclusion of the ergon argument, then, do not seem to capture the entire a picture, and we will return to
this notion later. There is some hope in a restricted version of the prescriptive interpretation.

Ackrill makes an interesting point about the *ergon* argument that will be beneficial to address here. In trying to understand the *ergon* of man, he notes, “In fact, practical reason, so far from being in any way less distinctive of man than theoretical, is really more so; for man shares with Aristotle’s god the activity of *theoria*.”\(^47\) Of course, the argument that the function of man lies solely in practical reason, the results of which are the ethical virtues, is difficult to reconcile with Aristotle’s apparent doctrine that contemplation is the highest of the virtues. Indeed, it may even pose the question of what Aristotle’s true doctrine is. Ackrill admits this, of course. He says that Aristotle has several reasons for supposing the primacy of *theoria* in the composite end. His argument nonetheless pushes us in the right direction by looking at something more distinctive in man than in all other creatures and by doing so in a way that Aristotle did not himself do.

### III. The Ergon Argument Per Se

#### a. The Problem of Human Nature

Every interpretation examined so far has failed to produce a coherent ethical theory, and each has failed to make sense of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. As we discussed above, if method three, which consisted in interpreting the *NE* in such way as to make it read consistently and coherently, failed, then one may pursue other methods of working with the *NE*.

\(^{47}\) (Ackrill, 1980, p. 27)
One may trace many of the difficulties of the \textit{NE} back to the components of the \textit{ergon} argument. The \textit{ergon} argument does not give a clear-cut guide for determining how contemplation and ethical activity relate to one another and to \textit{eudaimonia}. Given the fundamental nature of the argument to Aristotle’s work, it should have been able to more definitively do so. Intellectualists take the argument along with other evidence and conclude that fulfilling \textit{theoria} is the function of man. Meanwhile, inclusivists interpret the text to say that \textit{eudaimonia}, and accordingly the function of man, consists in a composite end with many goods. The former are unable to explain the complete and self-sufficient nature of \textit{eudaimonia} with respect to their interpretation. The latter group, however, does not have trouble explaining the finality, completeness, or self-sufficiency of their take on \textit{eudaimonia}. Where inclusivists run into trouble, however, is when attempting to discern some guiding ethical principle by which one may organize one’s life. Their interpretation of the \textit{ergon} argument, and consequently their notion of \textit{eudaimonia}, gives no way to decide what the final good is or how one may choose between two competing goods. Where the inclusivists lack, however, the intellectualists and their interpretation of human \textit{ergon} seems promising. They are able to yield a principle, a simple one in fact. However, their principle is one that is difficult to abide by. Lastly, neither interpretation is able to account for the importance of the external goods. The external goods are clearly important to Aristotle both as instruments and as intrinsic goods, but the form of the \textit{ergon} argument suggests that the interpretations must regard their value mostly as instruments. Interpreters were
going to have difficulties from the start.\textsuperscript{48} We may accordingly move on to the other methods of making sense of the \textit{Nichomachean Ethics}.

The first method, rejecting the work as a whole and salvaging working parts, is still too drastic a measure. The second method alone is also too drastic. Some combination of re-interpreting Aristotle and critically looking at his arguments should work here. It is once again beneficial to summarize the \textit{ergon} argument – I assure you: It will be the last time. The \textit{ergon} argument looks as follows, and it has been modified to include Aristotle’s caveat as another conclusion:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{E1}: The function, or \textit{ergon}, of each thing is doing well its characteristic activity.
\item \textbf{E2}: The specific \textit{ergon} of man is activity in accordance with the rational part of the soul.
\item \textbf{E3(C)}: Human \textit{eudaimonia} consists in virtuous activity.
\item \textbf{E4(C)}: If there is more than one virtuous activity, then in accordance with the best and most complete (or most final) virtuous activity.
\end{itemize}

This argument is no doubt familiar by now, and the form is just that of a deductive argument. The problem with the entire \textit{Nichomachean Ethics} lies within one line of this argument. Aristotle, I believe, has mischaracterized human nature, and his entire work suffers for it. In the coming pages, a new conception of human nature will emerge, a conception that is not at all at odds with what Aristotle has to say in the rest

\textsuperscript{48} Wilkes cites that the mixture of divine and non-divine is unstable (Wilkes, 1980, p. 352). Wilkes is not discussing the problems with the \textit{ergon} argument in the sense I do here, but her remarks still ring true.
of the \textit{NE}.

\textbf{b. A New \textit{Ergon} for Humankind}

E1 states that everything possesses some characteristic activity, and when that
something performs its characteristic well, it said to be a good thing of its type. There
is no problem with this statement. So it is easy to move on from here. It will better to
quote E2 in its entirety:

\begin{quote}
“What, then, could this [the human function] be? For living is
apparently shared with plants, but what we are looking for is the
special function of a human being; hence we should set aside
the life of nutrition and growth. The life next in order is some
sort of life of sense-perception; but this too is apparently shared
with horse, ox, and every animal. The remaining possibility,
then is some sort of life of action of part of the soul that has
reason” (1097b22-1098a20).
\end{quote}

Here Aristotle is trying to look at what is \textit{idion}, or unique, to humans. In doing so, he
precludes the life of nutrition and the life of perception. Only the life of reason
remains. It is in this preclusion that Aristotle makes the gravest error of his work. He
proclaims that what is \textit{idion} to man is simply his ability to reason, but this
proclamation I contest to be false.

My criticism of Aristotle’s E2 is drawn partly from Thomas Nagel’s analysis
of the \textit{ergon} argument. Nagel gives an analysis of E2 and aptly compares it to a more
simple type of object to illustrate his point. He compares the function of man to the
function of a combination corkscrew and bottle opener. This artifact has the function
of removing corks and caps from bottles. However, it shares the function of removing
corks in common with any regular corkscrew, so that cannot be its \textit{idion} function. Is
its *ergon*, then, to remove caps from bottles? Certainly not, as a simple bottle opener can do that. Nagel concludes that this corkscrew has a conjunctive *ergon*.49

Humans, by contrast, cannot have a conjunctive *ergon*. Aristotle has already established that what is unique to humans does not lie in nutrition or perception. But Nagel goes further and says that there is no way that human function can be reason, as human beings share reason with the gods.50 Nagel concludes his analysis of E2 saying, “But in fact the conjunctive picture of the component capacities of the human soul is absurd…”51 It is precisely this *absurd*, conjunctive concept that I intend to advance – out of necessity, as we have shown above. I hope to show that this concept is not only not absurd but also the proper way in which one must understand the *ergon* of humankind. However, first we must understand Nagel’s argument and see if we need to reject it.

Nagel further goes to describe the *ergon* of a giraffe. The function of giraffe is, “… not just the conjunction of excellences of its component functions but the optimal functioning of the total system in the giraffe’s *life*.”52 So even giraffes have a conjunctive *ergon*. Humans, however, are different, according to Nagel. We have reason, and our organic functions support both non-rational and rational activity. Nagel is willing to admit that humans employ reason to eat and to move and to do

49 (Nagel, 1980, p. 9-10)
50 (Nagel, 1980, p. 10). Perhaps Ackrill would object by saying that human beings share only divine reason with the gods. Practical reason is indeed within the uniquely human domain. That is not a line of thought, however, that is worthwhile to follow here. It will lead to more severe contradictions than either the dominant or inclusive interpretations would ever hope to. Wilkes hints toward a similar breakdown of *ergon* by arguing that it may be intelligence in general (Wilkes, 1980, p. 354).
51 (Nagel, 1980, p. 10)
other non-rational things. However, he maintains that this is not the purpose of reason. He writes, “… the highest-level account of a human life puts all other function into a supportive position in relation to rational activity. And although reason helps us get enough to eat and move around, it is not subservient to those lower functions.” There is an obvious objection here regarding what Nagel takes the definition of subservient to be, but his argument here makes little difference to his conclusion. Nagel finishes his interpretation with the usual intellectualist views. A life primarily devoted to contemplation is what Nagel concludes to be the ergon of man. There should be no need to reiterate the problems with this view.

Now, we must return to what Nagel has just referred to as absurd: the conjunctive ergon of man. E2 is based entirely on descriptive statements of the human soul and souls in general. The statements are the following:

\[ A: x \text{ has a nutritive element in its soul} \]

\[ B: x \text{ has a perceptive element in its soul} \]

\[ C: x \text{ has a rational element in its soul} \]

\[ x: \text{A creature with a soul} \]

Based on these relational statements, one can signify the construction of any given soul. From these notations, one is able to determine the ergon of each type of soul. The table below shows the logical notations of each type of soul.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plants</th>
<th>Gods</th>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>Humans</th>
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53 (Nagel, 1980, p. 11)
Plants are easy to signify here. They only have element in their soul: A. Accordingly, their *ergon* is likely to just grow. A includes all activities related to nutrition, such as eating and sleeping. Gods are equally simple. They must reason to be gods. Animals are slightly more complex. They must both grow well and perceive well to be a good instance of their class. All Aristotle means by perception here is that something has sensory and locomotive capacities. Moreover, this element must also contain the desire to reproduce, as it is no secret that animals reproduce. Humans are the last and most complex of the four types of soul. They have element A. Indeed, humans are able to grow. Moreover, humans have element B by virtue of the fact that we can move and reproduce. We also, however, take something from the gods: C. We share every individual element of our soul with some other type of creature, but there is definitely something that makes humans unique. Ironically, Nagel has already given the answer to the question. There is no trouble in deducing that human beings also have a conjunctive *ergon*. A new *ergon* argument emerges here. It takes the following form:

**E1:** The function, or *ergon*, of each thing is doing well its characteristic activity.

**E2:** The specific *ergon* of man is activity in accordance with each part of his soul.

**E3(C):** Human *eudaimonia* consists in proper satisfaction of the nutritive part of the soul through nutritional activity, the perceptive part of the soul through perceptive activity, and the rational part of the soul through virtuous activity.

**E4(C):** If there is more than one virtuous activity, then in accordance with the best and most complete (or most final) virtuous activity.
It is not quite apparent here, however, how one is able to make the jump from E3 and include E4. Translators are partly to blame for this confusion, for they have overused the word ‘virtue’, and I am partly to blame for the confusion because I did not address it earlier. Aristotle explicitly defines virtue, in fact: “The same is true unconditionally in every case, when we add to the function the superior achievement that expresses the virtue; for a harpist’s function, e. g. is to play the harp, and a good harpist’s is to do it well” (1098a10-12). Irwin should have translated ‘virtue’ (arête) here as ‘excellence’. Virtue in the ergon argument is not some ethically or mentally good thing (it is, of course, for humans), it is simply doing in an excellent manner what one is supposed. In other words, fulfilling one’s ergon excellently is virtue. It should not be difficult to jump between E3 and E4 now. The ergon argument is again a cohesive whole.

The conclusion for human ergon is then no different than Nagel’s conclusion for the ergon of a combination corkscrew and bottle opener. Humans are, in fact, composite beings, and our ergon should reflect this. Of course, Aristotle’s E4 dictates that if there is some part of our ergon that is best and most complete or final, then we should live a life in accordance with that specific part. Though this may seem problematic at first because of its striking similarity to the dominant view, it poses absolutely no problem to what follows. Next I will advance an interpretation of the Nichomachean Ethics based on this conception of the soul that explains the work beautifully. This interpretation will avoid many, if not all, of the pitfalls of the two predominant interpretations.

IV. A New Interpretation
The interpretation this section defends is a hybrid of both the dominant and inclusivist interpretation. It takes from the strengths and avoids the weaknesses of both. This section will go through each of the criteria set forth in Section II that must be satisfied in order for a working interpretation of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* to come forth. This section will examine this new interpretation with regard to (a) what place it gives contemplation and ethical activity, (b) the criteria Aristotle sets forth in Book I for *eudaimonia*, (c) whether it establishes a guiding ethical principle off of which one may lead one’s life, and (d) how it reconciles with Aristotle’s claims about the external goods. Each division will contain a short review of how each of the other interpretations dealt with that particular criterion, and then we will discuss how this new interpretation does so. Henceforth this new interpretation will be referred to as the ordered interpretation.

**a. The Place of Contemplation and Ethical Activity**

The dominant interpretation gave primacy to contemplation as the only good sought for its own sake. It was the only Type 2 good. Ethical activity was only valuable as a means to contemplation. The inclusive interpretation, on the other hand, maintained that both contemplation and ethical activity were sought for their own sakes. Ackrill’s hybrid interpretation gave contemplation and ethical activity Type 2 and Type 3 status respectively.

The ordered interpretation assigns place and value according to the *ergon* argument. Contemplation is the virtue corresponding to the highest part of the human soul, and therefore is the highest of the virtues. Human *eudaimonia*, however, consists
in fulfilling all capacities of the human soul, so contemplation is a Type 3 good. It is sought for its own sake and for the sake of the greater good, *eudaimonia*. Similarly, the ethical virtues are type 3 goods on this view, as they are sought for their sake but also for the sake of both *eudaimonia* and contemplation. This is to say that they directly contribute to *eudaimonia* and contribute through making contemplation possible. In order to fully understand this, let us now go back the breakdown of the soul.

Human *ergon* consists in exercising all three parts of the soul. There is, of course, a hierarchy between parts. Neither intellectualists nor inclusivists deny this. The rational part is highest, then the perceptive part, and last the nutritional part. In humans (not in gods, however) the nutritional and perceptive parts of the soul provide support to the higher, rational part. Put simply, eating and perceiving is what makes thinking possible. This is true both in the sense that we think at our best when we have eaten enough and in the sense that eating sustains life, an activity of which is thinking. The same argument applies for perceptive and locomotive capacities. Without senses, it is impossible to think in a characteristically human way. Now, the rational soul is split up into two parts; this distinction remains in my interpretation of E2. The part that obeys reason correlates to the ethical virtues and the part that commands reason to contemplation. Just as nutrition and perception make the higher level activity of reason possible, the lower level activity of obeying reason contributes to the existence of the higher level activity of commanding reason.
All that has been proven so far is that nutrition, perception, and ethical activity are Type 1 goods with respect to contemplation. We must further prove that they are intrinsically valuable to *eudaimonia*. Two arguments come to mind here. First, if human *ergon* consists in achieving excellence in all three parts of the soul, then each part of the soul must be intrinsically valuable for its own sake. This is to say that it is a necessary condition of the *eudaimon* life that it will have properly satisfied all lower order goods. For it is impossible to be fully *eudaimon* with the absence of food, according to the new E2. If food were only a sufficient condition for *eudaimonia*, then it would be possible to be *eudaimon* without eating, but our breakdown of the human function denies this. If one is *eudaimon*, then one has an adequate amount of food; this is to say that there is something intrinsic in the value of food the absence of which would make *eudaimonia* impossible. The same argument applies for the perceptive part of the soul and the part that obeys reason.

Further evidence exists for the lower goods’ intrinsic value. This evidence comes from Nagel’s statement that sometimes we employ our higher order capacities in order to achieve our lower order ones. This employment of reason to cook a recipe seems to suggest that at some given time the desire of nutrition, and likely some sort of pleasure, supersedes the importance of reasoning. If the lower goods had no intrinsic value, it would be entirely unnecessary to utilize higher parts of the soul to

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54 A clever question to this claim was, “What would excellence in cell-division amount to?” While humorous, I believe it actually represents my point fittingly. Excellent cell division leads to not having cancer, which means one has good health. One is able because of this good health then to act virtuously. Of course, one could act virtuously without good health, but the life with virtue and good health is best. So, as I said before, even nutrition is sought for its own sake.

55 (Nagel, 1980, p. 11)
satisfy the needs of the lower parts. Perhaps the strongest evidence comes from Aristotle himself when he writes that practical wisdom, though important as a means to contemplation, should also be valued intrinsically (1144a-11).

So, the ordered interpretation takes both contemplation and ethical activity to be Type 3 goods. This view shares components with the other interpretations, and so the objections to them should also apply to it. All these objections will be addressed below.

b. Criteria for Eudaimonia

_Eudaimonia_, according to Aristotle, must be the most final good, the most complete good, and an entirely self-sufficient good. It is in reconciling themselves with these criteria that some interpretations began to crumble. The dominant interpretation was shown to contradict Aristotle because _eudaimonia_ simply could not be equal to contemplation, as the latter was not the most complete good. Nor was it self-sufficient or final. The inclusive view had no problem meeting this set of criteria. Ackrill advanced a similar interpretation to the ordered interpretation, but he failed to build a detailed enough theory because he lacked the textual evidence.

The ordered interpretation, having an inclusive end, also satisfies the criteria put forth here. The composite good is the most final good. Both contemplation and ethical activity are sought for the sake of it. It is most complete. It contains all possible virtues. Lastly, it is self-sufficient. There is nothing the addition of which will add to the _eudaimonia_ of the person possessing it according to the ordered interpretation.

It is undoubtedly confusing why the ordered interpretation does not face the
same difficulty as the dominant interpretation, as they both give primacy of one sort to contemplation. The ordered interpretation certainly does give primacy to ethical activity, but it does so within the context of a greater composite good. So it is certainly the most final of the virtues themselves, as E2 suggests. But E2 also dictates that there be a greater good a constituent of which must be contemplation. The dominant view, by contrast, does nothing of the sort. For intellectualists, contemplation is the most final, complete, and self-sufficient good. When it is proven that in fact contemplation cannot be so because of Aristotle’s remarks on friendship and his principle that of goods the greater is always better, the dominant interpretation falls apart. The ordered interpretation and the inclusive interpretation, however, never claim anything of the sort. The inclusive interpretation simply treats contemplation and ethical activity as equally intrinsic goods, while the ordered interpretation gives primacy to contemplation within the context of a greater composite good.56

c. A Guiding Principle

Whereas with respect to criteria of eudaimonia, the dominant view failed, here the inclusive interpretation fails to yield anything of value. The dominant interpretation is able to give this principle: Act so as to maximize contemplation. This principle is indeed problematic, but the inclusive interpretation cannot even generate a workable principle of how to achieve eudaimonia. If no ethical principle can be derived from an interpretation of an ethical work, then that interpretation should be of little use to anyone. If we recall the dominant interpretation’s principle, however, it was ultimately

56 Rorty gives primacy to theoria in a similar manner within the context of a greater good (Rorty, 1980, p. 386). He says it is given primacy because of its particular subject.
one that was offensive to our ethical intuitions, as it allowed someone to continue
contemplation while someone in front of them was drowning. Ethical egoism was fatal
to the dominant interpretation. Ackrill’s hybrid interpretation was not developed fully
enough to yield any principle, so there was no discussion of it in this section.

The ordered interpretation, however, shines with respect to this criterion. It is not
only able to generate a normative ethical principle but also one that is not prima facie
offensive to any ethical intuition one might have. Once again, this principle is derived
from the modified E2. The principle is this: Act so to maximize contemplation so long
as all other excellences and needs are not neglected. The first part of this principle,
which indeed is the dominant interpretation’s principle, derives from E4. Since the
rational part of the soul is the highest in human beings, it only makes sense with E4
that we should strive to exercise that part as much as possible. But E2 provides a
necessary and ethical caveat to the principle. Our contemplation should never come at
the excessive cost of any other good. We should not contemplate instead of going to
war. Moreover, if someone is drowning in front of us, we have not diminished the
possible amount eudaimonia in our lives by saving them!

Moreover, the ordered interpretation does not have the difficulties of the inclusive
interpretation. There is no need to weigh different goods against each other. As Kraut
states, without a mechanism to decide between them the process of weighing them is
futile. The inclusive view would simply lead to moral paralysis. The ordered
interpretation avoids this pitfall. One should act to maximize contemplation, of course.
So there is no need to weigh contemplation with any other good unless one is lacking
in that good. For instance if one is hungry, it is entirely acceptable to eat something instead of contemplating in starvation. It is part of human nature as a matter of fact.

One may also argue that the *eudaimon* person of the ordered interpretation would also be stuck trying to maintain an equilibrium of goods that he or she was lacking. There is a distinction, however, to be made between the equilibrium of the inclusive view and that of the ordered view. The principle of the ordered view does not say that there is an equilibrium. Instead, one should always seek to maximize contemplation and pursue any ethical virtue that does so. However, if one is lacking in some particular virtue, then he or she should pursue that until it is to an adequate level. Pursuit of an adequate level is entirely separate from maintenance of an equilibrium. Adequacy, for one, does not require constant activity. One is able to wait until a good is about to be lacking. The principle of the inclusive view, however, would require its *eudaimon* person to constantly weight between all his or her goods and decide to pursue the lowest amount, which would then change very quickly. The principle of the ordered interpretation, then, is superior to both that of dominant and that of the inclusive interpretation.

d. *External Goods*

The ordered interpretation perhaps best handles Aristotle’s statements of external goods of all three interpretations. If we recall, Aristotle states several times in *NE* that the absence of the external goods would prohibit *eudaimonia* from existing. In other words, the presence of external goods seems to be a necessary condition of *eudaimonia*. Neither the dominant nor inclusive view could reconcile itself with these
remarks. The dominant view only saw external goods as a means to achieving contemplation, so it led to contradiction. One inclusivist interpretation agreed with the dominant interpretations view of external goods, and fell to the same arguments. Another inclusivist interpretation, however, maintained that an adequate level of external goods was required for *eudaimonia*. This interpretation had little textual evidence. Furthermore, both the ‘prescriptive’ and ‘regulative’ conception of ‘in accordance with’ led to absurdities. The ‘prescriptive’ interpretation led a life that was ultimately unlivable. On the other hand, the ‘regulative’ interpretation portrayed a standard of goodness that could hardly be called ethical. The ordered interpretation fares far better here than each of the aforementioned.

Looking again to the modified E2, one can deduce that external goods will have both intrinsic and instrumental value to *eudaimonia*. The external goods are, after all, what satisfy the desires of the nutritive and perceptive part of the human soul. Food satisfies the nutritive. Certain sorts of pleasures satisfy the perceptive. So the ordered interpretation manages to avoid any inconsistency with Aristotle with respect to external goods. In fact, one could argue that the ordered interpretation, far from contradicting Aristotle, actually reinforces what he says about external goods elsewhere in the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

The ordered interpretation also avoids the difficulty of not being able to decide on an adequate level of external goods. The guiding principle of the interpretation helps here. One should only pursue external if they are lacking. Once they are at an adequate level, one should turn one’s mind to higher order capacities. What is an adequate level,
however? Does this interpretation not suffer the same problem as Annas’? It does not entirely, for the ordered interpretation sets the criterion for *eudaimonia* forward in E2 and E4, and this criterion sets the adequate level. External goods are at an adequate level both when they are not lacking in themselves, and when their absence does not prevent one from pursuing contemplation. Absence will determine adequacy on this view, whereas on the inclusive interpretation there is no way to determine it.

Irwin’s interpretation faced another problem, namely that there was no upper bound to the amount of external goods one may have and the extent to which they may contribute to one’s *eudaimonia*. His response was that once all external goods reached a certain threshold, any increase in any one of them would only increase *eudaimonia* in degree, as opposed to increasing it in kind. The answer was at best clumsy, and Annas noted that there was no textual evidence to support it.57 The problem of upper bounds, however, does not present itself to the ordered interpretation, for the interpretation itself sets a limit to what amounts of not only the external goods but also the ethical virtues are acceptable. The bound is similar to Kraut’s upper bound, which stated that once pursuit of ethical virtues affected the amount of contemplation one could do, then one had reached the upper bound of pursuing ethical virtues.58 The ordered interpretation says this: Pursue external goods so long as they do not take time away from contemplation or ethical virtues. Ethical virtues are included in this principle because of the hierarchy of the human soul. The ordered interpretation also seems to have a lower bound, which states that one may pursue an external good over

57 (Annas, 1999, p. 47)
58 (Kraut, 1989, p. 33)
ethical virtues and contemplation if that external good is lacking. So, if one may choose to exercise over going to work or contemplating if one has enough money but health is lacking.

There are upper and lower bounds for each type of good, then. Contrary to what Kraut proposes, one can contemplate too much if one begins to lack in either ethical virtues or external goods because of one’s contemplation. Nonetheless, one should seek to maximize contemplation. Ethical virtues should only be pursued until they are no longer lacking. Then time should be devoted to contemplation. It is the same case with external goods. However, as soon as either external goods or ethical activity begins to lack, one can pursue either without negatively impacting one’s eudaimonia. Indeed, one’s eudaimonia is entirely dependent upon pursuing the right type of good when it is needed and then returning to contemplation once order has been restored. These upper and lower bounds have also solved the problem of deciding between a prescriptive and regulative notion of ‘in accordance with’. The bounds are both prescriptive and regulative. One is free to pursue neutral actions, which generally relate to external goods, so long as it does not take away from one’s contemplation.

V. Conclusion

We have discussed both the dominant and inclusive interpretation of the ergon of humankind and consequently eudaimonia. The dominant interpretation, which equated contemplation with eudaimonia, contradicted itself when trying to fit contemplation into Aristotle’s prescribed criteria for eudaimonia. The guiding principle of the dominant interpretation, which amounted to ethical egoism, was an unpalatable
conclusion and was accordingly discarded. Moreover, the dominant interpretation contradicted Aristotle’s remarks on external goods. The inclusive interpretation fared slightly better. There was no contradiction in the inclusive interpretation’s conception of eudaimonia against Aristotle’s criteria. However, the inclusive interpretation failed to yield any workable principle for living one’s life, an absolute necessity for an interpretation of an ethical work. Last, the inclusive interpretation’s view of external goods reduced itself to absurdities on several levels.

It was then necessary to reconsider portions of the Nichomachean Ethics and attempt to build a coherent theory by modifying these portions. The ergon argument was the prime candidate for this examination, as it was the source of nearly every contradiction within the interpretations. We modified the idion, or uniqueness, argument to reflect a more proper understanding of human nature. E2 changed from claiming that the ergon of humankind lay in one particular part of the soul to claiming that the ergon of humans consisted in satisfying every part of their souls to the proper extent. This small modification had drastic results for the ensuing interpretation.

The interpretation, which we deemed ‘ordered’, avoided every problem of the two previous interpretations. It maintained that eudaimonia is a composite good with contemplation and ethical activity and even external goods being both intrinsically valuable and instrumentally valuable to it. Contemplation, of course, maintained its primacy, being the highest part of humankind. Moreover, both the ethical virtues and external were proven to be necessary and sufficient conditions to achieving contemplation and thereby achieving eudaimonia. A guiding principle followed from
the ordered interpretation: Act so to maximize contemplation so long as none of the ethical virtues or external goods is lacking. This powerful ethical principle contained within it upper and lower bounds for each level of good. The ordered interpretation surpassed any other interpretation in providing a coherent and consistent interpretation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

So, the ordered interpretation has fared better than either of the two other interpretations. Why not just combine the dominant and inclusive interpretation without changing E2, then? After all, that is what the ordered interpretation does. This is not possible, however. The dominant and inclusive interpretations contradict each other at every corner. Moreover, the *ergon* argument as at stood would make this hybrid interpretation incomprehensible. One must modify E2 if any successful combination of both interpretations is to exist. The ordered interpretation is superior in every aspect, as has been shown.

As I stated before beginning my modification of the *ergon* argument, this interpretation is not one that Aristotle himself advances. There are clear objections to changing a work in order to fit one’s viewpoint, but that is not what has gone here. I have changed the work so that it actually yields a usable theory of ethics. The modification, moreover, was of a single line in the entire work, but the repercussions of changing that one line allowed the creation of a coherent, almost beautifully flowing interpretation of *NE*. Was the change worth the results that came about, or
would it have been better to attempt another interpretation with the words that Aristotle provides us? I leave that for the reader to decide.

Wei Liu arrives at a similar conclusion without modifying anything Aristotle says. His thesis is that the Aristotelian philosopher actually possesses all the virtues and considerable other goods. His analysis of the *Nichomachean Ethics* relies on five different steps, all relating to the virtues of mind. Discussion of his work is both beyond the scope of this paper and beyond the scope my skill.
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