

Teleology in Aristotle's Practical Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the debate on the relation between Aristotle's practical and theoretical philosophy. It argues that his practical philosophy depends to a considerable extent on his teleological conception of nature. This thesis is primarily directed against scholars who maintain that Aristotle does not derive political and human relations from natural or cosmic conditions. The paper defends David Sedley's anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle's natural teleology and shows how Aristotle applies teleological explanations to power relations among human beings – among men and women and among freemen and natural slaves – and their purposes and goals. The article focuses on Aristotle's human 'function' (*ergon*) argument, which is a teleological argument at the centre of his practical philosophy. It argues that this argument, which Aristotle presents to define 'human flourishing' or 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*), depends on his definition of man as the only 'living being that has language and reason' (*zôon logon echon*). It further claims that the dispute about whether Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* only with a life of contemplation or whether *eudaimonia* includes a political life can be clarified by referring to the natural purpose of *logos*.

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1. THE RELATION BETWEEN ARISTOTLE'S PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

An important controversy in Aristotle scholarship concerns the relation between his practical and theoretical philosophy. Many scholars claim that Aristotle's practical philosophy – mainly ethics and political philosophy – is independent of his theoretical philosophy and in particular of his theory of being.¹ In contrast, Andreas Kamp

argues that Aristotle's political philosophy depends especially on his theory of 'substance' (*ousia*), which is often considered the centre of his theoretical philosophy (Kamp 1985, 11, 353).²

autonomous and that usually one science cannot prove "the theorems of a different one" (*An. Post.* 1.7, trans. Barnes).

- 2 Apart from Aristotle's theory of 'substance' (*ousia*), Kamp considers his theory of *logos* and his conception of *soul-nous* to be the central instances of the dependence of his political theory on his theoretical philosophy; see Kamp's synopsis (1985, 353–362). Partly in line with Kamp, Irwin (1980) claims that Aristotle's ethics depends on his psychological and metaphysical doctrines. For a volume which argues that Aristotle's ethics is considerably more similar to a science (as conceived in his two *Analyt-ics*) than usually assumed, see Henry and Nielsen (eds. 2015). The editors explain on p. 2: "The central question of the volume is: To what extent do Aristotle's ethical

1 For a long list of works that defend this view, see Kamp (1985, 9). Kamp lists works by William L. Newman, Alexander Grant, Werner Jaeger, H. v. Arnim, Hellmut Flashar, Günther Bien, Hans Jochim Krämer, Manfred Riedel, Eckart Schütrumpf, Wolfgang Kullmann, and several others which claim the independence of Aristotle's practical philosophy just en passant. Aristotle himself claims that the various sciences are

While Kamp claims that Aristotle's political philosophy depends on his metaphysics, Fred D. Miller, Jr. persuasively argues that it depends on his philosophy of nature: "Aristotle's politics may be characterised as 'naturalistic', in the sense that it assigns a fundamental role to the concept of nature (*phusis*) in the explanation and evaluation of its subject-matter" (Miller, Jr. 1995, 27). Similarly, David Keyt (1991, 120, 140) characterises Aristotle's peculiar "standpoint in political philosophy" by three "basic ideas": "that the polis is a natural entity like an animal or a man", "that man is by nature a political animal", and "that the polis is prior in nature to the individual".³

treatises make use of the concepts, methods, and practices that the *Analytics* and other works characterise as 'scientific'?"

- 3 Cf. Miller Jr. (1995, 27–66, 335). Both Keyt (1991) and Miller Jr. (1995, 45–56) understand Aristotle's claim that the *polis* "is by nature (*physei*) prior (*proteron*) to the household and to the individual" (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a18–19) to be an independent third thesis and theorem. For a different interpretation of the three "basic ideas" that are mentioned and for reasons why Aristotle's claim of the natural priority of the *polis* is not an independent third thesis or theorem, but rather functions as a strong argument for the thesis that man is by nature a political animal, see Knoll (2017). For a persuasive "reinterpretation of Aristotle's political teleology" and a "denial that Aristotle treats the polis as a natural substance with its own internal principle of motion", see Yack (1991, 16); cf. Yack (1993, 92). As early as 1980, Kullmann (1991, 114) argues: "Any kind of substantial interpretation of the political is far from Aristotle's mind." In agreement with Kullmann, Pellegrin (2020, 93) concludes that "the city is not a natural substance (*οὐσία*)". On the contrary, Trott (2014, 51) claims that Aristotle holds that the *polis*

This article contributes to the debate on the relation between Aristotle's practical and theoretical philosophy. Its main thesis claims that Aristotle's practical philosophy – both his *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics*⁴ – depends to a considerable extent on his teleological conception of nature. This means that Aristotle conceives of human beings as animals and as part of nature and that he applies teleological explanations to the goods, goals, and purposes of humans, to the power relations among them, and to their parts, such as 'reason' or 'speech' (*logos*). Aristotle's teleological conception of nature is a central element of his philosophy of nature and of his biology, which constitute important parts of his theoretical philosophy. The main thesis of this paper is primarily directed against scholars such as Günter Bien who maintain "that in Aristotle

has "a nature of its own". In his chapter "A Biological Politics?", Pellegrin (2020, 67–93, 93) examines *Pol.* 1.2 and concludes, as in several of his articles, that "we must firmly resist the temptation to make of Aristotle an ancestor of sociobiology". Cf. Pellegrin (2015, 45, 2017). For the thesis that Aristotle understands the city as a product of both nature and art and for the distinction between a 'natural city' and an 'ethical city' and, correspondingly, between a 'primary teleology' and a 'secondary teleology', see Leunissen (2017).

- 4 Ernest Barker even claims that "the teleological view" "is everywhere present in the *Politics*" (Barker 1959, 276). In line with the main thesis of this article, Miller Jr. (1995, 18) claims: "Natural teleology also has an important place in Aristotle's practical science". Similarly, Leunissen (2017, 112) explains: "The clearest indication that Aristotle is conducting natural science in the *Politics* lies in his use of the teleological principle that nature does nothing in vain"; cf. Leunissen (2017, 107).

political-human relations are not derived from natural, cosmic or in any case extra-human conditions".⁵

Section 2 of this article introduces Aristotle's teleological conception of nature and briefly shows how he applies teleological explanations to organic parts, living beings, and natural processes. In order to clarify the thesis that Aristotle's practical philosophy depends on his natural teleology, it is necessary to at least outline the underlying interpretation of teleology. In the literature, whether Aristotle's teleology is about explanation or causation is a disputed issue. This article presupposes that it is about both and that, for Aristotle, teleological explanations correspond to the structure of the world. The primary reasons for this view are that Aristotle believes that a scientist can know the truth about the principles and (final) causes of both the cosmos and the sublunary world of nature and that language, thought, and the world form a unity.⁶

5 Bien (1980, 198), my trans. Although Keyt (1991), Knoll (2017), and Miller Jr. (1995) do not explicitly engage with Bien's view, the texts they examine and their arguments refute it.

6 For Aristotle's understanding of science as knowledge of the four causes, see e.g. *Met.* 1.1-3, 980a22-983b5. Aristotle explains about his fundamental model of the relationship between reality, thought, speech, and writing: "Now spoken sounds (*phônē*) are symbols (*symbola*) of affections in the soul (*en tē psychē pathēmatōn*), and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses (*homoiōmata*) of—actual things

Section 3 examines the place of human beings in Aristotle's teleological conception of nature and his teleological explanation of the relationship of plants, animals, and humans. Aristotle considers human beings to be gregarious animals (*Hist. animal.* 1.1, 488a7-10, cf. *Protrepticus* 51, 5-6 = Aristotle 2017, 47). As he conceives human animals to be part of nature and the natural order, he holds that they can be best understood by teleological explanations. Section 3 defends David Sedley's (1991) anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle's natural teleology against Monte Ransome Johnson's (2005) criticisms. Aristotle understands nature as a hierarchical order of purposes in which plants exist for the sake of animals and animals for the sake of men. Nature displays an order of rank in which the different parts have different values. According to the natural hierarchy, the better living beings, the better parts of them, and the better persons are destined to rule or govern over the worse. Section 3 shows how Aristotle applies teleological explanations to power relations among human beings and their purposes and goals; in particular it examines the relation between men and women and between freemen and natural slaves.

Section 4 scrutinises Aristotle's human 'function' (*ergon*) argument—usually referred to below as the *ergon* argument—which is at the centre of his practical philosophy and of his philosophy of man. This argument, which establishes what 'human flourishing' or 'happiness'

(*pragmata*)—are also the same" (*De interpr.* 16a3-8, trans. J. L. Ackrill).

(*eudaimonia*) is for the human animal, is clearly a teleological argument. It claims that man's ultimate good and purpose – *eudaimonia* – can be discovered by first detecting man's specific 'function' (*ergon*) in the natural order. The *ergon* argument gives strong support to the thesis that Aristotle's practical philosophy and his philosophy of man depend to a considerable extent on his teleological conception of nature. Section 4 argues that the *ergon* argument depends on Aristotle's definition of man as the only 'living being that has language and reason' (*zōon logon echon*). Section 5 demonstrates that an important dispute about Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia* can be clarified through an adequate understanding of Aristotle's *ergon* argument and by referring to the natural 'purpose' (*telos*) of *logos*. As the human function and task is an active life of *logos*, and as the natural purpose of *logos* is to give man a sense to both perceive and to communicate what is advantageous, good, and just, it is evident that *eudaimonia* includes a political life, which is the life of a citizen dedicated to politics and public affairs. This is a strong argument against scholars who claim that Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* only with a life of contemplation.

2. ARISTOTLE'S TELEOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF NATURE

Aristotle's teleology, often summarised by the phrase "Nature does nothing in vain", is a central and rather innovative part of his philosophy.⁷ Aristotle's

teleological conception of nature is inextricably linked to his conception of final causality.⁸ Organic parts, living beings, and natural processes have purposes, which are connected to some good (*De somn. vig.* 2, 455b17–18). On the level of living organisms, this means that all their parts exist for the sake of something, have a given 'purpose' (*telos*) or a specific 'task' or 'function' (*ergon*), and serve some particular 'good' (*agathon*). For example, the specific function and given purpose of the eye is to see and that of the hand or claw is to grasp some objects. To have such parts that serve different purposes is good for the well-being of a living organism. In order to explain the parts of a natural organism and their presence, Aristotle refers to the purpose and good that they serve (*De part. animal.* 1.1, 639b12–21). The front teeth exist *for the sake of* cutting the food and the molars *for the sake of* grinding it (cf. *Phys.* 2.8, 198b24–26). Plants possess roots that grow into the earth to take in nutrition and leaves exist to provide shade for the fruit and to protect it (*Phys.* 2.8, 199a23–29). In the literature, it is sometimes not appreciated enough that Aristotle's natural teleology is not linked only to his concept of a final cause, but also to his view that everything has a given 'task' or 'function' (*ergon*). As he explains in the *Politics*, "all things are

of "Aristotle's dialectical interrogation of his predecessors", see Johnson (2005, 7, 94–127).

7 *De caelo* 1.4, 271a33; *De somn. vig.* 2, 455b17–18; *De incessu* 2, 704b15–18; *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a9; *Pol.* 1.8, 1256b15–22. For a discussion

8 Aristotle identifies the 'end', 'goal', or 'purpose' (*telos*) of something natural with "that for the sake of which" (*to hou heneka*) (*Phys.* 2.2, 194a27–29; *Phys.* 2.3, 194b32–33).

defined by their function (*ergon*) and capacity (*dynamis*)” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a23, trans. H. Rackham; cf. *Meteor.* 4.12, 390a10–12).⁹

Living beings are composed of form and matter. According to Aristotle’s terminology, form and matter are ‘nature’ (*physis*), while living beings are ‘by nature’ (*physei*) (*Phys.* 2.1, 192b8–12; *Phys.* 2.2, 194a12–13). The form coincides with the final cause (*Phys.* 2.7, 198a25–26). The ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’ (*teleia*) actualisation of the form is the ‘goal’ (*telos*) of living beings, which have an internal ‘drive’ (*hormê*) to actualise their specific form and potential entirely. Aristotle also calls such a causal principle or internal impulse to ‘change’ (*kinêsis*) ‘nature’ (*physis*) (*Phys.* 2.1, 192b18–22; *Phys.* 3.1, 200b12–13).¹⁰ For instance, one kind of seed contains as its inherent goal the form of an olive tree, another kind the form of a human being (*Phys.* 2.4, 196a31–33). These seeds contain the ‘potential’ or ‘possibility’ (*dynamis*) of becoming an olive tree or a human being and the forms inherent in them urge out of themselves to the continuous change up to their completed ‘realisation’ (*energeia*) of this ‘potential’.

The form of the human being is inherent in the seed of the father, which acts on the matter provided by the mother. The father’s seed contains both the final and the efficient cause of the newly emerging human. However, the human being and the reality of its species-form exist earlier than the seed. Thus, as Aristotle frequently declares, “a human being generates a human being” (*Phys.* 2.7, 198a26–27; *Met.* 9.8, 1050a3–7; cf. *Phys.* 2 and 3).

On the level of nature as a whole, plants, animals, and human beings are part of a hierarchical order of purposes, in which everything has a given purpose and function. Such a broader understanding of teleology, which restricts it not only, as some scholars do, to the “internal structure and functioning of individual organisms”, is persuasively defended by David Sedley (1991).¹¹ In his interpretation of a classical and disputed text from the *Physics*, Sedley (1991, 184, cf. 182–187) demonstrates that, for Aristotle, natural processes are directed towards goals. Winter rainfall partly serves “to make the crops grow” and summer heat partly “serves to ripen the olives of Attica”.¹² In line with this, the disputed passage from the *Physics* concludes with Aristotle’s statement: “Therefore action for an end is present

9 Aristotle also identifies the ‘goal’ or ‘end’ (*telos*) of something with its *ergon* (*Eth. Eud.* 2.1, 1219a8; *De caelo* 2.3, 286a8–9). Nature makes the organs of a living being for their ‘task’ or ‘function’ (*ergon*) (*De part. animal.* 4.12, 694b14).

10 Aristotle distinguishes between four kinds of ‘change’ (*kinêsis*): (a) change in quantity (e.g. growth or increase versus decrease), (b) change in quality (e.g. a human being becoming educated), (c) change in space or locomotion, and (d) change in essence (coming to be and passing away) (*Phys.* 3.1, 201a11–15).

11 Sedley lists several works that defend a narrower interpretation of Aristotle’s teleology and several others that defend the broader interpretation he supports with his article (Sedley 1991, 179). Among the works that defend a narrower interpretation is Nussbaum (1978).

12 For other discussions of the “rainfall passage”, see Leunissen (2020, 45–46) and the literature she refers to in note 10.

in things which come to be and are by nature” (*Phys.* 2.8, 199a7–8, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye; cf. *Phys.* 2.8, 199a29–30). Nevertheless, Aristotle does not reduce change in nature and natural processes to final causes and teleological explanations. Besides those, there are also mechanical and material processes going on in nature. Those latter processes are linked to the four elements and their underlying matter. Fire has an inner urge upward and is hot, earth strives by nature downward and is cold. However, just as things that exist by nature and natural processes cannot be reduced to teleological explanations, neither can they be reduced to material causes and mechanical necessity, a reduction defended by several of Aristotle’s predecessors (cf. Gotthelf 1987¹³; Leunissen 2010, 215–217; Leunissen 2020, 44–50; Sedley 1991, 182).

In *De caelo*, Aristotle presents a version of the core principle of his natural teleology in which he equates nature with God: “God and nature create nothing that is pointless” (*De caelo* 1.4, 271a33, trans. J. L. Stocks). However, for him the world is an eternal and

uncreated order. There exists no creator outside of the world.¹⁴ Aristotle’s God is merely a cosmological and physical God, who, like the God of deism, does not care about the world and human beings. God is a pure ‘Mind’ or ‘Reason’ (*nous*) whose eternal activity is “thinking on thinking” (*noêsis noêseôs*) (*Met.* 12.7, 1072b14–30; 12.9, 1074b15–35). Such a God is the ultimate final cause that moves everything in the cosmos as being loved and desired (*Met.* 12.7, 1072a26–b4). Not only the heavenly bodies, but also the contemplative ‘intellect’ (*nous*) of the philosopher strives towards the divine and eternal. Living beings strive towards God by eternally replicating and reproducing their species-form, by eternally transmitting it from parent to offspring (*De an.* 2.4, 415a27–b7; *De gener. animal.* 2.1, 731b18–732a11). God is contained in the “nature of the universe” both as “something separate and by itself” and as the order of all its parts (*Met.* 12.10, 1075a12–14, trans. H. D. Ross). This eternal order of all the parts of the world is a teleological and hierarchical order of purposes. Since ever and forever the divine has been and is contained in nature as its teleological order. As Aristotle explains, “On such

13 Allan Gotthelf designates his “interpretation of Aristotle’s conception of final causality” as the “‘irreducible potential’ interpretation”. This means that “the development, structure, and functioning of living organisms cannot be wholly explained” and ontologically reduced to material or ‘chemical’ elements and the actualisation of their potentials. Rather, it can be explained by the actualisation of specific forms or by “primarily the actualization of a single potential for an organism of that form”, which cannot be reduced to material or ‘chemical’ elements (Gotthelf 1987, 212, 227–230).

14 For the persuasive claim that “Aristotle rejects the external, divine, and providential model of teleology as presented, for instance, in Plato’s *Timaeus*”, see Leunissen (2020, 42). In line with Leunissen, in his book Johnson (2005, 3) wants to “re-open a line of Aristotelian interpretation” that “recognized that the most important feature of Aristotelian teleology is that it presents an alternative to the anthropocentric, creationist, and providential schemes of teleology that were favored by Aristotle’s predecessors”.

a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature" (*Met.* 12.7, 1072b14, trans. H. D. Ross). In the sub-lunary world of nature, organic generation and development mainly consist of an eternal replication and actualisation of all the existing forms.

3. THE PLACE OF HUMAN BEINGS IN ARISTOTLE'S TELEOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF NATURE

In his article mentioned above, Sedley (1991, 179–180) claims that the structure of Aristotle's "global teleology" is "*anthropocentric*", which means that it is "centred on man" and that "man is the ultimate *beneficiary*" of the natural world.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Sedley (1991, 179) is aware that Aristotle "believes in a cosmic hierarchy in which god, not man, is the best thing". To substantiate his anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle's teleology, Sedley quotes a well-known passage from the *Politics* which claims

that plants exist for the sake of animals and the other animals for the good of man, the domestic species both for his service and for his food, and if not all at all events most of the wild ones for the sake of his food and of his supplies of other kinds, in order that they may furnish him both with clothing and

with other appliances. If therefore nature makes nothing incomplete or without purpose, it follows that nature has made all the animals for the sake of men (*Pol.* 1.8, 1256b15–22, trans. H. Rackham, slightly modified).

In this passage, Aristotle understands nature as a hierarchical order of purposes, in which plants exist for the sake of animals and animals for the sake of men.¹⁶ The quote also contains one of several statements in Aristotle's work that summarise the core principle of his natural teleology: "nature makes nothing incomplete or without purpose". Sedley (1991, 180–181) persuasively defends his anthropocentric interpretation of the passage against attempts to dismiss its seriousness. Nevertheless, not all scholars have been persuaded by this defence.¹⁷ Therefore,

16 It seems clear that the passage implies that plants too exist for the sake of men. One could object that in the biological treatises Aristotle never mentions that the purpose of animals is to provide food for humans and that this purpose is not consistent with the end of animals to strive towards God by eternally replicating and reproducing their species-form (see Section 2). However, considering that Aristotle thinks in hierarchies, the eternal replication and reproduction of animals can be interpreted as a goal that is at the same time a means for the higher goal to serve eternally as food, a tool, and a resource for men.

17 In line with Sedley, Johnson (2005, 231) argues against several unconvincing interpretations of this passage (W. Wieland, M. Nussbaum, D. M. Balme, R. Wardy). Nonetheless, Johnson (2005, 231–237) also criticises Sedley's anthropocentric interpretation. For instance, Johnson (2005, 232) argues that the passage does not say that seasons and weather "exist and function

15 More than 15 years after the publication of his article in 1991, Sedley (2007, 202–03) still defends his view that an "anthropocentric teleology" is present in Aristotle's natural philosophy.

it is appropriate to adduce some more passages from Aristotle's practical philosophy that elucidate his view. The main reason why Aristotle thinks that plants exist for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of men, is his conviction that "man is the best of the animals" (*Eth. Nic.* 6.7¹⁸, 1141a33–34, trans. H. D. Ross; cf. *Protrepticus*¹⁹). There are two main reasons why the human being is the best of the animals. First, only man possesses 'speech' and 'reason' (*logos*)" (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a9–10; cf. Section 5). Second, in man a divine element – 'intellect' (*nous*) – is present. Man's divine intellect enables him to lead a life of contemplation, which is a divine life.²⁰ Aristotle

conceives of nature as a hierarchical order in which humans have a much higher value than plants and animals. In the context of his reflections on the hierarchy of the different parts of the soul, Aristotle makes an important generalisation: "The worse is always (*aiei*) for the sake of the better; this is manifest alike in the products of art and in those of nature" (*Pol.* 7.14, 1333a21–23, my trans.). For Aristotle, the natural hierarchy of purposes corresponds to the natural hierarchy of beings. In the cosmos, God is the highest being and purpose; in the sublunary world of nature it is the human being.²¹

Monte Ransome Johnson (2005, 5) understands the refutation of Sedley's anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle's teleology to be one of the "main objectives" of his book. Johnson (2005, 4) defines 'anthropocentrism' as "the position that human beings are the center – or rather the end – of everything; everything has value or is good only in relation to human beings".

primarily for the benefit of man" (Sedley 1991, 180). This argument misses the point because Sedley does not substantiate this claim with this passage from the *Politics*, but with Aristotle's statements in *Phys.* 2.8, 198b16–199a8. Johnson (1985, 232) further argues against Sedley's interpretation that the natural 'function' (*ergon*) of plants and animals is not primarily the benefit of man. However, neither Aristotle's passage nor Sedley's interpretation makes such a claim. Existing for the benefit of man is not the function of plants and animals, but their purpose.

18 All references to *Eth. Nic.* are to I. Bywater's edition (W. D. Ross divides the chapters in a different way than Bywater).

19 In the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle explains: "certainly a human is the most honorable of the animals down here, hence it's clear that we have come to be both by nature and according to nature" (51, 5–6, trans. by D. S. Hutchinson and M. R. Johnson, Aristotle 2017, 47).

20 Aristotle argues that contemplation is the highest form of activity since it is based on 'intellect' (*nous*), which is the best part of human beings and apprehends the best knowable objects. Since he conceives of God as 'intellect' (*nous*) and God's activity as contemplation, human 'intellect' (*nous*)

and human contemplation are akin to God and God's eternal activity (*Eth. Nic.* 10.7, 1177a19–21, 1177b26–1178a8; cf. *Met.* 12.6–10).

21 While in the texts of his practical philosophy Aristotle usually clearly sets humans apart from other animals, his zoological writings rather display a gradualist view. However, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he attributes 'prudence' (*phronêsis*) to some animals (*Eth. Nic.* 6.7, 1141a26–28; cf. La-barrière 1990 and Pellegrin 2020, 87). In the literature, the "anthropological difference" is a disputed issue (for the term, see Keil and Kreft (2019, 4)). While Sorabji (1993, 13) holds that Aristotle "allows for a sharp intellectual distinction between animal and man", Steiner (2005, 76) claims that he recognises "a continuum between human beings and animals".

This is, however, not Sedley's definition of anthropocentrism. Sedley (1991, 179, 196) is aware that, for Aristotle, the "world is *theo-centric*": God, not man, is the end of everything and the highest good and value. Sedley's interpretation of Aristotle's teleology limits the meaning of 'anthropocentrism' to "sublunary nature" and its hierarchy, in which the human being is "the highest beneficiary of all" (Sedley 1991, 196). On the basis of his definition of anthropocentrism, Johnson (2005, 5) criticises *the* anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle's teleology. He argues that "it would be a grave mistake to infer from Aristotle's discussion of the instrumental value of plants and animals that Aristotle therefore holds that such natural substances do not at the same time have intrinsic ends independent of their instrumental value to humans". To be sure, the intrinsic end of plants and animals is to completely or perfectly actualise both their species-form and their specific 'function' or 'task' (*ergon*) and 'good' (*agathon*) (*Met.* 9.8, 1050a21–23). The specific functions and goods of plants and animals are to reproduce, flourish, and survive. In contrast to plants, animals have additional functions and goods because they are capable of moving in space, perceiving their environment, and having proper pleasures (*De an.* 2.4, 415a26–27; *Eth. Nic.* 10.5, 1176a3–9; cf. Johnson 2005, 220, 232–235, 241). The observation that plants and animals have intrinsic ends and natural functions and goods does not contradict Sedley's anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle's teleology and he does not

deny this anywhere. Johnson (2005, 226) accurately observes that Sedley does not mention or confront the arguments of two passages from *Eth. Nic.* 6.7–8, 1141a20–33, a33–b14, which are supposed to "contain the undoing of the anthropocentric interpretation". As mentioned before, Johnson's criticism of Sedley, which is mainly based on Aristotle's statement that man is not the best thing in the cosmos, is not convincing because Sedley is aware of this hierarchy and limits his interpretation to sublunary nature. Johnson's criticism is also based on Aristotle's statement that "what is healthy and good is different for men and fish" (1141a22–23, my trans.; cf. Johnson 2005, 10, 226). To be sure, this shows that, for Aristotle, fish have an intrinsic good and function. Nevertheless, this does not change Aristotle's view that their ultimate purpose is to serve as food for humans.

Sedley's anthropocentric interpretation of teleology and in particular *Pol.* 1.8, 1256b6–26 provides the first evidence that Aristotle's "philosophy of man" (*hê peri ta anthrôpeia philosophia*)²², which is a philosophy of human affairs and human conduct, is connected to his teleological conception of nature. The term "philosophy of man", which Aristotle introduces at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is very close to the term "practical philosophy", because the main sub-disciplines of both sciences are ethics and political philosophy. Aristotle applies teleological explanations not only to organic parts, living beings,

22 For the term "philosophy of man", see *Eth. Nic.* 10.10, 1181b15.

natural processes, and the relationship of plants, animals, and humans, but also to the relationship between human beings. Right at the beginning of the *Politics*, where Aristotle presents the key ideas of his philosophy of man, he explains that men and women have a joint natural goal and task; therefore they unite “of necessity” (*anagkê*). Men and women couple not “from intentional choice but – as is also the case with other animals and plants – from a natural (*physikon*) striving to leave behind another that is like oneself”. Men and women couple “for the sake of reproduction”, which is the final cause of their union (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252a26–30; trans. C. Lord). As will be examined below, Aristotle also interprets the relationship between free Greeks and natural slaves as being necessary and goal-directed. The embeddedness of Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery in his teleological conception of nature further demonstrates that his practical philosophy depends to a considerable extent on his teleology. It provides another argument against Bien’s (1980, 198) view “that in Aristotle political-human relations are not derived from natural, cosmic or in any case extra-human conditions”.²³

The last paragraphs of Section 2 have elucidated that, for Aristotle, the world is “a single well-ordered system” (Sedley 1991, 194). As demonstrated, many parts of this teleological and hierarchical

system have a given purpose and function. That most parts of this system are by nature unequal and differ in value are also central features. This is true of the various parts of which living beings are composed, of the different kinds of living beings, and of the different kinds of human beings. These inequalities and inequalities in value are the natural basis of the various natural hierarchies or nature-given rank orders. Thus Aristotle conceives the relation between reason and affects, soul and body, men and animals, masters and slaves by nature, Greeks and barbarians, men and women, parents and children, and capable and bad Greeks, in each case as a natural or nature-given order of rank.²⁴ In all these hierarchical relationships recognisable in the order of nature, the member or entity superior in rank is inherently better than the one inferior to it.

The natural order of rank specifies which living beings, which parts of them, and which people are destined to rule or govern and which ones are destined to be ruled or governed. According to the natural hierarchy, Aristotle sees it as natural and just when the higher rules over the lower and the better over the worse. Power relations exist by nature. Aristotle explains that “immediately from birth certain things diverge, some toward being ruled, others toward ruling” (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254a23–24, trans. C. Lord). Since power relations exist by nature, they are justified in their various forms. Rulership is not only a “natural” (*physei*), “necessary”

23 Bien (1980, 198) emphasises in particular that “the Aristotelian theory of slavery” is not derived “from natural, cosmic, or in any case extra-human conditions” (my trans.).

24 For a detailed study of the inequalities among human beings, see Knoll (2009, 135–140).

(*anagkaios*), and “beneficial” (*sympheron*) phenomenon, but also a universal one (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254a21–32).²⁵ The main reason why Aristotle considers rulership to be natural, necessary, and beneficial is that rulership makes it possible for different parts of an organism and different interacting humans to be able to perform the natural ‘task’ or ‘function’ (*ergon*) that belongs to them together (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254a28).²⁶ Aristotle’s teleological argument regarding the relation between the many different parts of the order of nature claims not only that the “worse always (*aiei*) exists for the sake of the better”, but also that rulership is “according to nature” (*kata physin*) or “by nature” (*physei*) and good both for the worse and for the better part (*Pol.* 7.14, 1333a21–22; *Pol.* 1.5, 1254b7–8, 13). Aristotle prepares his justification of the rule of free Greeks over natural slaves with the argument that there exist significant analogies between different kinds of relationships: between the different parts of the soul, between men and tame animals, and between men and women. Aristotle argues that it is

evident that it is according to nature and advantageous (*kata physin kai sympheron*) for the body to be ruled by the soul, and the passionate part of the soul by intellect and the part having reason, while it is harmful to both if the relation is equal or reversed. The same holds with respect to man and the other animals: tame animals have a better nature than wild ones, and it is better for all of them to be ruled by man, since in this way their preservation is ensured. Further, the relation of male to female is by nature (*physei*) a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254b6–14, trans. C. Lord).

In all the mentioned relationships in the natural order, the different parts have different values. These differences in value are considerable and are the natural basis of the natural hierarchies between the different parts. These natural hierarchies exist ‘by nature’ (*physei*), which means that they are part of the natural order. They determine which part should rule and which part ought to be ruled. Therefore, the rule of the better parts over the worse is ‘according to nature’ (*kata physin*), which also means that it is good for both parts and allows both of them to perform their natural ‘task’ or ‘function’ (*ergon*). For example, it is obvious that it would be harmful for a person if he were ruled by his appetites and not by his reason. Such a rule would be ‘against nature’ (*para physin*) or against the hierarchical order of nature. As a consequence, it would

25 This passage, as Eckart Schütrumpf (1980, 29) accurately argues, is an important reason for refuting Bien’s (1980, 198) view “that in Aristotle political-human relations are not derived from natural, cosmic or in any case extra-human conditions”.

26 In *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle distinguishes animals that live gregariously from animals that live solitarily. Of the gregarious animals, some live politically and some are scattered. Animals that live politically “are those that have a function in common (*koinon ergon*), which not all the gregarious animals do. Of this sort are man, bees, wasps, ants, and cranes” (*Hist. animal.* 1.1, 488a7–10, my trans.).

prevent a person from performing his ‘task’ or ‘function’ (*ergon*) in the natural order (cf. Section 4).

Aristotle’s justification of the rule of free Greeks over natural slaves, which has often been criticised, is a teleological argument. This justification is based on the natural principles of rulership introduced in the passage quoted above. After justifying the patriarchic rule of the man over the woman,²⁷ Aristotle makes an important generalisation:

The same must of necessity hold in the case of human beings generally. Accordingly, those who are as different from other men as the soul from the body or man from beast—and they are in this state if their task or function (*ergon*) is the use of the body, and if this is the best that can come from them—are slaves by nature (*physei douloi*). For them it is better to be ruled in accordance with this sort of rule, if such is the case for the other things mentioned (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254b14–20, trans. C. Lord, slightly modified).

It is important to notice that Aristotle does not defend or justify “slavery as natural” or “as a natural practice”, as is often claimed (Johnson 2005,

242–43).²⁸ With his distinction between slavery by nature and slavery by convention or law (*kata nomon*), like Plato before him, Aristotle criticises the common practice of Greeks enslaving Greeks (*Pol.* 1.6, 1255a4–7; cf. Knoll 2009, 149–156; Knoll 2020, 41–44). Aristotle considers such a practice to be ‘against nature’ (*para physin*) (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254a19). With his claim “that barbarian and slave are by nature (*physin*) the same thing”, Aristotle identifies slaves by nature and barbarians (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b9, trans. C. Lord).²⁹ Nevertheless, he provides precise criteria for those who fall into the category of a ‘slave by nature’. In the crucial passage quoted above, Aristotle defines the slave by nature first by his low position in the hierarchical order of nature and second by using a key concept – *ergon* – of his teleology. First, a slave by nature is supposed to differ from a free Greek man as much as the soul differs “from the body or man from beast”. Therefore, as for other inferior parts of the natural order – the body, the passionate part of the soul, tame animals, women – it

27 In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls the rule of the man over the woman “aristocratic”, and in the *Politics* “political” (*Nic. Eth.* 8.10, 1160b32–34; *Pol.* 1.12, 1259b1; cf. Knoll 2009, 158–59). Aristotle also justifies the rule of the man over the woman with the implausible claim that women possess the ethical excellences or virtues not in a ruling but in a serving form (*Pol.* 1.13, 1260a20–24).

28 The prevailing view, which claims that with his theory of natural slavery Aristotle “justified the universal Greek practice of slavery” (Sorabji 2006, 23), is highly problematic.

29 Against this interpretation one might argue that Aristotle is just making explicit what the poets say. However, the preceding statement that the barbarians have no naturally ruling element, which he holds to be a main trait of slaves by nature, makes this reading implausible (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b6–7; *Pol.* 1.5, 1254b22–23). For arguments against the widespread view that Aristotle identifies slaves by nature and barbarians, see Lockwood (2021).

is advantageous and better for a slave by nature to be ruled by his superior counterpart. Second, the purpose and the 'task' or 'function' (*ergon*) of the slave by nature is to work for his master and owner with his body. Aristotle even claims that 'nature' (*physis*) makes their bodies strong for their bodily services (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254b27–28).³⁰

The tasks and functions of slaves by nature are natural and correspond to another definition Aristotle offers for them: slaves by nature participate "in reason only to the extent of perceiving it" and lack the "deliberative part of the soul" (*bouleutikon*) (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254b22–23, trans. C. Lord; *Pol.* 1.13, 1260a12, my trans.). In contrast to the free Greek, who is a master and rules 'by nature' (*physei*), the slave by nature cannot "foresee with the mind"; his task or function is to use his body to perform the labour that is necessary for his and his master's 'preservation' (*sôteria*). This is the natural 'goal' or 'purpose' (*telos*) of their union. As the union of free Greeks and natural slaves is for the sake of their preservation, "the same thing is advantageous for the master and the slave" (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252a30–34). The work of the slave provides the master with the free time and leisure that is necessary for him to perform his 'task' or 'function' (*ergon*) in the natural order. Aristotle determines the *ergon* of the human being with his famous human 'function' (*ergon*) argument, by which he achieves

his core definition of 'human flourishing' or 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*).

4. ARISTOTLE'S HUMAN 'FUNCTION' (*ERGON*) ARGUMENT

Aristotle's human 'function' (*ergon*) argument is a primary reason that supports the thesis that his practical philosophy depends to a considerable extent on his teleological conception of nature. The *ergon* argument is at the centre of Aristotle's practical philosophy and of his philosophy of man.³¹ This is elucidated by the fact that he presents it to establish what 'human flourishing' or 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*) is for the human animal. Aristotle conceives *eudaimonia* as "the highest of all goods achievable by action" and introduces a preliminary definition: "living-well (*eu zēn*) and doing-well" (*eu prattein*) (*Eth. Nic.* 1.2, 1095a16–19, trans. H. D. Ross).³² Human flourishing or happiness is the ultimate 'good' (*agathon*) and final natural 'goal' or 'purpose' (*telos*) both for the individual and for the *polis*, the political association and organisation of individuals. The key concepts of the human function argument – *ergon*, *agathon*, *telos* – are at the same time the key concepts of Aristotle's teleology. The argument, which Aristotle presents in both the

30 In this context, Aristotle admits that nature often fails to achieve its aims; see *Pol.* 1.5, 1254b32–34; cf. *Pol.* 1.6, 1255b3–4.

31 For a precursor of Aristotle's *ergon* argument in Plato's *Republic*, see *Resp.* 1.352d–354c. For some of the main criticisms of the argument, see Johnson (2005, 218 n. 6).

32 Carlo Natali (2010) calls this the "nominal definition" of *eudaimonia*, a term that is widely used in the context of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.

Nicomachean and *Eudemian Ethics*, is clearly a teleological argument or a teleological explanation of *eudaimonia* (cf. Johnson 2005, 218). For Aristotle, nature is a hierarchical order whose organic or living parts have given and specific functions and purposes. The *ergon* argument claims that the final cause of the human being, *eudaimonia* as man's ultimate good and purpose, can be discovered by first detecting man's specific 'function' or 'task' (*ergon*) in the natural order.

Before Aristotle presents his *ergon* argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he extensively criticises Plato's view that among the order of forms there is one highest form, the *one* universal form of the good (*Resp.* 6, 505a–517c; *Resp.* 7, 540a/b).³³ For Plato, everything good is good because it participates in the one universal form of the good. In contrast, Aristotle argues that there exist many different goods and a plurality of distinct meanings of the term 'good'.³⁴ Subsequently, in line with the first phrase of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he explains that different actions and arts aim at different goods. Nevertheless, the good is always the final cause; it is "in every action and pursuit the end (*to telos*)" or "that for

whose sake everything else is done" (*Nic. Eth.* 1.5, 1097a18–24, trans. H. D. Ross). There exist many different goods and ends and not all are final goods and ends. However, the supreme and 'perfect good' (*ariston teleion*) achievable by human action is a final end. In line with the first paragraphs of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls this good and end 'human flourishing' or 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*) and argues that this "end of action" is 'self-sufficient' (*autarkes*) (*Nic. Eth.* 1.5, 1097a28–b21, trans. H. D. Ross).

In order to determine exactly what the supreme good or *eudaimonia* is, Aristotle introduces his *ergon* argument. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, '*ergon*' is usually only translated as 'function'. However, it can also mean 'task', 'performance', 'job', or 'work'.³⁵ Aristotle starts his argument with the suggestion that "a clearer account" of *eudaimonia* could be achieved by first ascertaining "the function of man (*to ergon tou anthrôpou*)". This approach to discovering man's ultimate good and purpose by first investigating man's specific function or task is based on Aristotle's view that in the natural order a thing's *ergon* and *agathon* are inextricably linked. Seeing and grabbing objects, the functions of eyes and hands, e.g., are good for the well-being of the human organism. At the beginning of the *ergon* argument and in line with the analogies he draws in *Physics* 2 and other texts between 'art' (*technê*) and 'nature' (*physis*), Aristotle

33 Johnson (2005, 217–18) rightly draws attention to the fact that in both the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle introduces the *ergon* argument "just after he argues that there is no univocal concept of the good, or at any rate no useful or attainable separate good". This article focuses just on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

34 Like 'being', 'good' is referred to in all the ten 'categories' which Aristotle understands as the ten supreme kinds of propositions (*Eth. Nic.* 1.4, 1096a23–29).

35 In his translation of Aristotle's passages related to the *ergon* argument in *Eth. Nic.* 1.6, Olof Gigon renders '*ergon*' as '*eigentümliche Leistung*'.

refers to the functions and activities of both artists and organic parts and claims that everything has a function:

For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function (*ergon*) or activity (*praxis*), the good (*tagathon*) and the doing well (*to eu*) are thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? (*Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1097b22–33, trans. H. D. Ross, slightly modified).

An important assumption of Aristotle's argument is his generalised claim that “for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the doing well are thought to reside in the function”. As in the order of nature all living organisms and all organic parts have functions or tasks that are good for their well-being, Aristotle assumes that the human animal too has such an *ergon* linked to his good.³⁶ Aristotle presents

his answer to the question of what the specific human *ergon* is as the result of a process of elimination of possible candidates (cf. Natali 2001, 148):

Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us rule out, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but *it* also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that possesses reason (*leipetai dê praktikê tis tou logos echontos*) (of this, one part has reason in the sense of being obedient to reason, the other in the sense of possessing it and exercising thought). (*Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1097b33–98a5, my trans. based on R. Crisp and H. D. Ross).

The first step of Aristotle's process of elimination is to exclude mere ‘life’ (*zên*), “the life of nutrition of growth”. To reproduce, to flourish, and to survive are the specific functions and goods of plants. However, they are also functions and goods of animals and humans.

ethics “presupposes his metaphysical biology”. For Aristotle, the human being is a gregarious animal which is part of nature and the natural order. Therefore, he extends his teleological interpretation of nature to the human being. For unconvincing attempts to deny that the *ergon* argument is based on a scientific and external perspective, on Aristotle's natural teleology, or on facts about human nature, see Gomez-Lobo (1989), McDowell (1995), and Nussbaum (1995); for an extensive criticism of Nussbaum's “internalist” interpretation, see Knoll (2009, 219–31).

36 The *ergon* argument does not “set out to prove that human beings have a function”. Rather, Aristotle assumes the existence of such a function, which follows from his “broader metaphysical functional determination thesis” (Shields 2015, 241–42). MacIntyre (1984, 148) explains that Aristotle's

The second step of Aristotle's process of elimination is to exclude "a life of perception". As mentioned before, compared to plants, animals have additional functions and goods because they are capable of moving in space, perceiving their environment, and having proper pleasures. However, as humans share these functions and goods with animals, they cannot be considered to be their specific functions and goods.

After eliminating two candidates, Aristotle claims that there only remains a life of the activity of the rational part of the soul as the specific human *ergon* (1098ab3–4). A few lines later he rephrases this first definition, determining the function or task of man as "an activity of the soul in accordance with reason or not without it" (*psychês energeia kata logon he mê aneu logou*) (1098a7–8, my trans.).³⁷ Aristotle further refines this first and main result of the *ergon* argument by adding that the human *ergon* is not only a life of the activity of the rational part of the soul, but a life of the excellent or virtuous activity of this part.³⁸ This definition

of the human *ergon* leads Aristotle to his definition of *eudaimonia* as the "activity of the soul (*psychês energeia*) in accordance with excellence or virtue (*kat'aretên*), and if there are several excellences or virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete (*kata tēn aristēn kai teleiotatēn*)"; he further adds that this must be over a "complete life" (*biō teleiō*) (*Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1098a16–18, my trans.). Aristotle also explains that this definition of *eudaimonia* is just an outline or a rough sketch of the ultimate human good which needs to be filled in later. In fact, this is just Aristotle's core definition of *eudaimonia* and in the following sections he adds that a good and happy life also requires the goods of the body, such as health and beauty, and external goods, such as friends, wealth, and political power (*Nic. Eth.* 1, chapters 8–9, 1098b9ff.). In Books 2–5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle fills in his outline or rough sketch of *eudaimonia* by investigating the ethical virtues, such as 'temperance' (*sôphrosynê*), 'courage' (*andreia*), and 'justice' (*dikaiosynê*), which are excellences of the character. In Book 6, he scrutinises the intellectual virtues, such as 'prudence' (*phronêsis*) and 'wisdom' (*sophia*), which are the main two excellences of human reason. After presenting his theory of the human 'soul' (*psychê*) at the end of Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that the distinction of excellences or virtues in 'intellectual' (*dianoêtikas*) and 'ethical' (*ethikas*) ones corresponds to the distinction of the parts of the soul.

Although Aristotle presents the result of his search for man's specific

37 Martha Nussbaum mistakenly claims that this is already the conclusion of the *ergon* argument (Nussbaum 1995, 113–14; cf. Knoll 2009, 224–31). The conclusion and core definition of *eudaimonia* is only phrased at *Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1098a16–18.

38 Instead of talking about a refinement of Aristotle's first and main result of the *ergon* argument, Nevim Borçin suggests distinguishing between the *ergon* of man and the human good. She explains that the *ergon* of man is the activity of the rational part of the soul, while the human good is the good and noble performance of the human *ergon*. I am grateful to her for this persuasive suggestion.

function or task as the result of a process of elimination, it actually already presupposes his famous definition of a human being from the *Politics*, according to which man is the only 'living being that has language and reason' (*zôon logon echon*) (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a9–10; see Section 5).³⁹ This is also confirmed by the terminology he uses in both passages.⁴⁰ The *ergon* argument further presupposes Aristotle's related theory of the human 'soul' (*psychê*), to which he refers in the longer passage quoted

above. However, he explains this theory only a few sections later, in *Nic. Eth.* 1.13. At the beginning of *Nic. Eth.* 1.13, he makes it clear that his understanding of the human soul is connected to his *ergon* argument and its conclusion, the core definition of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle divides the soul into one part that is 'non-rational' (*alogon*) and one that 'has reason' (*logon echon*) (*Nic. Eth.* 1.13, 1102a28). As the cause of nutrition and growth, the non-rational part is essentially vegetative. From this part, Aristotle distinguishes another non-rational part which he calls the 'appetitive part' (*epithymetikon*) and in general the 'desiring or striving part' (*orektikon*). This part is only somewhat non-rational because it shares in *logos* and, in persons of virtuous character, listens to and obeys reason (*Nic. Eth.* 1.13, 1102b30–31). In *Nic. Eth.* 6, Aristotle divides the part of the soul that 'has reason' (*logon echon*) and exercises thought in the proper sense in practical and theoretical reason. The specific virtue of practical reason is 'prudence' (*phronêsis*), which requires experience (*Nic. Eth.* 6, chapters 8–9). Theoretical reason is perfected through learning or studying and the actualisation of the intellectual virtue Aristotle calls 'wisdom' (*sophia*).⁴¹ These two intellectual excellences or virtues correspond to the two forms of life that enable 'human flourishing' or 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*). The life of contemplation of the

39 This claim does not imply that the *Politics* was written before the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Rather, it is likely that the *Politics* was written after the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is indicated by the back-references to Book 5 of *Eth. Nic.* (which corresponds to Book 4 of the *Eudemian Ethics*); *Pol.* 3.9, 1280a18; *Pol.* 3.12, 1282b 19–20. It is also suggested by Aristotle's mention of a future political treatise at the end of *Eth. Nic.* 10.10, 1181b12–23, which in all likelihood refers to the eight Books of the *Politics* (cf. Knoll 2011, 128–130). Although the definition of man as the only living being that has *logos* is only phrased in *Pol.* 1.2, Aristotle had already developed it in Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This definition is at the centre of both his *ergon* argument and of his theory of the human 'soul' (*psychê*). This theory distinguishes between one part that is 'non-rational' (*alogon*) and one that 'has reason' (*logon echon*) (*Nic. Eth.* 1.13, 1102a28; cf. *Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1097b3–4). The latter wording is identical with *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a9–10, which additionally focuses on the distinctions between the nature of human beings and other higher animals (see above and Section 5).

40 In correspondence to the claim that man is the only 'living being that has language and reason' (*zôon logon echon*), according to Aristotle's presentation the *ergon* argument's process of elimination leads to the result: "There remains, then, an active life of the element that possesses reason (*leipetai dê praktikê tis tou logos echontos*)" (*Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1097b3–4).

41 Aristotle defines wisdom as "intellect (*nous*) in combination with scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*)" (*Nic. Eth.* 6.7, 1141a19, trans. R. Crisp).

scientist or philosopher requires wisdom; the political life of the citizen is based on prudence, experience, and the ethical virtues.⁴² In *Nic. Eth.* 10, chapters 6–9, Aristotle presents several arguments why a life of contemplation is superior to a political life (cf. Natali 2001, 157–165).

5. TWO ARGUMENTS FOR AN INCLUSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF EUDAIMONIA

In the literature, there is a well-known dispute about the correct interpretation of Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia*. Broadly speaking, this dispute is about the question of whether Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* exclusively with a life of contemplation of the scientist or philosopher or whether Aristotle has a more inclusive understanding that comprises a political life, moral actions, and the exercise of ethical virtues.⁴³

The exclusive view leans on Aristotle's praise of a life of contemplation in *Nic. Eth.* 10, chapters 6–9, and on his core definition of *eudaimonia* as the "activity of the soul in accordance with excellence or virtue, and if there are several excellences or virtues, in accordance with the best and most perfect/complete (*kata tēn aristēn kai teleiotatēn*)" (*Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1098a16–18). Proponents of the exclusive view translate "*teleiotatēn*" as "the most perfect" and hold this to refer to the intellectual virtue of 'wisdom' (*sophia*), which is required for a life of contemplation. In his persuasive defence of the inclusive understanding of *eudaimonia*, John L. Ackrill (1980) suggests that "*teleiotatēn*" should be rendered as "the most complete", a translation which was adopted for good reasons by both R. Crisp and H. D. Ross. On the basis of this translation, Ackrill (1980, 28) argues that the core definition of *eudaimonia* should be understood as "referring to total virtue, the combination of all virtues", for which he gives some linguistic arguments.⁴⁴ Another argument for the inclusive view is that a central requirement of *eudaimonia* is 'self-sufficiency' (*autarkeia*), in the sense that a life is self-sufficient if it is "worthy of choice and lacking in nothing" (*Nic. Eth.* 1.5, 1097b14–15).⁴⁵

of an inclusive interpretation and not its opposite.

42 In all likelihood, in the *ergon* argument Aristotle refers to these two forms of life in *Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1098a5–6.

43 For a summary of the debate and many references to the older literature, see Heinaman (1988). The central issues of the debate are not only the relation of a life of contemplation and a political life, but the relation of *Eth. Nic.* Book 1 and 10; see also Kullmann (1995). Heinaman distinguishes between an inclusive and an exclusive view of *eudaimonia* and calls the inclusive account "the comprehensive view" (Heinaman 1988, 31). Others distinguish between an inclusive and a dominant interpretation of Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia* (Horn 1998, 83–85). However, the term "dominant" presupposes an understanding of *eudaimonia* that is focused on a life of contemplation, but could comprise a political life, moral actions, and the exercise of ethical virtues. As a consequence, a "dominant" interpretation becomes a subcategory

44 Although Ackrill's interpretation of the meaning of "the most complete" as a translation of "*teleiotatēn*" constitutes an important argument against the exclusive view of *eudaimonia*, philologically it seems a bit forced.

45 For a critical discussion of the argument from self-sufficiency and the conclusion that it "offers no support for the

The preceding analysis of Aristotle's natural teleology and of his *ergon* argument leads to two additional and complementary arguments for an inclusive understanding of *eudaimonia*. The first and main result of the human function argument is that the specific human *ergon* (and thus *eudaimonia*) consists in a life of the activity of the rational part of the soul or in "an activity of the soul in accordance with reason or not without it" (*Nic. Eth.* 1.6, 1098ab3–8). These definitions clearly refer to both theoretical and practical reason.⁴⁶ Since the political life of the citizen is based on both the ethical virtues and on 'prudence' (*phronêsis*), the excellence of practical reason, such a life is clearly implied by the main result of Aristotle's *ergon* argument. In political life citizens use their practical reason to deliberate about political questions or decisions and to determine the appropriate means for a virtuous, good, and happy life. Therefore, such a life is a crucial part of the actualisation of man's nature as a 'living being that has language and reason' (*zôon logon echon*). Despite Aristotle's

arguments for the superiority of a life of contemplation, as a citizen the scientist or philosopher usually desires to participate in the political life of the *polis*: "But in so far as he is a human being and lives together with a number of others, he chooses to do actions in accordance with virtue" (*Eth. Nic.* 10.8, 1178b5–7, trans. R. Crisp). This implies that *eudaimonia* includes both a life of contemplation and a political life.⁴⁷

The second argument for an inclusive understanding of *eudaimonia* is based on the natural purpose of *logos*, which Aristotle explains in *Politics* 1.2 in the context of his well-known definition of man as a 'political animal by nature' (*physei politikon zôon*) (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a2–3). Aristotle refines this definition by adding the much-discussed proposition that "man is *mallon* a political animal than bees or any gregarious animal", which could mean either that man is a political animal in "a higher degree" or that he is "more of" one than other gregarious animals (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a7–9). If "*mallon*" is translated as in "a higher degree", the proposition refers to a quantitative difference. If it is rendered as "more of", it refers to a qualitative difference, which also means that only man can appropriately be called "political" and that other gregarious animals are "political" only in an imprecise and metaphorical sense.⁴⁸

comprehensive interpretation of *eudaimonia*", see Heinaman (1988, 50; cf. 41–51).

46 For good reasons, Ackrill (1980, 27) argues that "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*". Nussbaum even goes one step further and claims that the "human function" argument "attempts to establish" a "basis of agreement about the centrality of practical reasoning" for "the good human life" (Nussbaum 1990, 182). As Nussbaum's one-sided interpretation neglects the great importance Aristotle attributes to theoretical reason and a life of contemplation, it is not persuasive.

47 For the relation of the two forms of life, see Kullmann (1995), Lisi (2014), and Ottmann (2001, 168–171).

48 For the debate and the literature, see Knoll (2017) and Miller Jr. (1995, 30–36). Knoll (2017) primarily defends the thesis that only man can be called a political animal because

In the phrase that immediately follows the claim that “man is *mallon* a political animal than bees or any gregarious animal”, Aristotle refers to his teleological understanding of nature on which his subsequent analysis of the difference of the nature of animals and humans is based: “Nature, as we claim, does nothing without purpose” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a9, my trans.). In the next phrase, he presents his famous definition of a human being: “Man is the only animal (*zôon*) that possesses speech and reason (*logos*)” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a9–10, my trans.). Despite the close interdependence between speech and reason and the meaning of the word *logos*, in almost all translations “logos” is rendered only as “speech”, and not as well as “reason”.⁴⁹ However, the following phrases elucidate that in Aristotle’s definition “logos” refers to both speech and reason. While nature gives ‘voice’ (*phonê*) to all animals, it gives the gift of *logos* (speech/reason) only to human beings.⁵⁰ In a first step, Aristotle distinguishes between the natural purposes of *phonê*

and *logos* in the meaning of speech. The natural purpose of voice is to communicate the sensations of pleasure and pain. The natural purpose of speech is “to reveal (*deloun*) the advantageous and the harmful (*sympheron kai to blaberon*), and hence also the just and unjust (*dikaion kai to adikon*)” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a14–15, trans. C. Lord). In the context of this distinction, Aristotle elucidates the difference between the ‘nature’ (*physis*) of animals and humans. He explains about animals that “their nature has come this far, that they have a perception (*echein aisthêsin*) of the painful and pleasant and signal these things to each other” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a12–14, trans. C. Lord). Immediately after clarifying the natural purpose of speech, Aristotle refers to the natural purpose of *logos* in the meaning of reason. Thereby, he continues his explanation of the distinctive characteristics of humans compared to other higher animals:

For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception (*aisthêsin echein*) of good and bad (*agathou kai kakou*) and just and unjust (*dikaion kai to adikon*) and the other things of this sort; and community in these things is what makes a household and a city (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a15–18, trans. C. Lord).

If *logos* in *Pol.* 1.2 were translated only as speech, this passage would be partly redundant because in this case Aristotle would mainly be repeating what he had explained before about the

only man possesses *logos* and because *Pol.* 1.2. focuses on the concept of the *polis*. Still, not all scholars seem to be aware of the double sense of “mallon” and several translate it, in line with most translations of the *Politics*, simply as “more” or “more of”, e.g. Karbowski (2019, 226), Leunissen (2017, 110, 114), and Müller (2019, 122). In contrast, see Keil and Kreft (2019, 4, 10–12) and Pellegrin (2020, 81, 86).

49 This one-sided translation is often reproduced in the secondary literature; see e.g. Karbowski (2019, 226) and Leunissen (2017, 110, 114).

50 In *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle is more precise and explains that nature gives ‘voice’ (*phonê*) only to animals that breathe (*Hist animal.* 4.9, 535a29–b3).

difference between animals and humans and the natural purpose of speech.⁵¹ However, this is not the case because in this passage Aristotle further explains the specific capacities of human nature and the difference between the natural purposes of *logos* in the meaning of speech and of reason. The main natural purpose of 'reason' (*logos*) is that man has 'a perception' or 'a sense' (*aisthêsin echein*) of what is good and bad and just and unjust.⁵² This shows that *logos* – in line with its meaning in *Eth. Nic.* 1 – needs to be translated as reason, because speech alone would not suffice to endow man with the capacity to have such perceptions. In contrast, the natural purpose of speech is to give humans the capability to communicate and to 'reveal' or 'explain' (*deloun*) their perceptions about these phenomena to others.

The first and main result of the *ergon* argument defines the human function as an active life of the element that possesses reason (*praktikê tis tou logos echontos*). Neither in his *ergon* argument nor in his theory of the human 'soul' (*psychê*) does Aristotle mention the specific capacities of *logos*. He mainly does this in *Eth. Nic.* 6 and in *Pol.* 1.2. The natural purpose of *logos* is to give man

a sense to perceive and communicate what is advantageous, good, and just. These values or virtues and their exact meaning are the central practical and moral issues which citizens discuss and deliberate in political life. Therefore, Aristotle concludes his explanation of the difference of the nature of animals and humans in *Pol.* 1.2 with the remark that "community in these things is what makes a household and a city". As the human *ergon* is an active life of *logos*, and as the specific capacities and purposes of *logos* (reason/speech) are inextricably linked to the moral and political life of citizens, it is evident that *eudaimonia* includes political life. This is a strong argument for both an inclusive interpretation of *eudaimonia* and against an exclusive understanding, which identifies *eudaimonia* only with a life of contemplation.

6. CONCLUSION

The previous three sections have demonstrated that Aristotle's practical philosophy depends to a large extent on his teleological conception of nature. This is especially true for Aristotle's analysis of power relations among human beings, for his *ergon* argument, and for his view of the natural purposes of *logos*. His *ergon* argument is related to his theory of natural slavery, which again is based on his teleological and hierarchical conception of nature. The natural *ergon* of the slave by nature is to work for his master and owner with his body, which provides the latter with the free time and leisure that is necessary to perform his *ergon* in the natural

51 Probably because he does not recognise the double sense of *logos* in this context, Pellegrin (2020, 84) complains that "Aristotle expresses with an insistence that verges on pleonasm" that human beings are "the only animals endowed with perception of ethical values".

52 At the beginning of § 39 of his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls derives the human "sense of justice", a key term of his theory, from *Pol.* 1.2.

order. In this context, Aristotle claims that both the bodies and souls of free persons and slaves are different. In contrast to the body of the slave by nature, the body of the free man is not fit for work, but “useful with a view to a political way of life” (*Pol.* 1.5, 1254b27–31, trans. C. Lord).

At the beginning of the *ergon* argument, Aristotle suggests that a definition of *eudaimonia* could be achieved by first ascertaining “the function of man (*to ergon tou anthrôpou*)”. However, the common denomination of the *ergon* argument as the “human function argument” is something of a misnomer. First, from Aristotle’s view of slaves by nature, whom he identifies with barbarians, it follows that they are not able to achieve *eudaimonia*. Second, it is doubtful whether Aristotle holds women to be capable of *eudaimonia* because he claims, e.g., that they possess the ‘deliberative part of the soul’ (*bouleutikon*) ‘without

decision-making power’ (*akhyros*) and the ethical virtues not in a ruling but only a serving form (*Pol.* 1.13, 1260a12–13, 20–24).⁵³ Third, Aristotle is convinced that the vast majority of Greek men are incapable of excelling in virtue (*Eth. Nic.* 10.10, 1179b10–16, 1180a4–14; *Pol.* 5.1, 1301b40–1302a2). In line with this, he claims that the multitude is only capable of developing military virtue (*Pol.* 3.7, 1279b1–2). Only a few Greek men have the natural potential to develop all the human excellences or virtues and to achieve true *eudaimonia*. In addition, most free men have to work. This is a crucial social obstacle in the path of the development of the human virtues because such a development presupposes leisure and free time (*Pol.* 7.9, 1328b33–1329a2).⁵⁴ Therefore, the result of Aristotle’s *ergon* argument does not really refer to the natural *ergon* of all human beings, but to the *ergon* of free Greek elite men.

53 There are even reasons to believe that Aristotle thinks that women cannot develop the virtue he calls ‘prudence’ (*phronêsis*); see Knoll (2009, 157).

54 Cf. Knoll (2009, 135–40).

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