

# Essentialism and Pluralism in Aristotle's 'Function Argument' (NE 1.7)

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**ABSTRACT:** Aristotle is often thought of as one of the fathers of essentialism in Western philosophy. Aristotle's argument for the essence of human beings is, however, much more flexible than this prejudice might suggest. In the passage about the "human function" at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7, Aristotle gives an account of the particular "function" (or "achievement," *ergon*) of human beings that does not ask very much of the modern reader—only that she be prepared to analyze human beings as a logical category according to certain rules. While this may trouble the naturalistic reductionist or the post-humanist thinker, it is not clear that Aristotle's request is unreasonable, especially given what the function argument goes on to offer. It places normative thinking in the constellation of *type-property-activity*, a narrowing of the search for the human good, but not an overly constrictive one. The second, substantive stage of the argument gives a more narrow interpretation of what the unique property and its corresponding activity are in the case of humans—but even here Aristotle's apparently "thick" conclusions about the ultimate human good ultimately leave more room for a pluralistic disagreement about ends than might be expected.

**I**n this paper, I will try to show that essentialism, or at least Aristotle's version of it, allows for inter-subjectively valid normative statements about human beings, while keeping open a space for important disagreements about the specifics of the human good.

Essentialism about ethics can take many forms. Aristotle's teacher Plato, for instance, famously directed human beings toward one, unchanging, mathematical good. Aristotle's version of essentialism does not look to one universal good, instead it aims at elucidating a "human good"—the uniquely human mode of being that structures our notion of good and bad

actions, and good and bad humans. Aristotle is clearly worried that too plural a conception of human happiness will be meaningless (if everyone is good, then no-one is good), but as I hope to show, his solution still leaves a great deal of room for multiple visions of human flourishing, yielding ground neither on the possibility of substantive ethical agreement nor on the variety of good human lives.

This paper will focus on a passage that contemporary Anglophone scholars call the “function argument”<sup>1</sup> in the first book of the *Nichomachean Ethics* (NE I.7). First, it will break down the text into two component arguments, formal and substantive. The first part will examine the uses of the “formal” part, which provides a logical basis for functionalist-ethical thought. The second part will examine Aristotle’s substantive claims for a particular human good, while the last part will try and take stock of just what is essentialist and what pluralistic in Aristotelian functionalism.

### 1. THE MINIMALLY ESSENTIAL (“FORMAL”) STAGE OF THE FUNCTION ARGUMENT

Aristotle does not differentiate between formal and substantive arguments in his text. Despite the danger of reading a philosophical argument against the grain, analytically distinguishing a “formal” core at the heart of the passage on the human function may prove helpful in uncovering the assumptions and conclusions of an Aristotelian-functional approach.<sup>2</sup> Here is the formally distinct argument, as I understand it:

P1: For certain types (*genē*) of things,<sup>3</sup> normative evaluation—how we define *what they are* and *whether they are good* depends on what we take to be its function (*/achievement*, 1098a8–9).<sup>4</sup>

P2: The “function” (*ergon*) of such a type is a work (whether in the sense of product or activity, *ergon kai praxis*, 1097b26) which will reflect one of its unique properties (*idion*, 1097a34).<sup>5</sup>

C1: For any such type, its function, as a working out of a unique property, is how we determine whether it is acting well (*to eu*), that is, whether it is a good example of its type (literally, “has the good,” *tagathon*, 1097b27). More literally: “And generally for those things for which there is a function and a mode of action, the good and the well seem to be in its function, and thus it would seem to be for humans, if (*eiper*) they have a function” (1097b26–28).

If humans have a function, it will be easier to make normative judgments about them—are they doing it well? The weight of the argument is *not* on proving that humans have a function—the “conclusion” uses a tentative “if.” Rather, Aristotle is drawing up a framework for understanding what follows if humans *do* have a function.

Before finding a human function, it is necessary to show that humans are the *type* of thing that has a function, and to identify some "unique properties" of that type. Once it has been agreed that humans are the *type* of thing that has a function, it may be possible to show that humans have a function and that the function is the key to normative evaluation. The formal version of the function argument merely sets up possible normative payoff for types of things that have a unique property (*idion*) that relates to a form of action (*praxis*) that might be a function (*ergon*), but it is dependent on identifying a certain type and a certain unique property conducive to action.

The argument as I have described it is both simple and modest, almost tautologically so. In terms of normative argument, however, this line of reasoning is not without its achievements. First and foremost, despite the presence of the word "function," the formal stage of the argument is neither guilty of the naturalistic fallacy, nor is it teleological in any specified sense.<sup>6</sup> The formal argument is normative from its first premise. In speaking about only certain "types," Aristotle restricts us to talking about classes that *can* be normatively cognized. We are free to reject this first premise in order to maintain a materialistic, reductionist account of the world, but if we accept it, we have by no means violated the fact/value distinction—we have merely taken on board the idea that humans are something that can be normatively evaluated as a class.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, although Aristotle uses several terms of art (*genos*, *idion*, *praxis*), the argument up to this point is more or less detachable from its context in the *Ethics*, though the presumption that types can have specific unique properties that identify them without defining them is not defended here. Whether this last point constitutes a metaphysical assumption or not, it is clear that Aristotle doesn't (at this point in the argument) need to import *his own* theory of what the distinguishing feature for humans is for the argument to succeed.<sup>8</sup>

This brief argument makes several key assertions about the nature, or "location" of the sort of good that emerges from function-thinking:<sup>9</sup> A good example of the human "type" will be good in relation to a continued activity (*praxis*). For humans, as Aristotle later makes clear, this can only really be measured over the course of a life, (*bios*). A function is not a transferrable good, it is a form of activity that makes measuring good possible.<sup>10</sup> This action must be related to some unique property. It cannot be shared with other types, but the possibility of multiple unique properties within a single type is not excluded. We will have reason to return to this point later on, for it is the great accomplishment of the argument to both establish the existence of a good of a single type and yet leave room for a sort of relativism between multiple distinguishing properties of that type. Finally, what is at stake in normative description for Aristotle is the good *of* the type, rather than any good *for* the type.<sup>11</sup> The good *of* the type is a subjective genitive—an adjective relating to the human good, not an objective genitive where

“type’s good” is “good a type possesses, good for a type.” Normative value, Aristotle suggests, does not come from possession of something, or from any collection of “prudential” interests, at the substantive level, it will be the appraisal of a human being, measuring her against her type’s possible achievements, by means of an activity related to the “unique property.”

## 2. THE SUBSTANTIVE STAGE OF THE FUNCTION ARGUMENT

Although we have been speaking of a “human good,” the formal level of the function argument works for any “functional type.” In order to apply this to the problem of the human good, Aristotle must show that humans are indeed such a type. The form this argument takes is apparently inductive (*epagogē*). We move from human crafts that have clear functions (carpenters, cobblers), and human body-parts that have clear functions, to the idea of a human function.<sup>12</sup> The analogical reasoning here is rather more sophisticated than it might appear. The *Ethics* itself begins with crafts (*pasa techne...*). We are reminded of that beginning—that crafts all exist for the sake of (*hou heneka*)<sup>13</sup> some good, and are governed by the craft of politics, which concerns itself with the knowledge (*gnosis*) of the life-course that can achieve (that is?) that good (*bios*, 1094a22–3). In the passage immediately preceding our argument Aristotle stresses that another way of thinking of the good is the *choice-worthy life* (*hairetos bios*). Crafts are not just an example of social roles that have functions. They demonstrate the way in which social roles are implicated in the pursuit of life-courses.

The middle term of the argument for the existence of a human function is the apparently rhetorical question “or is the human being naturally a do-nothing? [*argon*].” Is this cheap rhetoric? It is a *reductio*—but perhaps not a cheap one. Once again, Aristotle is shifting the weight to an *if*—what happens if we decide that human nature lacks a function? And once again, we should look to the context. Aristotle has just asserted that human nature is political (constituted in a matrix of social relations, *phusei politikon ho anthropos*, 1097b11). Now we see that the stakes of whether humans have an *ergon* is wrapped up in whether human nature is political—whether there can be a *bios politikos*—a naturally political life course. A Hobbist, or even a garden-variety hedonist, might still not be convinced either of the natural status of politics or that humans aren’t “non-functional,” but Aristotle has made the consequences of a non-functionalist approach clear. Politics would become unnatural.<sup>14</sup> The final step in the argument, a description of functional organs, is directly related to the elements that came before it. The function of body parts is to serve a whole. How would the analogy work in humans? As Aristotle says in the *Politics* (III.4, 1277a5), the city is the whole of which humans are the part. Of course, humans are parts of the city qua citizens, not qua humans, but humans *need* the city to live fully qua humans. The city, Aristotle says, is the difference between

mere life (*zoe*) and the good life (*eu zen*, *Politics* I.2, 1252b30). The political nature of man connects the formal level of the function argument to the substantive level.

This analogical argument is deeply integrated with other strands of Aristotle's thought.<sup>15</sup> By thinking through the relation of crafts and parts and wholes to human life, we are being made to acknowledge that certain life courses (at the very least, political ones) are natural for humans, a view that will be hard to support if humans don't have some natural activity for achieving a good life course, that is, a function. Though incomplete, relying as it does on deep analogy and association, this first step in the substantive level of the function argument has already suggested two crucial patterns. The first is contrast between the threadbare attitude towards human life (*zoe*) that we are left with if we refuse to go along with functional-thinking and the rich concept of the life-course (*bios*) that seems tied to function-thinking. The second is the close relationship between the substantive functional claims and the idea of man as a political animal. This argument is, perhaps despite itself, weighted towards the *bios politikos*.

If Aristotle has convinced us that man must have a function, he should now be ready to identify the unique property (*idion*), and its activity (*praxis*) in humans, both of which should implicate the function. Aristotle assumes that the activities of the soul will be the definitive site for understanding a being composed of body parts (cf. *De Anima* II.412b4–6). As in *De Anima* (II.413a23ff.), Aristotle works through the shared activities of the souls of plants and animals, such as growth and perception (each of which results in a different way of living, *zēn*), before arriving at the activity of reason (*praktikē logou*) that is, rational thinking (*dianooumenon*, cf. *De Anima* II.414b18), as unique to humans. The function must be an activity related to the unique property, so the function of human beings is the being-at-work (actuality, *energia*) of a particular part of the soul "with reason or at least not without reason" (NE 1098b7–8). More particular, it is the set of activities (*praxeis*) that accompany this soul working at full-throttle, a set that can be said to form a way of living.<sup>16</sup> The human function is a certain practice of living, using a certain part of the soul in a certain way.

Having identified the unique property, a soul able to think and act rationally (*meta logou*), and the practice that would entail—a life of rational activity—Aristotle is ready to flesh out the substantive picture of a human good. The human good will be the full-functioning (being-at-work, *energia*) of the soul *according to excellence* (1098a16–17), where excellence is a stable state (*hexis*, as opposed to *praxis*, cf. NE II.1106a10–12) traceable to continuous good functioning. This seems, once again, tautological. The state of excellence (being good at something) comes about from the good functioning of the unique part of the human being, and in turn, encourages it. These goods for humans are the exercise of the unique human property so well and with such consistency that it can be described no longer as an act, but as a power (or powers, however many might contribute to the best

activity, 1098a17). This is not a tautological description, but a mutually enforcing one. In excellence, Aristotle is introducing the “goods-for” that were absent in the formal version of the argument. Goods *for* humans both emerge from and make possible the good of a person. The excellences, and the things that make excellence possible, are goods for humans. It should not surprise us that the goods *for* a thing, the excellences possessed by it, are undetermined. They will have to be supplied by the content of the good activity, and are therefore entirely contextually contingent.

Aristotle began filling out the substantive version of the function argument by showing that the exercise of the unique human attribute would be visible in living activity (*zoē*). The end of the substantive argument is the conclusion that the human good should be thought of as a *life-course* (*bios*). In the space between these two words lies the difference between the formal part of the argument and the fully specified version. “Life” is a category that applies to many living things that might exhibit the unique property-activity-function relationship. “Life-course,” laden as it is with the implications of decisions, attitudes, and projects, with *activity* in a particular mode, can only apply to human beings. Once the “good life-course” is agreed to be the ultimate human good, it will be understood to structure all human activity. From less teleological premises we have reached a more teleological conclusion, yet one that still maintains a modicum of pluralism—Aristotle has not ruled out the possibility of multiple good life-courses.

### 3. PLURALISM AND ESSENTIALISM IN THE FUNCTION ARGUMENT

From the beginning of his discussion of the human good, Aristotle professes to be open to the possibility that there might be multiple ends to human ethical life (NE 1097a23–4). In the formal level of the argument he continues to leave open the possibility of plurality in several ways. The first is in the very “formal” nature of part of the argument. Not only can this argument, as Aristotle suggests, be applied to things other than humans, different terms can be substituted for its variables (*idion*, *praxis*, etc.) and the argument will still work. One can, perhaps, find traces of this “formal” function argument in Aristotelians as varied as Aquinas, Marx, and even Heidegger.<sup>17</sup>

Within the formal stage of the argument itself the underspecified nature of the “unique property” also lends itself to a multiplicity of solutions. The unique property does not *define* the entity it belongs to, nor is it the “being” (*ousia*) of a being. Despite some connotations of the word “unique,” more than one “unique property” can apparently inhere in a natural type (it is unique to the type, not unique as the *only* distinguishing feature of the type). If more than one of these properties can be the basis for a sustained mode of activity (*praxis*), then there would seem to be no reason why there cannot be more than one normative function. Indeed, the way Aristotle fills out the contours of the unique property of humans suggests just how plural the *idion* can be. The part of the soul that

is responsible for the unique property of "possessing reason" (*logon echon*) is a doublet, having two parts, each itself unique to humans (NE VI.1139a6ff.).<sup>18</sup>

This may shed some light on a famous interpretive difficulty in the *Ethics*, that there are two life-courses (*bioi*) that seem to fit the specifications of the human good—the life of practical (political) activity, and the life of theoretical activity. Aristotle has a set of arguments for why the latter is ultimately superior, but, as readers have long recognized, the strongest argument against the life of theoretical activity is Aristotle's own function argument. The "formal" element of the function argument, which rests so heavily on identifying the "type" and the "unique property" would seem to point to political activity as the definitive characteristic of humans. After all, theoretical activity is shared with gods (and maybe other higher rational beings). It is precisely that such higher beings think abstractly that makes theoretical thought "higher" than practical thought. Indeed, Aristotle notes, *if* man were the best thing in the universe, then perhaps his "unique property" would be the highest (but, clearly he is not, so it is not, NE VI.1141a20–22). It is only one interpretation of the "substantive" stage of the function argument that pushes us to identify the "fullest functioning" meaning of "having reason" with theoretical activity, a meaning that may point beyond the uniqueness of humans entirely.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

By separating the formal elements of the function argument from its substantive version, this paper has tried to clarify the scope and meaning of what the argument accomplishes. The formal substrate of the function argument does not ask very much of the modern reader—only that she be prepared to analyze human beings as a logical category according to certain rules. While this may trouble the naturalistic reductionist or the post-humanist thinker, it is not clear that Aristotle's request is unreasonable, especially given what the function argument goes on to offer. It places normative thinking in the constellation of *type-property-activity*, a narrowing of the search for the human good, but not an overly constrictive one.

The substantive stage of the argument gives a more narrow interpretation of what the unique property and its corresponding activity are in the case of humans—but even Aristotle's apparently "thick" conclusions about the ultimate human good ultimately leave more room for disagreement about ends than might be expected. If we substitute a Marxian idea of labor as human *praxis*, we will get a very different substantive understanding of the function (or as the young Marx called it, the "species essence"). If we view the Heideggerian notion of *care* as a form of particular (*idion*) activity, we may even find traces of a function argument in *Being and Time*. If Aristotle's argument is essentialist, it is also incredibly flexible. This unsolved tension between essentialism and formal pluralism is the great legacy of the function argument.



## NOTES

1. Here, with the genitive *anthropou*, *ergon* means something like a human's "proper work." S. Baker, in an important recent contribution, argues that this should often be translated "achievement," as it can refer to a product or an activity, depending on the case. I will use *function* for the most part, but understood as meaning something like "achievement that expresses an essence."
2. We are not the first to propose a "formal" reading of the argument—see the recent work of G. Lawrence (2001, 2006, 2009), J. Whiting (1988), and A. Gomez-Lobo (1989)—but we hope to add to this approach in more clearly separating out what is formal from what is substantive in NE 1.7.
3. What Lawrence (2006) calls "functional items," and Thompson (2015) describes as the subject of "practical naturalism."
4. The use of *genos* here is curious. I translate it as "type" to get across two assumptions entailed in the word—one, that it can contain several "natural kinds" (*eide*, cf. *Topics* I.5.102a32–33) within it, but yet is specified enough to share a set of unique traits. This raises the question: What are the "natural kinds" within the type "human"?
5. The "unique property" is something "which does not show the essence of a thing but belongs to it alone and is predicated reciprocally of it" (*Topics* I.5.102a19–20). Having a trunk is a unique property of elephants because if something is an elephant, it has a trunk, and if something has a trunk, it is an elephant. That said, the *being* (*ousia*) of an elephant is not having a trunk, although it may be *related* to trunk-using.
6. Surely there are *substantive* functionalist theories that commit both errors. One could posit that a human's function is to gain a reproductive advantage in her ecological niche as measured by propagation of genetic material, or one could posit that a human's function is to do what he was created by his creator to do. The fallacy in both of these cases is committed at the *substantive* level.
7. See Whiting 1988. Many will find the separation of humans from other animals to be itself metaphysically presumptuous. For a defense of this approach see Thompson 2015 and Boyle 2012.
8. This agrees, to an extent, with the account given by T. D. Roche (1988: 58–9).
9. I borrow the idea of the "logical category" from Lawrence (2001, 2004).
10. As Gomez-Lobo (1989) and Baker (2015) both note, the function and the good are not strictly identical. The good is found within the function.
11. In contradistinction to Plato's use of a form of function argument at *Republic* 351ff., where the function of a thing demonstrates what it's good *for* (i.e., that it's best *at* something) and perhaps also what's good *for* it. See Lawrence 2009, Baker 2015.
12. This is, *prima facie*, a weak argument. Following Barney (2008) and Tuozzo (1996), to whom I am indebted, I will try to take it at more than its surface value.
13. Note that the parallel function passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* (EE II.1.1219aff.) is clear about associating the function with an end "for the sake of which" something is. What we should make of the rhetorical (and perhaps philosophical?) difference between the two passages is a pressing question.



14. See Barney 2008 on "shaming" as a rhetorical trope against instrumentalists in the *Ethics*.
15. My reading is a combination of the "architectonic" and "social teleology" approaches described by Barney (2008).
16. The wording here (*zoē tis*, 1098a13–14) seems incongruous with the sense of getting beyond "mere life," a reason I am inclined to agree with Bywater and delete 1098a12–16.
17. A claim it is beyond the immediate scope of this paper to defend.
18. A few readers have raised the question of what makes a particular unique property the site of the function/achievement. Those familiar Alexander or Boethius invariably bring up laughter as another *idion*—after all, are not humans the only *animal risibile*? Both Aristotle and Alexander make a distinction between "complete" and "incomplete" activities (cf. *Met. Theta 6*). Laughter is an incomplete activity—it aims at something and it ends at something (we might say the thing it aims at is an effect in social life—on this Aristotle and Hobbes could agree). The more perfect *idion* will be the "complete" *idion* of rationality, all the more so since laughter only makes sense within the context of *logos* and not the other way around.
19. R. Kraut (1989) tries to argue that the *idion* always leaves *potential* for sharing properties with "higher beings," but this seems wrong—Aristotle could have described it as a sort of *dunamis*, which he did not.

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