

Aristotle on work

Author(s): Tom Angier

Source: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 70, No. 278 (4), PHILOSOPHY OF WORK: PHILOSOPHIE DU TRAVAIL (2016), pp. 435-449

Published by: Revue Internationale de Philosophie

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44862687>

Accessed: 09-02-2022 16:16 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Revue Internationale de Philosophie* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*

# Aristotle on work

TOM ANGIER

‘Work’ is a richly textured English term of Germanic origin. It can have a technical sense, viz. the exertion of force in overcoming resistance, which is employed in the physical sciences. As a verb, ‘work’ signifies activity engaged in or set in train in order to achieve a particular result or set of results: it can be intransitive (‘they are working hard’) or transitive (‘she works the machine’), personal (‘he works for little money’) or impersonal (‘the mechanism works’, ‘the plan worked’). As a mass noun, ‘work’ again indicates mental and/or physical activity directed at an end or ends, covering (most generally) a task to be completed (‘the work took longer than expected’), but also (more specifically) one’s job (‘I’m looking for work’), or the place one is employed (‘she’s home from work’). As a count noun, it picks out the result of or product made by activity: here we speak, for instance, of ‘works of art’ or a ‘masterwork’. In light of this lexicographical data, can we reduce the semantics of ‘work’ to some kind of philosophical order? To some degree, yes. The noun ‘work’ is process/product ambiguous, in that it can designate either a form of activity or the result(s) of that activity. In this respect, it differs from the Latin-derived term ‘labour’, which refers exclusively to a form of activity. ‘Work’ differs from ‘labour’ also insofar as the latter tends to pick out physical, especially manual work, and therefore work of some strenuousness. In this way, ‘labour’ reflects its etymological origin in the Latin for ‘toil’, which could be said to be a species of work.<sup>1</sup>

When we turn to ancient Greek, the semantic field is perhaps more variegated, but betrays some structural similarity. *Ergazdomai* (verb) and *ergon* (noun), from which English derives ‘ergonomic’ (etc.), are cognates that share the same Indo-European root as ‘work’. Whereas English’s mixed Germanic and Latin inheritance permits the contrast between ‘work’ and ‘labour’, Greek uses *ergazdomai* to cover all forms of result-directed activity, including manual or hard labour. *Ergon* has an even wider semantic range, covering not only the highly general sense of ‘thing’, but also ‘trouble’ (cf. Latin ‘labor’), ‘product’, ‘deed’, ‘task’,

---

1. Hannah Arendt makes a great deal of the distinction between ‘labour’ and ‘work’ in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1959). I shall come back to this later on.

‘business’ and ‘function’. (Aristotle’s ‘function argument’ in *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] I.7 refers to the different *erga* or functions that characterise different species.) Like the English noun ‘work’, *ergon* displays a process/product ambiguity, since it can refer either to activity *per se*, or to that which is generated by activity. And this is crucial to the opening chapter of NE, where Aristotle makes a key distinction between ends [*telē*]: ‘some are activities [*energeiai*],’ he holds, ‘others are products [*erga*] apart from the activities that produce them’ (1094a4-5). This notion of ends that are *para* or apart from activity is, as we shall see, seminal for Aristotle’s axiology of work. This is because, as he goes on to add, ‘where there are ends apart from the actions [*praxeis*], it is the nature of the products [*erga*] to be better than the activities [*energeiōn*],’ (1094a5-6).

We have seen, then, that English and Greek terminology in this domain overlaps, to an extent, even if the substantive *ergon* incorporates a range of concepts not falling under any one English term. What I want to concentrate on in this article is ‘work’ in the sense of one’s occupation, whether this is understood in purely instrumental terms (a ‘job’ to earn money), or in some more elevated sense (‘vocation’, *métier*). What is striking is that, compared to modern thinkers, Aristotle is far more ready to assert and argue for a hierarchy among types of occupation. As I’ll detail below, NE X.7-8 leave the reader in no doubt that at the summit of human *erga* lies what Aristotle calls the activity of *theōria*, variously translated as ‘contemplation’, ‘study’, ‘speculation’ or simply ‘theory’. This is the activity characteristic of *philosophoi*, viz. those who love wisdom, and in Aristotle’s view it approximates the activity of god. Below *theōria* there is ordinary *praxis*, namely action<sup>2</sup> that instantiates the moral or character virtues, virtues such as courage, temperance, justice and generosity. The highest form of *praxis* is that of the *politikos* or ruler, whose sphere of action is the most responsible of any man leading the practical or non-contemplative life, viz. the entire city or *polis*. Below *praxis*, there lies *technē*, viz. ‘art’, ‘skill’, ‘expertise’ or ‘craft’. Unlike politicians, say, *technitai* or craftsmen typically produce distinct, tangible products, such as shoes, clothes, carts or well-bred horses. In this way, they are what Aristotle calls *poiētikoi*, i.e. involved in making things,

2. *Praxis* has the semantic range of action, doing, practice, or business, and therefore is more concrete in sense than *energeia*, which denotes activity, operation, performance or actuality. Whereas contemplation constitutes an *energeia*, it does not constitute a *praxis*, since it is abstract in content and (*per se*) involves only the intellectual virtues (not the character virtues, or *ēthikai aretai*).

rather than merely in acting.<sup>3</sup> And last and certainly least, there is the activity characteristic of slaves [*douloi*], viz. getting and purveying life's 'necessities', principally food and drink. As I'll document further on, such activity relies on *empeiria* or mere 'experience', i.e. non-expert habit, which even the rationally defective can master.

This fourfold hierarchy is no doubt controversial, both in terms of its ordering and the specific content of each type of work. But at least in its broad privileging of the *bios theōrētikos* over the *bios praktikos*, the contemplative over the practical or 'active' life, it retained its authority until the modern period (for corroboration of this, see Craig 1987). So far as I can tell, there were only two main challenges to this authority in the history of Western philosophy. A challenge emerged first from some Christian thinkers, who drew on the person of Jesus – together with wider biblical tropes – to argue that the *vita activa*, even the life of manual labour, had great dignity (or even virtue), which at least equalled that of the *vita contemplativa*. After all, Jesus was trained in the humble discipline of carpentry, an example *par excellence* of the *technai poiētikai*. And if God Himself had deigned to become incarnate as a mere *technitēs*, or craftsman, this reflected not only a parallelism between human and divine creativity, but also the notion (wholly absent in the ancient Greek context) that human toil had a new champion in a God who voluntarily suffered on the Cross. These themes were taken up sporadically throughout Christian history, for example in the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* ['On Capital and Labour'] (1891) and *Laborem Exercens* ['On Human Work'] (1981).<sup>4</sup> But despite these overtures to the *vita activa*, and even to the life of manual labour – especially after the Reformation – Catholic Christian thought never officially abandoned the *vita contemplativa* as the highest form of life, something reflected in Josef Pieper's famous study, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (Pieper 1952). And although Catholic philosophers are now in a minority in taking this position, the persistent privileging of the contemplative life over 'unfree' or 'illiberal' occupations until well into the modern period is itself remarkable.

- 
3. Put otherwise, they have 'ends apart from [their] actions' (NE 1094a5). True, *technē* is a very capacious term, and at times covers mathematics, navigation, generalship and even politics [*politikē technē*] (see Angier 2010, 36-41). Clearly, none of these activities is strictly *poiētikē* (a type of making). Nonetheless, in NE VI.4, Aristotle gives *technē* a narrower definition, saying 'making and acting being different, *technē* must be a matter of making, not acting' (1140a16-17). It is this generic contrast which informs my taxonomy of work.
  4. For Jesus the carpenter, see John Paul II 1981, II.6, V.26 (cf. Leo XIII 1891, 223); for human co-creation with God, see John Paul II 1981, II.4, V.25 (cf. Leo XIII 1891, 219); for toil as participation in the Cross, see John Paul II 1981, V.27 (cf. Leo XIII 1891, 221). See also, in general, Berdyaev 1960, 215-16.

The second main challenge to Aristotle's fourfold hierarchy comes from Marxist philosophy, much of which not only challenges, but also inverts Aristotle's hierarchy. As Hannah Arendt notes, Marx elevates labour in virtue of its productivity, and 'the seemingly blasphemous notion ... that labour (and not God) created man' (Arendt 1959, 76). For Marx, contemplation is assimilated to idle, unproductive, and thus parasitic activity, whose moral dubiousness is compounded by its metaphysical ill-foundedness (man's 'species-being' is now shaped essentially by labour, or the ability to produce). Indeed, according to *The German Ideology*, and *contra* Aristotle, it is not reason but labour that properly distinguishes man from the other animals. As Marx writes, 'The first historical act of this [human] individual, by which he distinguishes himself from the animals, is not that he thinks, but rather that he begins to produce his means of subsistence [Lebensmittel]'.<sup>5</sup> But despite this exaltation of proletarian work, Marx's writings contain unmistakably Aristotelian elements. Rather than proletarian work, his real sympathy lies with proletarian workers, whose well-being ultimately requires the demise of labour. As he puts things in *Das Kapital*, 'the realm of freedom begins only where labour determined through want and external utility ceases', where 'the rule of immediate physical needs ends' (Marx 1932, 873).<sup>6</sup> Marx holds, in fact, that man's species-being will be fulfilled only when human labour is replaced by machines, and his final vision of communist society lauds, if not the contemplative life, at least the life of leisured *praxis*. In such a society, he maintains, people will 'do this today and that tomorrow, ... hunt in the morning, go fishing in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, are critics after dinner, as they see fit, without for that matter ever becoming hunters, fishermen, shepherds or critics' (Marx and Engels 1970, 22, 373).

So it seems that, even within traditions with the resources to resist Aristotle's axiology of work, it has shown extraordinary resilience. Why so? And can that axiology be (at least partly) defended? I will argue that it can, but before doing so, I want to outline three respects in which it is clearly no longer defensible. First, Aristotle assumes a social hierarchy which unduly influences his hierarchy of occupations. Just as Plato's *Republic* assigns *theōria* to a ruling 'guardian' class, and provisioning to the lower orders, so Aristotle assumes a similar correlation between class and occupation. But such guilt (or merit) by association hardly provides *grounds* for his fourfold hierarchy. What we need are reasons for valuing contemplation, and depreciating (e.g.) manual labour *per se*, rather

5. Marx and Engels 1970, 568. For further references, see Arendt 1959, 325-6 n. 14, 330-31 n. 36.

6. For further references, see Arendt 1959, 90, 113, 332 n. 49.

than the suasion of contemporary class prejudice.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, Aristotle assumes an evaluative ontology which we have lost, and which, moreover, seems irrecoverable. For him, matter's perishability is a mark of its disvalue, compared to the imperishability of the supralunary sphere (for evidence of this contrast, see, for instance, *Metaphysics* III.4). It follows that those who concern themselves with material, worldly things – i.e. most *technitai*, but pre-eminently *douloi*, who handle perishable foodstuffs – are involved with intrinsically less valuable objects. Thirdly, this defunct evaluative ontology is mirrored in Aristotle's psychology. For according to the latter, human perception and cognition involve the mind's taking on the 'form' of objects without their matter.<sup>8</sup> But if so, it seems inevitable that the comparative disvalue of perishable objects will inform the psychology of those who spend their time working on and/or with such objects. As Aristotle expresses matters, 'the mind thinks all things [*panta noei*]' (*De Anima* 429a18); the upshot here being that both craftsmen and slaves have minds that are, unavoidably, continually 'brought low'.

In sum, there are bad reasons to affirm Aristotle's fourfold hierarchy of occupations: neither correlation with class status, nor Aristotle's highly controversial accounts of ontology and psychology should persuade us to move in its direction. But that does not mean there are no good reasons to affirm it (at least in part). In what follows, I will tackle Aristotle's hierarchy from the bottom up: starting with *empeiria* or mere 'experience', I will document why this is both epistemically and practically an inferior condition to that of the *technitēs*. I will then argue that the life of *technē* has distinct disadvantages compared to the life of virtuous *praxis*, which, in turn, can be seen to hold less value, overall, than the life of *theōria*. Not that Aristotle's argument will, in every respect, stand up – indeed, it has significant flaws. But my claim will be that the evaluative structure it proposes is fundamentally sound and deeply insightful.

To begin with, why think that the occupation of the *technitēs*, which typically centres on the production of durable objects, is superior to that of the *doulos*,

- 
7. Such prejudice is more evident in Aristotle than in Plato, since unlike Plato, Aristotle tries to justify most slavery as 'natural' (see *Politics* I.3-7). According to him, 'slave[s] ha[ve] no deliberative faculty at all' (1260a12), a key mark of their rational deficiency. As he holds at 1254b20-22, 'he who can be, and therefore is, another's, and he who participates in reason enough to apprehend, but not to have, is a slave by nature'. This is clearly an artefact of ideology, rather than of careful observation. For our purposes, its interest lies solely in the idea that types of occupation – rather than types of person – constitute a hierarchy.
  8. See esp. *De Anima* 418a3-6, 424a17-21, III.4-5. As Aristotle puts things with regard to perception, 'the perceptive faculty is in potentiality such as the object of perception already is in actuality', so that when something is affected by an object of perception, 'it is made like it and is such as that thing is' (418a3-6).

which is typically concerned with providing life's 'necessities', using 'cooking and similar menial arts' (*Politics* 1255b26-7)? Arendt, who construes this as a contrast between 'work' and 'labour', justifies the superiority of the former precisely in virtue of its end: viz. the production of durable objects. She writes: 'Their proper use does not cause them to disappear and they give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man' (Arendt 1959, 119). Labour, according to Arendt, 'lacks the worldly permanence of a piece of work', and moreover embodies a 'compulsory repetition ... , where one must eat in order to labour and must labour in order to eat' (ibid. 125); it is 'caught in the cyclical movement of the body's life process, has neither a beginning nor an end' (ibid. 126). All told, this argument is intriguing, but appears strangely under-motivated. Arendt places value on the durable, stable and solid as opposed to the temporary and evanescent, an evaluation which has some intuitive plausibility.<sup>9</sup> But it is hardly robust, let alone probative. The fact that something is continually necessary for the sustenance of life might be thought a mark of its value, rather than disvalue. Furthermore, even assuming Arendt is right to say that the process of provisioning lacks a clear beginning and end, it remains obscure why this is a mark against it (Aristotle thinks the continual revolution of the heavenly spheres is a mark of *superior* motion). All in all, Arendt seems under the impress of Aristotle's Platonic assumption that the perishable is ontologically inferior to the eternal, with *technē* approximating the latter to a higher degree. But as I argued above, this is a very weak basis on which to systematically subordinate 'labour' to 'work'.<sup>10</sup>

If we are looking for a stronger basis for this subordination, we must turn away from Arendt and back to Aristotle himself, and in particular to the first chapter of book one of the *Metaphysics*. It is here that Aristotle gives his account of how *technē* emerges from mere 'experience' or *empeiria*, an account that does not rely on dubious premises concerning durability or processes with clear

9. Elizabeth Telfer relies on the insubstantiality and transience of food and drink to argue that they cannot constitute an art form (see Telfer 2008).

10. Arendt's deprecation of being 'caught in the cyclical movement of the body's life process' also has Platonic overtones: the *Phaedo* presents the soul as trapped in the body, while the *Republic* associates the body with base desires, which need to be transcended. (For a critique of Plato's hostility to the body and to impermanence in general, see Nussbaum 2001.) Overall, Arendt does too little to question her dichotomy between 'labour' and 'work'. By the twentieth century, industrial mechanisation had brought the latter far closer to a repetitive process, and made its products far less solid and durable than in previous centuries. Indeed, although Arendt shows some limited acknowledgement of these points (see Arendt 1959, 294-5), her strong contrast between *animal laborans* and *homo faber* is notable for its anachronism.

beginnings and ends. Instead, Aristotle presents *technē* as a distinct epistemic and practical achievement, one that presupposes yet transcends what is learnt through mere accumulated experience. Admittedly, he does not refer explicitly either to slaves, or to the practice of provisioning. But as I'll elaborate, there are sufficient points of contact between his account in *Metaphysics* I.1 and his wider hierarchy of occupations to suggest that the category of *empeiria* correlates precisely and illuminatingly with the 'servile' life.

Aristotle opens his account by distinguishing human from other animal learning. 'The animals other than man', he holds, 'live by imagination [*phantasiais*] and memories, and have but little of connected experience' (980b25-7). While experience requires memory, only in humans is memory systematic and ordered, yielding determinate experience: as Aristotle comments, 'many memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience' (980b29-81a1). This progress to *empeiria* is a clear cognitive gain, since it allows humans to refer to identical objects under a single category. But it still falls short of the cognitive sophistication of *technē*. As Aristotle writes, '*technē* arises, when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgement about similar objects is produced' (981a5-7). In other words, the move to *technē* marks a graduation from using universal concepts to making universal judgements. To take Aristotle's own example, 'to have a judgement that when Callias was ill of this disease this did him good ... is a matter of experience; but to judge that it has done good to all persons of a certain constitution, marked off in one class, when they were ill of this disease ... this is a matter of *technē*' (981a7-12). So we can see a key respect in which *technē* constitutes an epistemic improvement over mere experience. Instead of a panoply of disconnected or *ad hoc* judgements about individuals, the *technitēs* or person of skill can form universal judgements about types or classes of object. And this, in turn, affords practical dividends, since such judgements make experience both more predictable, and more subject to control. Not that *technē* does away with the need for acquaintance with particular objects or individuals;<sup>11</sup> it is just that their nature and condition become more perspicuous, and open to more effective management.

11. Aristotle recognises this explicitly when he comments that 'With a view to action, experience seems in no respect inferior to *technē*, and we even see men of experience succeeding more than those who have theory without experience. The reason is that experience is knowledge of individuals, *technē* of universals, and actions and productions are all concerned with the individual' (981a12-17). It is consistent with this to recognise that, while *empeiria* alone is more effective than pure 'theory', *technē* informed by real acquaintance with individuals is better than either.



The universality of *technē*-cognition is tied to two more respects in which it is superior to mere experience. First, the person of skill has explanatory knowledge, rather than simply a grasp of what tends to happen. As Aristotle maintains, ‘we think that knowledge and understanding belong to *technē* rather than to *empeiria* ... because [*technitai*] know the cause, but [*empeiroi*] do not. For men of experience know that the thing is so, but do not know why, while the others know the ‘why’ [*to dioti*] and the cause [*tēn aitian*]’ (981a24-30). Explanatory knowledge is powerful because rather than remaining at the childish, servile level of noting individual occurrences or successive events, it allows one to understand why such sequences occur in the first place. And this removes one from the condition of the *doulos*, who depends not on his own, but on his master’s explanatory understanding. A similar relation holds between those Aristotle calls ‘master-workers’ and ‘manual workers’: ‘the master-workers [*architectonas*] in each *technē* are more honourable’, he contends, ‘and know in a truer sense and are wiser than the manual workers [*cheirotechnōn*], because they know the causes of the things that are done (we think the manual workers are like certain lifeless things which act indeed, but act without knowing what they do, as fire burns – but while the lifeless things perform each of their functions by a natural tendency, the labourers perform them through habit)’ (981a30-b5). While this contrast is no doubt exaggerated, and coloured by ideology, it points up the parallelism between mere *empeiria* and the supposed condition of the slave, whom Aristotle compares to a rationally deficient instrument, wholly at the disposal of his rationally proficient master.<sup>12</sup> And to underline this contrast, he highlights a second disparity between experience and skill, namely that ‘it is a sign of the man who knows, that he can teach, and hence we think *technē* more truly knowledge than experience is; for *technitai* can teach, but men of mere experience cannot’ (981b7-10).

To summarise why the bridge from experience to skill or craft is worth crossing (assuming one has the rational capacity to do so). *Technē* is characterised primarily by the ability to make universal judgements, rather than *ad hoc* judgements about particulars. This is a clear epistemic gain, which has practical benefits as well. At a more fine-grained level, the cognitive progress *technē* embodies is crucially causal or explanatory in form, since part of what universal judgements enable is an understanding of *why* objects of type x or

12. ‘Now instruments are of various sorts; some are living, others lifeless ... in the arrangement of a family, a slave is a living possession ... And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action, separable from the possessor’ (*Politics* 1253b28-4a17). Cf. NE 1161b4-7; *Eudemian Ethics* 1241b17-24, 1242a28-9.

y behave as they do. In this way, the knowledge enjoyed by craftsmen is even further removed from that of mere *douloi* (where these include labourers or manual workers). Finally, *technitai* are privileged on account of their ability to teach and pass on their trade. Whereas the benighted *empeiros* can point merely to ‘knacks’ he has learnt along the way, the universal and causal knowledge gained through craft-learning is sufficiently systematic to constitute transmissible expertise.

Having crossed the bridge from experience to skill, we move next to the bridge from skill to *praxis*. In some ways this is the most straightforward bridge to cross, because the benefits of doing so are palpable. They are at least threefold. First, *technē* as I’ve outlined it characteristically concerns the production of objects.<sup>13</sup> On this construal, there is evidently a narrowness of content that afflicts the work of a *technitēs*. For he or she deals primarily not with humans, but with the material aspects of human life. On the one hand, there is a distinct good to be realised in producing shoes, or clothes, or any number of kinds of object. The precision and attention to detail required is valuable *per se*, and indeed, has been the topic of monographs like Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (Sennett 2008), and Matthew Crawford’s *Shopclass as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (Crawford 2009). But on the other hand, one does not have to affirm Aristotle’s metaphysical depreciation of matter to see that continual attention to material goods involves a narrowness of focus that has moral psychological costs. At its worst, it can involve a dramatic impoverishment of sensibility, where the concern with precision, say, becomes obsessive, and the human teleology of craft-production is lost sight of altogether.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, this narrowness of focus has a further aspect, viz. one of scope: for each *technitēs* is preoccupied with only one, particular, restricted domain. Granted, there can be hierarchies of crafts, where some are systematically subordinated to others that are less narrow in scope. For instance, ‘bridle-making ... fall[s] under the *technē* of riding, and this ... under strategy’ (NE 1094a10-13). But these ‘master *technai*’ (NE

13. But not exhaustively so: NB the ‘arts’ of medicine and horse-breeding, for example. My point applies only to what Aristotle calls the *technai poiētikai*, or productive crafts. These are paradigmatic crafts, something reflected in Arendt’s category of ‘work’, which concerns the production of durable objects.

14. This is not far-fetched, if one sees the implications of Aristotle’s insight that ‘where there are ends apart from the actions [*praxeis*], it is the nature of the products [*erga*] to be better than the activities [*energeiōn*]’ (NE 1094a5-6; cf. 1105a27-b2). In a *technē*-dominated society, action is wholly subordinated to what it produces, and arguably this has led – in an era of industrial mass-production – to a highly injurious de-privileging of the good of the human producer. Arendt goes so far as to say that it is characteristic of tyranny to treat the whole of society as akin to an object to be fashioned, rather than as an arena of autonomous agents (see Arendt 1959, 198-202, 206). I shall elaborate on how *technē* can usurp moral practice below.

1094a14) – skilled activities such as generalship, navigation or medicine – are effectively already forms of *praxis*. They privilege action, that is, over making, and in virtue of this their ends ‘are to be preferred to all the subordinate [narrowly technical] ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued’ (NE 1094a15-16).

A third, related reason to cross the bridge from *technē* to *praxis* is that craft-work *per se* is too narrow in content and scope to give itself moral direction. In Aristotle’s terms, craft-knowledge is not the same as virtue, which must be supplied by what he calls ‘practical wisdom’ [*phronēsis*]. As he puts matters, ‘it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient ... not in some particular respect, ... but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general. This is shown by the fact that we credit men with practical wisdom ... when they have calculated well with a view to some good end which is one of those that are not the object of any *technē*’ (NE 1140a25-30). In other words, although craftsmen can be virtuous, they are so not because of their own technical expertise, but because they subordinate that expertise to moral ends. And this is no easy task: it involves being properly habituated from one’s youth up in virtuous practices (see NE II.1; cf. *Eudemian Ethics* 1220a22-b20), practices that may favour particular technical achievements, but may well come into conflict with them. To take a modern example, the nuclear scientist or embryologist may have to forego professional opportunities and advancement in order to keep his or her *technē* within the bounds prescribed by *phronēsis*. There is always the possibility, that is, that skills and virtues will come apart,<sup>15</sup> and it is integral to Aristotle’s fourfold hierarchy that, in cases of conflict, the latter always trump the former. True, Aristotle’s judgement that ‘no man can practise virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer’ (*Politics* 1278a20-21) is harsh and unwarranted. But his concern that the *technai* can overstep their moral bounds is not unfounded, neither is his insistence on the hegemony of virtuous *praxis*.<sup>16</sup>

15. This is a theme highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1981).

16. In *The Moral Economy of Labour: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory* (Murphy 1993), James B. Murphy argues for *technē* as the centre of a flourishing life, where this is not in tension with virtuous *praxis* but thoroughly integrated with it. Aristotle would have nothing against this proposal. Where he departs from Murphy is in being more alive to the potential tensions between *technē* and virtue. For instance, he notes that craft *per se* is value-neutral, and that technical proficiency is consistent with pursuing immoral ends (see NE VI.5; cf. *Metaphysics* 1046b4-9, 18-20 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1246a31-3). If this danger was real in Aristotle’s time, I take it it is so *a fortiori* in ours, a time in which the aims of business and industrial manufacture have become, in many ways, disembedded from the common good. For this notion of the modern period’s being marked by a disembedding of the economy from the wider social good, see Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (Polanyi 2002).

We now come to the third and final bridge, from virtuous *praxis* to *theōria* or contemplation. This is the hardest bridge to cross, since the idea that intellectual work is the crowning achievement of human life appears both self-indulgent and ‘elitist’ to the modern mind. Nonetheless, it is the most important bridge to secure, since without it Aristotle’s entire axiology of work is deprived of its *telos* and ultimate rationale. In what follows, I will not discuss how, exactly, contemplation is privileged within Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* (or ‘flourishing’). This debate is too complex to treat in a small space (for details, see Angier 2010, ch. 3). Instead, I will simply assume that Aristotle strongly privileges contemplation over the life of active, character virtue, and ask: on what grounds does he do so? His weakest reasons, I will argue, are given in NE X.7, while his strongest are found in *Metaphysics* I.2. I will begin with the former.

Aristotle opens NE X.7 by claiming that *theōria* not only makes use of the best part of us, but also has the best objects of any human activity. ‘[T]his activity is the best’, he declares, ‘since not only is intellect [*nous*] the best thing in us, but the objects of intellect are the best of knowable objects’ (1177a19-21). While I will defend the latter claim below, the former claim is clearly very controversial, and depends on Aristotle’s Platonic notion that the soul is superior to the body. This is hardly self-evident, and anyway relies on a disjunction between soul and body that is inimical to much modern philosophy. He goes on to argue that ‘the activity of wisdom [*sophia*] ... is thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness’ (1177a24-6), since ‘we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything’ (1177a21-2). But not only is the latter view empirically very dubious – at best, it is true of intellectuals – the former claim about intellectual pleasures is also insufficiently robust. Anticipating John Stuart Mill’s argument that competent judges find intellectual pleasures ‘higher’,<sup>17</sup> it depends on a notion of ‘purity’ that remains tendentious and wholly unanalysed. Next, Aristotle holds that contemplation is best because, unlike the person devoted to a career of justice, bravery, temperance, etc., the *philosophos* ‘even when by himself can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is’ (1177a32-4). But this argument from self-sufficiency simply assumes that dependence on others is a disvalue – a view which appeals, no doubt, to the risk-averse, but otherwise does not recommend itself. And this argument is followed by another from self-sufficiency, this time in relation to the activity of *theōria* itself. ‘[T]his activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake’, Aristotle maintains, ‘for nothing arises from it apart from the

17. See chapter two, paragraph five of Mill 1998.

contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action' (1177b1-4). Again, however, this reasoning lacks suasive power. Even if *Theōria* may be the antithesis of a utilitarian good,<sup>18</sup> and this may make it unique, but without more argument it does not make it uniquely valuable.

NE X.7 offers three more arguments for the superiority of intellectual over other types of work – viz. active and interpersonal, technical, and laborious work – but they are no more convincing.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, *Metaphysics* I.2 contains powerful arguments, which at least put the opposition on the defensive, and at most establish the primacy of contemplation beyond doubt. Aristotle begins by arguing that the goal of *theōria* – namely, wisdom or *sophia* – is supremely valuable. It is so because wisdom 'deal[s] with the first causes and the principles [*archas*] of things' (981b28-9). That is, *sophia* is a kind of architectonic knowledge, which discerns the foundations of the other sciences [*epistēmai*]. As Aristotle puts things, 'the first principles and the causes are the most knowable; for by reason of these, and from these, all other things are known, but these are not known by means of the things subordinate to them. And the science which knows to what end each thing must be done is the most authoritative of the sciences ... and this end is the good in each class, and in general the supreme good in the whole of nature' (982b2-7). From this it is evident that wisdom, on Aristotle's construal, is not some dry, 'purely intellectual' attainment, which brackets all considerations of value. On the contrary, it is most 'authoritative' [*archikōtatē*] precisely because it covers both the inanimate and the animate, integrating the 'factual' with the normative. And it is in virtue of this architectonic function that *sophia* acts as the *telos* of all enquiry. It is, as it were, that which undergirds all subordinate forms of knowledge and practice. As Aristotle summarises this (by now familiar) hierarchy: 'the man of experience is thought

18. This is a theme taken up at *Metaphysics* 981b19-20, 982a14-17, 30-32, 982b19-21.

19. Aristotle argues that contemplation, unlike 'the activity of the practical virtues', requires leisure, and since 'we are busy that we may have leisure', the former is superior to the latter (1177b4-26; cf. *Metaphysics* 981b20-25, 982b22-8). But this evaluation of business and leisure is merely stipulated, and made plausible largely by a tendentious example (namely, the 'business' of war, which is engaged in solely for the sake of peace). Furthermore, even if leisure is superior to being 'busy', it does not follow that it should be used for contemplation. Aristotle's second argument holds that '[i]f intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life' (1177b30-31; cf. 1178b21-4, *Metaphysics* 982b29-3a10). But this argument depends entirely on a theistic metaphysics, and even then only on an intellectualist version thereof. Thirdly, Aristotle argues that the intellect 'seem[s] ... to be each man himself ... It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of himself but that of something else' (1178a2-4). This essentialist argument, which refers back to Aristotle's function argument in NE I.7, is obviously controversial. Even if it is cogent, moreover, it does not demonstrate that the intellect should be devoted to contemplation. For as 'inclusivist' interpreters contend, the intellect can (and perhaps should) be devoted, instead, to the practical virtues.

to be wiser than the possessors of any perception whatever, the *technitēs* wiser than the men of experience, the master-worker than the mechanic, and the theoretical kinds of knowledge to be more of the nature of wisdom than the productive' (981b30-2a1).

The supreme significance of wisdom lies, then, in the fact that it comprehends and coordinates all other forms of knowledge and practice. Just as political science achieves this within the domain of the city or *polis*, and physical science does so within the realm of nature or *phusis*, so *sophia* transcends all the sciences, ordering them and interrelating their contents systematically. In this way, *sophia* is maximal in scope: as Aristotle writes, 'the wise man knows all things, as far as possible' (982a8-9); '[he] has in the highest degree universal knowledge; for he knows, in a sense, all the subordinate objects' (982a21-3). And this encyclopaedic grasp is evidently a great achievement. As Aristotle remarks, 'he who can learn things that are difficult, and not easy for man to know, is wise (sense-perception is common to all, and therefore easy and no mark of wisdom)' (982a10-12); 'these things, the most universal, are on the whole the hardest for men to know; for they are furthest from the senses' (982a24-5). The *sophos* is admirable not only for the breadth of his knowledge, but also for its precision. As Aristotle continues, 'the most exact of the sciences are those which deal most with first principles; for those which involve fewer principles are more exact than those which involve additional principles, e.g. arithmetic than geometry' (982a25-8); 'he who is more exact and more capable of teaching the causes is wiser' (982a12-14). It follows from the scope, precision, and foundational nature of *sophia* that it is the most worthwhile of any human pursuit. And this is borne out nicely by Aristotle's paean to wisdom in NE VI.7: 'wisdom must plainly be the most finished of the forms of knowledge', he adjures; 'the wise man must not only know what follows from the first principles, but must also possess truth about the first principles. Therefore wisdom must be comprehension combined with knowledge – knowledge of the highest objects which has received, as it were, its proper completion' (1141a16-20).

The ambition of Aristotle's vision here is beyond doubt. If wisdom of the synoptic kind he proposes is possible, then intellectual work which takes this as its aim is, plausibly, the highest form of work available to man. The question is, however, whether Aristotle's vision is realisable. And on this score there are, I think, at least two major obstacles to be overcome: one issuing from the field of intellectual enquiry itself, and one from the sphere of economics. As to the former, since Aristotle's time it has become progressively more difficult to maintain the ideal of *philosophia*, or 'love of wisdom', as a totalising discipline

that incorporates the results and methods of all other disciplines. This is because, uncontroversially, those other disciplines have multiplied, becoming increasingly specialised and complex. It is therefore difficult to envisage any ‘queen of the sciences’ whose task is to adjudicate and order the claims and procedures of all subordinate sciences. As to the latter obstacle, there are pressures emanating from modern market capitalism which mean that any vision of the whole, any discipline that tries to synthesise the entirety of human knowledge and practice, is likely to fail. This is because the market primarily rewards specialists, even if it also has a place for those who collect *information* (rather than knowledge) in various disparate databases. Moreover, it tends to reward specialists whose expertise has clear, especially short-term utilitarian benefits – precisely the kind of benefits of which Aristotle is most sceptical. In the face of these two obstacles, intellectual work of the kind Aristotle lauds looks difficult to uphold. It may nevertheless still be worth the effort, not least in the light of his claim that ‘even if [contemplation] is small in bulk, much more does it in power and honour surpass everything’ (NE 1177b34-8a2).

University of Cape Town, South Africa

## REFERENCES

Angier, T. 2010, *Technē in Aristotle’s Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life*. London: Continuum Books.

Arendt, H. 1959, *The Human Condition*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Aristotle 1984, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (revised Oxford translation, ed. J. Barnes, vol. 2). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Berdyayev, N. 1960, *The Destiny of Man*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

Crawford, M. B. 2009, *Shopclass as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin Books.

Craig, E. 1987, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

John Paul II 1981, ‘Laborem Exercens’, accessed on 22.9.16 from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html).

Leo XIII 1891, ‘Rerum Novarum’, in *The Great Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII*, ed. Rev. J. J. Wynne, S. J. New York: Benziger Brothers.

MacIntyre, A. 1981, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.

Marx, K. 1932, *Capital and other Writings*, ed. M. Eastman. New York: The Modern Library.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. 1970 [1932], *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, part I, vol. 5. Glashütten im Taunus: Verlag Detlev Auvermann.

Mill, J. S. 1998, *Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murphy, J. B. 1993, *The Moral Economy of Labour: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. 2001, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (updated ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pieper, J. 1952, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Polanyi, K. 2002 [1944], *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Boston: Beacon Press.

Sennett, R. 2008, *The Craftsman*. London: Penguin Books.

Telfer, E. 2008, 'Food as Art', ch. 2 of A. Neill and A. Ridley (eds), *Arguing about Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) London: Routledge.