# *Ergon* argument in Plato’s dialogues

When offering a comprehensive interpretation of the *ergon* argument in Aristotle’s ethical works, one cannot avoid to inquire into its relation to the usage of *ergon* argument in Plato’s dialogues. My main focus will be on the argument presented at the end of the *Republic* I. I will offer a reconstruction of the argument which will show its strengths and weaknesses in replying to Thrasymachus’ infamous position. Further, I will show its importance for the argumentation in the rest of the *Republic* which presents the ideal city as a complex structure where everyone serves in a function for which he is naturally suited.[[1]](#footnote-1) I believe, that the *Republic* offers the best account of the *ergon* argument in Plato’s dialogues and at the same time it is the best example of the argument’s use in Plato’s moral and political philosophy. However, this way of argumentation is present in several other dialogues as well and I will briefly discuss these occurrences in the last section of this chapter.

My interpretation will cover the *Alcibiades* I., *Crito* and *Meno*.[[2]](#footnote-2) The *ergon* argument can be taken as a part of the tradition which sets the groundwork of ethics by examining the human nature and its specifics compared to other forms of life. In this context Martha Nussbaum discusses Socrates’ argument against the radical hedonistic life at *Philebus* 21c-22c.[[3]](#footnote-3) She is right that this argument, which I will discuss later, is based on the normative force specifically human life has for us, humans. In this respect it is similar to several places at the *Nicomachean Ethics*,[[4]](#footnote-4) yet it is not directly linked to the *ergon* argument in the *Republic* I. I will argue that in order to see the *ergon* argument at use outside the *Republic* it is more promising to look at the *Alcibiades I.* and the *Crito*, since these two dialogues utilize the *ergon* argument in their treatment of virtue and basic moral principles. If I am right, it seems that Plato puts the basic scheme of the *ergon* argument to work in more dialogues than it has been acknowledged so far.

Plato’ version of the *ergon* argument and its relation to Aristotle’s ethics is not discussed in detail by too many authors.[[5]](#footnote-5) Those who mention the *ergon* argument at the end of the first book of the *Republic* as a precursor to Aristotle’s argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*[[6]](#footnote-6) disagree on how much the latter account owns to the earlier one. Some scholars assume that these two arguments are basically the same.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nearly all commentators see Aristotle as an improvement upon Plato’s sketchy argument[[8]](#footnote-8) and some claim that Plato’s account is unfit for Aristotle who could not utilized in in his own treatment and thus he must come up with substantial changes within the *ergon* argument.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Santas (2006) offers a comprehensive view on the use of the term *ergon* later in the republic; cf. Barney (2008): 316 for brief suggestion how Plato uses this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plato, *Alc.*I 126b; *Crito* 44d, 49c; *Meno* 71e-72a; on the passages in the *Crito* cf. Barker (1977): 25-26 and on the *Meno* cf. Lawrence (2001), footnote 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nussbaum (1995): 98-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. *NE* I.8 1099a31-b7 or I.10 1100b8-22 and, of course, the *ergon* argument in I.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The notable exceptions are Lawrence (2001): 449-450, Barney (2008), Gottlieb (2009): 68ff. and Barker (2015). I am generally in agreement with Barker (2015): 231-236 that Plato’s account is a forerunner for Aristotle’s *ergon* argument and that the concept of *ergon* covers both products and activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Only Baker (2015): 238 and 243 briefly links the *ergon* argument in the *Protrepticus* and the *Eudemian Ethics* with Plato’s *Republic* I. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Grant (1885): vol. 1, 449; Burnet (1900): 34; Dirlmeier (1983): 277-278; Cooper (1986): 145. Tuozzo (1996): 148 says that the arguments are similar in structure and possibly in the outcome as well, yet Plato’s argument does not help in establishing that there is a specific human *ergon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. E.g. Barney (2008): 300-301 or Gottlieb (2009): 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kraut (1979): 468-469, 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)