
The Dialectical Method in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Abstract

This paper will investigate Aristotle's methodology in the Nicomachean Ethics [EN]. It is widely agreed that Aristotle's explicit account of his methodology in EN is the method of dialectic. However, it has been argued that Aristotle does not consistently practice this method and often appeals to metaphysical principles in his other texts to construct his moral theory. As a result, it has been claimed that Aristotle not only diverges from his dialectical method, but also contradicts his doctrine of the autonomy of distinct branches of philosophical enquiry.

*In this paper, I will investigate what it would mean for Aristotle's account to be dialectical and will show that, although Aristotle's explicit methodology is dialectical he nonetheless diverges from this method in presenting his *ergon* argument. However, though he diverges from his dialectical method, I will argue that we can understand this divergence as a response to the definitive problem of EN; namely, how can we actually achieve the highest good in our actions. Thus, I will conclude that although Aristotle does in fact diverge from his dialectical method, we can understand this divergence as consistent with the claim that EN is an autonomous enquiry.*

1.

According to Terence Irwin's highly influential series of articles, Aristotle often appeals to his metaphysical and psychological theories, outlined in his previous texts, as premises or principles for his ethics. In particular, Irwin suggests that Aristotle's infamous human function (*ergon*) argument in Book 1, Chapter 7 [1.7] of the *Nicomachean Ethics* [EN] is actually a consequence of Aristotle's general theories of soul, form and essence as presented in *De Anima* and *Metaphysics*.² Timothy Roche calls Irwin's view the 'metaphysical foundation hypothesis'. In opposition to this view, Roche argues that Aristotle proposes only one method in the EN - the method of dialectic. The aim of *Phronimon*, Vol 7 (2) 2006

this methodology, Roche tells us, is the establishment of the first principles in ethics. Moreover, according to Roche, Aristotle constantly reiterates in his writings the doctrine of the autonomy of distinct branches of philosophical knowledge, in such a way that each rational 'discipline', or science, has its own special principles that function as explanations or 'reasons' for the *phainomena* 'appropriate' to that discipline.³ Thus, Roche argues, if Aristotle were to incorporate his metaphysical and psychological doctrines into the defence of his moral principles, as Irwin suggests, he would contradict the doctrine of the autonomy of the sciences. However, according to Roche, Aristotle, in fact, "practices what he seems to preach, viz., that dialectic, and a purely autonomous dialectic, is the only method to establish his ultimate moral principles."⁴

The debate between Irwin and Roche turns on the common assumption that Aristotle's explicit method is dialectical and that Aristotle's *ergon* argument, as presented in EN 1.7, is a point of contention for this method. However, it is unclear precisely what a 'dialectical method' would actually consist of and, thus, what would constitute a divergence from this method. In the following, I will investigate the ways in which Aristotle's method may be considered dialectical and I will consider what possible positive outcomes may result from such a method. Given this investigation, I will thereby consider whether Aristotle's *ergon* argument actually does diverge from this method. I will argue, in opposition to Roche, that Aristotle's *ergon* argument does, in fact, diverge from a dialectical method. However, I will contend that this divergence need not be understood as an attempt by Aristotle to provide a metaphysical foundation for his ethical doctrines. Rather, I will argue that Aristotle's divergence can be understood as a response to one of the motivating problems of EN. I will contend that insofar as the motivation for this divergence is internal to the concerns of EN, Aristotle's enquiry in this text can be considered autonomous. Thus, I will demonstrate that although Aristotle does in fact diverge from his dialectical method in presenting his *ergon* argument, this divergence is actually consistent with his doctrine of the autonomy of the sciences.

2.

According to Roche, it is a widely held belief that the explicit methodology Aristotle claims to employ in EN is dialectical. However, at no time in EN does Aristotle explicitly define his methodology in this way. For a definition of dialectics, we must turn to Aristotle's *Topics* and *Posterior Analytics* [Apo]. In these texts, Aristotle defines dialectical reasoning in opposition to demonstrative reasoning. Moreover, in these texts Aristotle discusses both types of reasoning in terms of deductive arguments or inferences

(*sullogismos*). A deduction, Aristotle tells us in *Topics*, "is an argument in which, certain things being laid down, something other than these necessarily comes about through them".⁵ A demonstrative deduction, on the one hand, is when the premises from which the deduction starts are true and primitive. Aristotle calls such true and primitive premises first 'principles' (*archai*).⁶ A dialectical deduction, on the other hand, reasons from "reputable opinions".⁷ These principles require no further explanation for their acceptance. *Topics* defines 'reputable opinions' (*endoxa*) as those opinions which are "acceptable by everyone or by the majority or by the wise - i.e. by all, or by the majority, or by the most notorious and reputable of them."⁸

Setting aside for the moment the question of how such reasoning is performed, Aristotle makes clear in a number of places in EN that the subject matter of his investigations are opinions and not necessary truths or first principles. Aristotle most evidently makes this distinction in EN 1.4 wherein he identifies the difference between "arguments from principles and arguments toward principles." Here, Aristotle tells us:

For we should certainly begin from things known, but things are known in two ways; for some are known (or familiar) to us, some known without qualification. Presumably, we ought to begin from things known to us. [EN 1095b1-5]

It seems that, in the above passage, Aristotle is affirming that his method is dialectical insofar as the *endoxa* under consideration are the reputable opinions known to us, rather than necessary first principles. Aristotle makes this more explicit in his discussion of *akrasia* in EN 7.1, wherein he tells us "we must set out the appearances" and we "must prove the common beliefs."⁹ Moreover, in the *Eudemian Ethics* [EE] Aristotle tells us "about all these matters we must try to get conviction by arguments, using phenomena [*phainesta*] as evidence and illustration."¹⁰

This does not mean that any opinion or belief counts as *endoxa* for dialectical reasoning. Rather, Aristotle tells us in *Topics*, the *endoxa* must be relevant to a dialectical problem.¹¹ The subject matter or dialectical problem under investigation in EN is: "what is the highest of all goods achievable in action?"¹² This problem or question defines, or is the condition for, the set of dialectical propositions which are the relevant *endoxa*. These dialectical propositions are the *endoxa* about which we dialectically reason.

Aristotle further qualifies the set of *endoxa* or dialectical propositions considered relevant to the problems in EN by telling us "it is enough to examine those that are most current or seem to have some argument for them".¹³ Aristotle does not provide a clear reason for limiting the set of relevant *endoxa* in this way other than claiming that it would be "futile to examine all these beliefs" about the dialectical problems under investigation

in EN.¹⁴ Stated in this way, it may appear that the limitation is due to purely pragmatic reasons. However, EE suggests something slightly different when it tells us that “to examine then all the views...is superfluous, for children, sick people, and the insane all have views, but no sane person would dispute over them... for such persons need not argument but years in which they may change.”¹⁵ The suggestion here seems to be that limitation on the set of relevant *endoxa* is not guided by pragmatic considerations regarding how many *endoxa* one can reasonably attempt to consider in one investigation of a dialectical problem. Nor is it limited merely to a certain kind of *endoxa* (i.e. those which are reputable). Rather, EE suggests that the relevant set of *endoxa* is to be further limited to those *endoxa* which are accepted by a certain type of person; i.e. a person who may come to some kind of understanding as a result of the argumentation. This seems to be consistent with Aristotle’s claim in EN that “a youth is not a suitable student of political science [i.e. the proper science of the good]; for he lacks experience of the actions in life, which are the subject and premises of our arguments.”¹⁶

Thus, it seems clear that Aristotle is employing a dialectical method in EN insofar as the propositions he is investigating are reputable opinions. Now, *that* Aristotle is employing a dialectical method in order to investigate and answer certain questions in EN is accepted by both Irwin and Roche. However, what is less clear is precisely *how* Aristotle answers these questions based on a dialectical method. It is only in view of an account of how Aristotle dialectically *reasons* that we will be able to ascertain whether he actually diverges from this method in presenting his *ergon* argument.

3.

By investigating these reputable opinions dialectically, Aristotle seems to want to answer the question of ‘what is the highest of all goods achievable in action?’ Aristotle provides a clue as to how his dialectical reasoning proceeds in his discussion of *akrasia* in EN 7, wherein he tells us “we must set out the appearances, and first of all go through the puzzles (*aporiai*)”.¹⁷ In *Topics*, Aristotle also talks about dialectics as a way to “puzzle on both sides of a subject [to] make us detect more easily the truth or error about the several points that arise.”¹⁸ Moreover, Aristotle provides the following crucial definition: “dialectics is a process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries.”¹⁹

Based on this definition of dialectics (what I call the ‘broad’ definition of dialectics), it seems that dialectical reasoning is a critical examination of the relevant *endoxa* of a problem. Such investigation will show puzzles (*aporiai*) that arise from inconsistencies in the *endoxa*. Presumably, such

inconsistencies will lie in the *endoxa* themselves. For instance, in EN 1.6 Aristotle examines Plato's conception of the good and demonstrates what he sees as various inconsistencies in this account.²⁰ Aristotle concludes from this examination that Plato's conception of the good cannot be the highest good for human action. Moreover, in EN 1.5, Aristotle investigates what he calls the conceptions of the good held by "the many, the most vulgar" (admittedly, only those conceptions which "have some argument for their defence"), "the cultivated people" and the "money-lenders."²¹ In each case, Aristotle shows inconsistencies in their accounts and concludes that they cannot be considered the highest end of good actions and, as a result, Aristotle recommends that we "dismiss" them.²²

Given this broad definition of dialectics, what possible positive outcomes may follow? In his critical examination of *endoxa*, it seems that Aristotle is rejecting those which are internally inconsistent. Now, if this were a complete description of Aristotle's method, then presumably the positive outcome of this investigation would either be a single *endoxon* (the sole survivor of the dialectical examination) or a set of *endoxa* which are all consistent within themselves. This seems to be what Aristotle is suggesting when he writes "if there is some end of everything achievable in action, the good achievable in action will be this end; if there are more ends than one (the good achievable in action) will be these ends."²³ Thus, it seems that the highest good for human action may be an inclusive view which accommodates the relevant *endoxa* that survive the dialectical examination. Alternatively, it may be a single, definitive account if there is only a sole surviving *endoxon*.

However, it seems clear that Aristotle is not merely examining these various *endoxa* concerning their internal consistency. Rather, he is examining them as to whether they can actually provide an answer to the dialectical problem regarding the highest good or final end (*teleion*) of human action. Thus, Aristotle does not merely dismiss *endoxa* which are inconsistent *per se*. Rather, Aristotle dismisses *endoxa* which do not provide an adequate solution to his dialectical problem (I call this Aristotle's 'narrow' dialectical method). That Aristotle proceeds in accordance with this narrow dialectical method is clear, for example, when he rejects the money-maker's life for not being "the end" which he is looking for.²⁴ Moreover, it is also evident when Aristotle argues that the conception of the good held by the cultivated people (i.e. that the good is honour) "appears to be too superficial to be what we are seeking."²⁵ In EN 1.7, Aristotle tells us that the good that he is looking for is "that for the sake of which the other things are done... in every action and decision it is the end, since it is for the sake of the end that everyone does the other actions."²⁶ Moreover, in EN 7.8, Aristotle tells us "the end we act for is the principle."²⁷

It seems that Aristotle is looking for the first principle/s for human action. These first principles are primitive propositions or premises which require no further proof or reason. They are self-evidently true. That there *are* such first principles is a central component of Aristotle's entire philosophical enterprise. The idea seems to be that if there are no first principles, which require no further proof or reasoning, then there will be either an infinite regress or circularity in reasoning.²⁸ When applied to action, the idea is that if every action is performed for some end (and this end is the reason why or that for the sake of which we perform the action), then the first principle will be the final reason that we provide in this reasoning process, beyond which no further reasoning is required. Moreover, that Aristotle is looking for a first principle for human action is clear when he claims that the highest good must be "something complete and self-sufficient, since it is the end of the things achievable in action".²⁹ Completeness and self-sufficiency are two qualities of the first principles.

Given that Aristotle is aiming for the first principles of human action, in EN 1.4 he tells us that the highest of all goods achievable in action is actually happiness [*eudaimonia*]. We are told that "happiness, then, is apparently something complete and self-sufficient, since it is the end of the things achievable in action."³⁰ Moreover, "happiness is a principle; for (the principle) is what we all aim at in all our other actions."³¹ How does Aristotle arrive at this principle from his dialectical method? Aristotle introduces the idea that *eudaimonia* is the first principle by claiming that "as far as its name goes, most people virtually agree; for both the many and the cultivated call it happiness, and they suppose that living well and doing well are the same as being happy."³² Stated in this way, it would seem that this view is actually an *endoxon* that is being examined dialectically. This suggestion seems to be supported when Aristotle tells us "presumably the remark that the best good is happiness is apparently something [generally] agreed, and we still need a clearer statement of what the best good is."³³ Thus, it seems that Aristotle is beginning with an accepted belief or *endoxon*, i.e. that *eudaimonia* is the highest good, and then proposes to investigate the implications of this view. This would be consistent with his dialectical method.

However, if this is what Aristotle has in mind, it is unclear how *eudaimonia* makes the transition from being one *endoxon* in the set of relevant *endoxa* to becoming the first principle for human action. How does *eudaimonia* achieve such a privileged position? Examining the consistency of an *endoxon* itself does not show that it is the first principle. We seem to need something more.³⁴

In order to see how Aristotle arrives at *eudaimonia* as the first principle for the highest good, it is useful to consider the way in which Aristotle

proceeds to define *eudaimonia*. As Aristotle tells us, most people agree that the best good is *eudaimonia*. However, this does not yet tell us what *eudaimonia* is. "We still need a clearer statement of what the best good is."³⁵

It is at this point in EN that Aristotle introduces his infamous human function [*ergon*] argument. Aristotle introduces this argument by claiming, "perhaps, then, we shall find this [definition of the best good] if we first grasp the function of a human being."³⁶ Aristotle argues as follows: just as the good for a flautist or sculptor and every craftsmen or "whatever has a function and (characteristic) action" depends on their function, the same is true for human beings if they have some function.³⁷ The definitive function for a human being, Aristotle goes on to tell us, is a certain form of life, or activity of the soul, in accord with reason.³⁸ Moreover, such a life, or function, is good (*eudaimon*) when this activity of the soul is performed in accordance with virtue.³⁹ Therefore, the human good (*eudaimonia*) is activity of the soul in accord with virtue.

Aristotle's definition of *eudaimonia*, as activity of the soul in accord with virtue, seems to be the conclusion of an inference based on the following premises: a) the good for whatever performs a characteristic function depends on their function, b) human beings have a characteristic function, c) the characteristic function of human beings is activity of the soul in accord with reason. According to Roche, these premises are simply additional opinions or *endoxa* being considered as part of Aristotle's dialectical investigation. Thus, Roche argues, Aristotle's *ergon* argument is consistent with his dialectical method insofar as the propositions being considered as premises are opinions and not first principles or unqualified truths. Now, as we have previously discussed, the relevant *endoxa* for dialectical reasoning are those opinions which are relevant to a given dialectical problem. In this case, the dialectical problem is the question 'what is the highest good for human activity?' Thus, the relevant *endoxa* for this dialectical problem are dialectical propositions or beliefs about what the highest good for human activity actually consists in. However, in the case of Aristotle's *ergon* argument, the premises of this inference are not dialectical propositions or beliefs relevant to this dialectical problem. For example, the proposition that human beings have a function is not a belief about the highest good for human activity. Nor can this be said about the proposition that the human function is activity of the soul in accord with reason. Thus, Roche cannot be correct in claiming that Aristotle is consistent with his dialectical method insofar as the premises in Aristotle's *ergon* argument are merely additional opinions or *endoxa*. Even if Roche is correct in his claim that the premises in Aristotle's *ergon* argument are merely reputable opinions (rather than established first principles or truths) and therefore

endoxa as such, they are not *relevant endoxa* to the dialectical problem under investigation in EN. In defining *eudaimonia* as activity of the soul in accord with virtue, Aristotle is defining it by a conclusion of an inference based on premises that are not dialectical propositions of the dialectical problem under investigation in EN. This seems to suggest that Aristotle diverges from his dialectical method in presenting his *ergon* argument.

Against Roche, Irwin argues that the premises that Aristotle employs in his *ergon* argument are the conclusions or summaries of inferences carried out in his *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*.⁴⁰ Given that his definition of *eudaimonia* is the conclusion of an inference from these premises, Irwin argues that Aristotle thereby has a metaphysical foundation for his ethical doctrines.⁴¹ Now, I will not here attempt to resolve the question of whether Aristotle does or does not have such a foundation. On the one hand, it is clear that Aristotle does not explicitly identify premises in EN as being conclusions of inferences performed in his other texts. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the premises he employs in his *ergon* argument parallel views that he argues for in other texts. However, I think that it would be a very difficult task to prove that the reason why Aristotle chooses these particular premises in EN is because he insisted upon a metaphysical foundation for his ethical account. Moreover, as Roche convincingly points out, such an account would be additionally problematic given Aristotle's clear emphasis in EN and his other writings on the distinction between separate domains of enquiry.⁴²

In what follows I will argue that, unlike Irwin who seems to interpret Aristotle as attempting to provide a metaphysical foundation for his ethical theory, Aristotle's definition of *eudaimonia* may have been introduced in response to a second problem motivating EN: how can we actually achieve *eudaimonia*?⁴³ I shall conclude that although Aristotle does in fact diverge from his dialectical method in presenting his *ergon* argument, the insights he introduces via this divergence are essential to the problems and aims of EN itself. Thus, though Aristotle diverges from this dialectical method he may still be thought to be consistent with his claim that EN is an autonomous enquiry.

4.

In EN 1.4, Aristotle identifies the subject matter or dialectical problem under investigation in EN as: "What is the highest of all the goods achievable in action?"⁴⁴ However, it seems that EN is also concerned with the problem of how this highest good is actually acquired. As Aristotle stresses throughout this entire treatise, "the end is action, not *knowledge*"⁴⁵ and "the aim of studies about action, as we say is surely not to study and know about a

given thing, but rather to act on our knowledge."⁴⁶ Thus, Aristotle tells us, "the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us."⁴⁷ These comments suggest that, although Aristotle is certainly concerned with the former problem, the latter problem is also central, if not definitive of, Aristotle's moral theory in EN. That this problem is, in fact, definitive and unique to Aristotle becomes clear when we consider Aristotle's critique of the moral theories of Plato and Socrates. For instance, according to Aristotle, Plato explained 'the good' by predicating a substantive entity or property (Plato's Idea or Form of the Good) to every instance in which we speak of 'good'.⁴⁸ This property was thought to be separable from, and the explanatory essence of, all 'good' things or activities. However, Aristotle rejects this account of 'the good', arguing that "clearly it is not the sort of good a human being *can achieve* in action or possess; but that is the sort we are looking for now".⁴⁹ Moreover, according to Aristotle, Socrates held the view that knowledge of excellence or the good was actually the highest good. Thus, for instance, to know justice and to be just came simultaneously.⁵⁰ However, in EN, Aristotle clearly distinguishes himself from this view insofar as he innovatively separates knowledge from action and problematises their relationship. Thus, the question of how to "*become good*" is unique to EN and distinguishes Aristotle from his contemporaries.

While it seems clear that an account of how we can achieve the highest good will be closely related to that which we identify *as* the highest good, or the "goal" we identify as that towards which we attend or "aim" our actions,⁵¹ it is unclear whether dialectical reasoning itself can provide an answer to the problem of how this highest good is achieved or practised.⁵² If we consider the 'broad' account of Aristotle's dialectical method, it seems that this method can only critically evaluate the *endoxa* held by the majority or the wise concerning this problem. Moreover, if we consider the 'narrow' account of Aristotle's method, this same set of *endoxa* would be examined with regards to whether or not they can solve the problem of how we can achieve *eudaimonia* in action. However, given that this problem is definitive and unique to Aristotle, there do not seem to be any relevant *endoxa* that would function as dialectical propositions for a dialectical examination to thereby provide an explanation or solution.

It is in light of this problem that Aristotle can be understood to introduce his *ergon* argument. Now, as we have previously discussed, Aristotle's *ergon* argument is based on the claim that the definitive function of human beings is an activity of the soul in accord with reason. Moreover, the highest good, *eudaimonia*, is thought to consist in the performance of this function in accordance with virtue. *Prima facie*, this seems to be a merely descriptive account of the nature of an ultimately good way of life.

However, Aristotle seems to be after an account of how we can *come to act* in a good way, how we can actually *achieve* eudaimonia or come to *realise* this way of life. In what follows, I will argue that Aristotle attempts to account for how we can achieve eudaimonia through his account of practical wisdom [*phronēsis*] in EN 6. However, I will show that this discussion of *phronēsis* is essentially informed by Aristotle's *ergon* argument and, thus, provides an insight into how Aristotle can be thought to introduce his *ergon* argument in a way which is consistent with the doctrine of autonomous domains of enquiry.

Richard Sorabji's study of *phronēsis* indicates most clearly a way of thinking about Aristotle's response to the question of how knowledge of the highest good can "make us better able, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark" in our actions.⁵³ According to Sorabji, "practical wisdom involves the ability to deliberate [EN 1140a25-b6; 1141b8-14; 1142b13]. The man of practical wisdom deliberates with a view not merely to particular goals but to the good life in general (*pros to eu zēn holōs*) [EN 1140a25-31], with a view to the best (*to ariston*) [EN 1141b13; 1144a32-33]...At the same time he is concerned not only with universals, such as the good life in general, but also with particular actions [EN 1141b15; 1142a14; 20-22; 1143a29; 32-34]".⁵⁴ Given this account of the person of practical wisdom (*ho phronimos*), Sorabji suggests that *phronēsis* enables a person of practical wisdom, in the light of their conception of the good life in general, to perceive what is required of them, with regards to a particular virtue in a particular case, and it instructs that person to act accordingly. Thus, it is in the light of a general notion of what the good life consists in that the person of practical wisdom deliberates about what a particular virtuous action might consist in given a particular context. C.D.C. Reeve seems to agree and elaborate on this point when he claims that we acquire a "more filled out conception of eudaimonia, our knowledge of the universal eudaimonia, by doing actions of types that we think will exemplify (our more schematised conception of) eudaimonia."⁵⁵

Thus, it is in this discussion of *phronēsis* that we can see Aristotle attempting to resolve the problem of how knowledge of the highest good can help us 'hit the mark' in our actions. According to the above understanding of *phronēsis*, Aristotle's response to this problem seems to be that our conception of the 'highest good' is somewhat like a rough schemata in the light of which we deliberate and which we attempt to make manifest through our actions in a given situation. Moreover, the general suggestion seems to be that there is no absolute 'knowledge' of this highest good which can function as a prescriptive rule for all ethical actions in all circumstances; rather, the idea seems to be that it is by doing actions which we think are cases of acting well in a particular context that we will gradually

learn or come to understand what acting well actually is or consists in. Thus, it seems that our conception of the highest good informs our actions, in a quite general and schematised way, and the outcomes of our actions subsequently inform our conception of the highest good, and this is a continuously circular process.

Whether or not this brief account of *phronēsis*, thus presented, adequately responds to the problem of the relationship of knowledge of the highest good to action, I will not here decide.⁵⁶ However, what is significant about this account, for the concerns of this paper, is that it is through this account of *phronēsis* that Aristotle actually addresses this problem, and, crucially, this account develops out of Aristotle's *ergon* argument. Aristotle tells us in EN 6, "*phronēsis*... is about human concerns, about things open to deliberation. For we say that deliberating well is the function of the prudent person more than anyone else."⁵⁷ Moreover, "we fulfil our function insofar as we have *phronēsis* and virtue of character."⁵⁸ It seems clear that *phronēsis* essentially involves the crux of Aristotle's *ergon* argument; namely, that human beings have a function and this function is an activity of the soul that involves reason.

Insofar as Aristotle's account of *phronēsis* depends upon his *ergon* argument, and insofar as *phronēsis* is a response to the problem of how knowledge of the ultimate good can help us 'hit the mark' in our actions, we can also think of Aristotle as introducing his *ergon* argument in response to this problem. Thus, we need not follow Irwin in concluding that Aristotle introduces his *ergon* argument to provide a metaphysical foundation for this ethical theory. Rather, given that Aristotle's account of *phronēsis* sheds light on the relationship between knowledge of the highest good and ethical action, and that this account depends upon *eudaimonia* as defined by the *ergon* argument, it seems to follow that Aristotle diverges from his dialectical method in order to respond to this central problem of EN. In this way, Aristotle's divergence is internal to the concerns of EN. Thus, Aristotle is consistent with his claim that EN is an autonomous enquiry.

5.

This paper set out to investigate the debate between Irwin and Roche concerning Aristotle's explicit account of his methodology in EN and the question of whether Aristotle consistently practices this method. As I have shown, there are good reasons to think that Aristotle's explicit method is dialectical. However, I have also shown that Aristotle diverges from this account in presenting his '*ergon* argument' in EN 1.7. Thus, I have demonstrated the ways in which this divergence is inconsistent with his dialectical method.

However, rather than construing this as an attempt by Aristotle to provide a metaphysical foundation for his ethical theory in EN, I have shown a way to understand Aristotle's *ergon* argument as a response to the question of how knowledge of the highest good can assist us in achieving this highest good. I have demonstrated that Aristotle addresses this question through his idea of *phronēsis*, as presented in EN 6, and I have also shown that this account depends on his *ergon* argument. As a result, I have demonstrated that, although Aristotle does diverge from his dialectical method in presenting his *ergon* argument and account of *phronēsis*, it is only by this divergence that he can actually answer the fundamental questions that motivate EN. Thus, though Aristotle diverges from his dialectical method in EN, he remains consistent with his doctrine of the autonomous domains of enquiry.

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Endnotes

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2. Terence Irwin, 'The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Methods', in Rorty ed. *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles: 1980), p36
3. See Timothy Roche, 'On the Alleged Metaphysical Foundation of Aristotle's Ethics', in *Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1988), pp53-54
4. Roche, p49

5. Topics 100a25-26
6. Apo 72a
7. Topics 100a30
8. Topics 100b21-22
9. EN 1145b4-5
10. EE 1216b27-28
11. See Topics 1.4, 1.10
12. EN 1095a16. EN is also concerned with the problem of how we can actually attain or achieve this highest good in action (see EN 1099b9). However, as I will show, answers to this latter problem cannot be arrived at via dialectical reasoning.
13. EN 1095a29-30
14. EN 1095a29-30
15. EE 1214b29-32
16. EN 1095a1-3
17. EN 1145b5
18. Topics 101a35-36
19. Topics 101b3-4
20. It is arguable whether Plato actually propounds the view that Aristotle rejects in this chapter of EN. However, the aim of our discussion is to expose Aristotle's views rather than to assess whether or not he adequately represents those of others.
21. EN 1.5
22. EN 1.5
23. EN 1097a23
24. EN 1.5
25. EN 1095b24-25
26. EN 1097a19-20, 21-23
27. EN 1151a15-16
28. See Apo 1.2
29. EN 1097b21
30. EN 1097b21-22
31. EN 1102a38-40
32. EN 1095a14
33. EN 1097b23-25
34. One suggestion of how Aristotle arrives at *eudaimonia* as the first principle *might* be that he arrives at this account via induction (*epagôgê*). Inductions, Aristotle tells us in EN 6.3, "[lead to] the principle, i.e., the universal, whereas deduction proceeds from the universal." [EN 1139b29]. Thus, it might be suggested that, rather than merely being one

endoxon among the set of *endoxa*, *eudaimonia* is actually a general account that is induced from the set of particular *endoxa* that Aristotle identifies as consistent. Now, such reasoning would seem to be consistent with a dialectical method as such. For instance, in *Topics* Aristotle identifies both deduction and induction as forms of dialectical arguments [Topics 105a10-11]. Thus, it would be consistent with Aristotle's dialectical method that one view may be privileged in the sense that it may be induced or abstracted from the *endoxa* under consideration. However, if we reflect upon the few examinations Aristotle actually conducts in EN 1 prior to asserting that *eudaimonia* is the highest good, the *endoxa* that Aristotle considers do not actually suggest *eudaimonia* as a common feature. Thus, *eudaimonia* couldn't be the induced first principle from consistent *endoxa*.

35. EN 1097b23-24

36. EN 1097b25

37. EN 1097b25-29

38. EN 1098a14

39. EN 1098a17

40. See Irwin, p49. It must be admitted that Irwin's argument is not literally against Roche, as the latter challenges Irwin rather than the other way around. However, it can be seen that Irwin's interpretation of Aristotle's method in EN is *conceptually* against that of Roche.

41. See Irwin, p49

42. See Roche, pp53-54. See also EN 1098a26-33, 1095a5, 1103b27, EE 1216b11-25; Met 1064b17-23

43. The first dialectical problem is: 'what is the highest of all goods achievable in action?'

44. EN 1095a16

45. EN 1095a5

46. EN 1179a35

47. EN 1103b27

48. See EN 1.6

49. EN 1096b34-35

50. See EE 1216b1

51. EN 1099b30

52. Aristotle specifically writes that the problem is how this highest good is to be achieved. I think that this way of phrasing the problem is slightly misleading as it suggests that *eudaimonia* is a substance or state to be achieved. Given that Aristotle defines *eudaimonia* as a *way* in which human beings perform their definitive activities (i.e. an excellent way) it seems to be more correct to present the question in terms of how we are to practise or perform our definitive activities. Of course, answers to how we are to perform our definitive human actions in a good way will *involve* the development of certain virtuous states. However it does not follow that *eudaimonia* itself is such a state. The alternative way of presenting the question, i.e. how *eudaimonia* can be practiced, also seems problematic as it suggests that '*eudaimonia*' is something that we actually do

when, in fact, eudaimonia seems to be merely a description of a certain way (an excellent or good way) in which these actions are performed. Further clarification of whether eudaimonia is actually achieved or practised would extend beyond the immediate concerns of this paper. For our purposes, it is enough to note the ambivalence.

53. EN 1094a23-25

54. Richard Sorabji, 'Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue', in Rorty ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 1980), p206

55. C.D.C Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992), p59

56. It must be acknowledged that this brief discussion overlooks many crucial subtleties in Aristotle's account of *phronesis*, most notably the central role of virtue and the indivisible relationship between desire and understanding in good actions. However, what is important for the concerns of this paper is the fact that it is in this account that we can see Aristotle attempting to resolve the problem of how knowledge can help us achieve the highest good.

57. EN 1141b10-11

58. EN 1144a8-9