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Notes on *Ergon* and *Ponos* in Plato

Michael Okyere Asante ^{a,*}

^a University of Ghana, Ghana

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This paper explores the functions of *ergon* (work) and *ponos* (labour) in Plato's dialogues.

Abstract

Do the words 'labour' and 'work' carry the same or different meanings? Can they be used interchangeably, and under what contexts? While we find that in the English language and other European languages, such "etymologically unrelated words" are considered as reflecting the same activity, they could mean different or similar things depending on their contexts. In this brief paper, I show how this is the case in Plato's use of *ergon* (work) and *ponos* (labour).

Keywords: *Ergon*, Labour, Plato, *Ponos*, Work.

Introduction

In ordinary language 'labour' and 'work' are often used interchangeably. As Arendt notes, "every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have to come to think of as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage" (Arendt, 1958: 80). In the ancient Greek language, for instance, 'work' is distinguished from 'labour': the Greek word *ponos* (labour) refers to, as in the sense Locke puts it, "the labour of our body", while *ergon* (work) refers to "the work of our hands" (Locke sec. 26, cited in Arendt, 1958). To 'labour' (*ponein*) was equivalent to slavery in the ancient Greek sense because 'labour' was viewed as a degrading activity which sapped out all the energy of man, inhibiting his ability to fully attain his human potentialities (Ackah, 2004, Akinboye, 2005). We can understand this view by looking into ancient Athenian society, where citizens were mostly concerned about the politics of the city-state and left *ponos* to slaves and foreigners. But, it was only those citizens who could afford this leisure of political participation who could totally shun *ponos*; poor citizens could not afford this leisure and were drawn into *ponos* by their

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: kwadwoasante1@gmail.com (M.O. Asante)

circumstances, for they had to labour in order to fend for themselves and their families or pay any debts they owed their creditors (Amemiya, 2007; Cartledge, 1998).

This aversion to *ponos* is not only contained in the politics of ancient Greek society, but also in its mythology, so that the distinction between *ponos* and *ergon* was a great deal. For instance, the distinction between *ponos* and *ergon* in Hesiod's *Works and Days* is made in relation to two kinds of Strife on earth (11-12). The first kind of strife, which corresponds to *ponos*, is evil, malicious and oppressive (14-15, 28). Hesiod adds that this kind of strife "fosters war, that evil, and quarrels and contests, the hard-hearted one" (14). By implication, then, *ponos* is considered a curse from Zeus (42ff.), and the cause of the evils of society (ibid.; cf. *Theogony* 226-232). Hesiod relates the other kind of strife to *ergon*, indicating that *ergon* is healthy for men to engage in. The acquisition of wealth through work encourages envy in other men, and this kind of strife, according to him, is good since it drives them to also work and acquire wealth (20-23). It also encourages those who are idle to put up with work (23-24). Thus, this kind of competition in work is good and healthy for the individual (24). In this brief paper, I show, using examples from Plato, how such "etymologically unrelated words" as *ponos* (labour) and *ergon* (work) can assume different as well as same meanings in ancient Greek literature depending on the contexts in which they are used, despite the 'negative' connotation attached to *ponos*.

Plato's use of *ergon* and *ponos*

The most common uses to which *ergon* is put in Plato's works are 'task', 'function' and 'work'. But *ergon* could describe other things such as a person's role, duty, assignment, or proper work; an action or deed; an occupation or business; the result or product of work or a composition. *Ponos*, commonly used to describe 'labour', constitutes the activities carried out by exertion of physical strength in executing work (Asante, 2017: 87). In what follows, I provide a few examples of how Plato uses *ergon* and *ponos* in his dialogues.

***Ergon*:**

a. denoting task, function, role, duty, assignment:

... we aren't all born alike, but each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one task [*ergou*], another to another (*Rep.* 370a8-b1; cf. *Laws* 807c2; 921d7; *Euthyphro* 9b5; *Statesman* 284c7).

... the midwife's greatest and noblest function [*kállistov ergon*] would be to distinguish the true from the false offspring ... (*Theaetetus* 150b3-5; cf. *Rep.* 335d10, *Laws* 934b6).

So it's the work [*ergon*] of a carpenter to make a rudder. And if the rudder is to be a fine one, a ship-captain must supervise him (*Cratylus* 390d1-2).

Then to the degree that the work of the guardians [*tò tōv phulakōv ergon*] is most important, it requires most freedom from other things and the greatest skill and devotion (*Rep.* 374e1-3).

"For a man my age that's a big assignment [*ergon*], Socrates," he said (*Parmenides* 136d1).

b. denoting work, occupation:

[There are] those whose bodies are weakest and who aren't fit to do any other work [*ergon*]. They'll stay around the market exchanging money for the goods of those who have something to sell and then exchanging those goods for the money of those who want them (*Rep.* 371c6-d3; cf. *Laws* 807a4; 921a2).

They'll [our citizens] build houses, work [*ergasontai* at a task, trade or business] naked and barefoot in the summer, and wear adequate clothing and shoes in the winter (*Rep.* 372a6-b2).

... we must compel and persuade the auxiliaries and guardians to follow our other policy and be the best possible craftsmen at their own work [*tou heautōn ergou*], and the same with all the others (*Rep.* 421b5-c2).

c. denoting action or deed:

This action [*ergon*, prosecuting your father] would then, it seems, be hated by the gods, but the pious and the impious were not thereby now defined, for what is hated by the gods has also been shown to be loved by them (*Euthyphro* 9c5-7; cf. *Laws* 885b3).

d. denoting result or product of work, or a work of composition (such as poetry, music, etc., *Laws* 829d1):

Then what would you say its result [*ergon*] was? For instance, if I should ask you what result [*ergon*] does medicine produce, when it rules over all the things in its control, would you not say that this result was health? (*Euthydemus* 291e4-6; cf. *Gorgias* 452a7; *Rep.* 374b7; *Philebus* 38d8-9; *Statesman* 287d4-6, 288a10, 288b7, 288e7; *Laws* 921c6; 956a6)

But we prevented a cobbler from trying to be a farmer, weaver, or builder at the same time and said that he must remain a cobbler in order to produce fine work [*ergon*] (*Rep.* 374b5-7).

Ponos:

a. denoting social status, hard work, toil or work done with the body or physical strength:

There are other servants, I think, whose minds alone wouldn't qualify them for membership in our society but whose bodies are strong enough for labour [*ponous*, hard-work, work, toil]. These sell the use of their strength for a price called a wage and hence are themselves called wage-earners (*Rep.* 371d9-e3).

There is also the 'Secret Service' [like the auxiliary in the *Republic*], as it is called, which involves a great deal of hard work [*polu-ponos*], and is a splendid exercise in endurance (*Laws* 633b7-c1).

In the first place, no student should be lame in his love of hard work [*ponous*], really loving one half of it, and hating the other half. This happens when someone is a lover of physical training, hunting, or any kind of bodily labour [*ponon*] and isn't a lover of learning, or inquiry, but hates the work [*ergon*] involved in them. And someone whose love of hard work tends in the opposite direction is also lame (*Rep.* 535d).

b. denoting the physical activities constituting work:

Must each of them contribute his own work [*ergon*] for the common use of all? For example, will a farmer provide food for everyone, spending quadruple the time and labour [*ponon*] to provide food to be shared by them all? (*Rep.* 369e2-5)

c. denoting tasks (*ponoi*) that must be performed by physical strength as requirement for completing an assignment, engaging in a competition, assuming a position or securing victory in contest:

... I experienced something like this: in my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable. I must give you an account of my journeyings as if they were labours [*ponoi*] I had undertaken to prove the oracle irrefutable (*Apology* 22a).

... we must find out who are the best guardians of their conviction that they must always do what they believe to be best for the city. We must keep them under observation from childhood and set them tasks that are most likely to make them forget such a conviction or be deceived out of it,

.... And we must subject them to labours [*ponous*], pains, and contests in which we can watch for these traits (*Rep.* 413cd; cf. *Laws* 833e6).

In all these things—in labours [*ponoi*], studies, and fears—the ones who always show the greatest aptitude are to be inscribed on a list. (*Rep.* 537a6-7)

Discussion

From the examples in literature, we see that *ergon* may stand alone as occupation, while *ponos* may refer “specifically to those activities that are done by bodily exertion (cf. *Rep.* 369e2-5, 371d9-e3)” (Asante, 2017, p. 87), or may describe the actions of the work, that is, the effort (cf. *Laws* 735b7) put into the work (occupation, task or function). But metaphorical descriptions of the activities that go into or depart from philosophical inquiry also employ the use of *ponos*. For instance, tasks (*erga*) that involve the use of mental faculties could be described as one’s labours (cf. *Apology* 22a). At *Phaedo* 84a, the soul must not, while being freed by philosophy, “surrender itself to pleasures and pains and imprison itself again, thus labouring in vain like Penelope at her web.” Thus, in Plato’s use of the words (*ergon* and *ponos*), anyone who has an occupation (*ergon*) could labour (*ponoi*)—mentally or physically—to fulfil his or her task for the common good of the *polis* (cf. *Rep.* 369e2-5, 374b7-9; 421b5-c2). In the *Republic* for instance, the work of the wage-earners is distinguished only in the sense that theirs does not involve mental, but physical effort. The guardians’ work involves mainly mental effort, but their training includes both manual and mental work (*Rep.* 535d, 537a7-8). By implication, *ponos* applies to manual work more than it does to mental work (which fits into the description of *ergon*).

While a cursory glance at the textual evidence seems to reveal that Plato’s use of *ergon* and *ponos* fits exactly into the connotations used in ancient Greek society, a careful consideration of the examples given in Plato’s use of *ergon* and *ponos* shows that, in the *Republic*, Plato does not consider *ponos* as a degrading activity, but mainly as an activity involving the use of physical strength or the physical aspects of the body. It is therefore misleading to quote *Republic* 536e as evidence to support any claim that suggests Plato maintains the status quo:

...no free person should learn anything like a slave. Forced bodily labour does no harm to the body, but nothing taught by force stays in the soul (*Rep.* 536e).

Here, Plato’s emphasis is on the word ‘force’, not on ‘bodily labour’ (*ponos*). For Plato, *ponos* becomes a degrading activity only when it is forced, as will be in the case of slave labour. This is why he employs the analogy of the free person and the slave to communicate the need for children to be taught through play and not by force. He sets the distinction clear enough for the reader to understand that the citizens of the *polis* or the ideal state of the *Republic*, in this case, need, as part of their training for guardianship, tasks involving physical strength. Besides, the third class of citizens have as their occupation work involving manual labour. And it is the proper contribution of each individual, doing their own work, which ensures harmony in the *polis*.

In the *Laws*, which is less ideal than the *Republic*, the degree to which this claim is true is limited; while the training of citizens involves physical exertion, they are barred from engaging in any form of craftsmanship and retailing (*Laws* 848a2-4, 846d). The citizens’ occupation is towards political and civic duties. In this sense, *ponos* denotes the social status of foreigners (who are the only persons allowed to engage in craftsmanship and retailing) and slaves (who, though are barred from craftsmanship, do engage in other manual work) (*Laws* 846d-847a; 806d8-10). Another way to look at this limitation is to see *ponos* in Plato as different from *ponos* in the reality of ancient Greek life by considering the ends of bodily labour. The activities of the wage-earners and the training of the guardians in the *Republic*, as well as the competitions in the *Laws*, point towards an end. The nature or purpose of the activity thus plays an important role in such distinctions. However, this analysis cannot be generalised as representing Plato’s complete thought; like the contrasts between Plato’s ideas in an ideal context and ancient Greek conceptions, *ponos* can be seen to take on different—that is, ideal, real and metaphorical—connotations in Plato’s dialogues. Thus, when it comes to the practical aspects of Plato’s political organisation, the meaning of *ponos* bears no difference from its ancient Greek conception.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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