

The Semantics of Ancient Greek Nominal ἔργον in Relation to the English Nominal "Work"

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Introduction

My goal here is to consider the meaning of the noun ἔργον in Plato's *Republic* book 1, particularly in the philosophically momentous "function" argument at 353b-354c. To that end, I will attempt to clarify the meanings of the Greek nominal form ἔργον. And in an effort to do that, I will begin with the English nominal form "work," with which ἔργον is cognate.¹ The idea is that clarification of the meanings of the English nominal form will assist in clarifying the meanings of the Greek nominal form.

I will distinguish six meanings of the English nominal form "work."² I suggest that these six meanings largely exhaust the semantic range, i.e. set of meanings, of the nominal form "work." To corroborate this conclusion, I will compare my results with those of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. The Greek nominal form ἔργον has at least four meanings. And the two sets of meanings partly overlap.

Having clarified the meanings of the English and Greek nominal forms, I will turn to examples of the latter in Plato. Here, my aim is to confirm that four meanings of ἔργον, which occur prior to the composition of the Platonic corpus, also appear in Plato. These results will then facilitate assessment of the meaning and use of ἔργον in the so-called function argument of *Republic* book 1.

The Semantics of the English Nominal Form "Work"

The English nominal form "work" occurs as a count noun and as a mass noun. As a count noun, "work" denotes an object – whether concrete or, as in the case of music, abstract – that has been intentionally produced by fine artistic or literary activity. For example, at an auction of paintings:

One work sold for over ten million dollars.

The early works sold for less than expected.³

¹ The IE stem is **uerǵ-* (to do, make); so, e.g., Rix (2001) 686; Beekes (2010) 450. Cp. Doric *ἔργον* (*IG* 4.800), Elean *ἔργον* (*SIG* 9), both cited from LSJ.

² Here and throughout I use "meaning," "sense," and "denotation" interchangeably.

³ Webster's *Ninth* gives this example: "The dunes are the works are wind and sand." I am unsure of this. I wonder whether "works" here is being used metaphorically and so somewhat poetically; that is, the dynamics of wind on sand are being treated as if intentional action was involved. If instead we assume that this instance is non-metaphorical, then it appears that the count noun

Call this the "fine product" sense of the count noun "work."

Observe that we cannot employ the count noun "work" to denote an object that has been intentionally produced by ordinary manufacture. For example, consider a set of wingnuts or flapper valves. Of either of these, it would not be felicitous to say:

These works are cheap, but durable.

Contrast:

These products/objects/items are cheap, but durable.

Turning to the mass noun, the lexically singular mass nominal form "work" is at least three-ways ambiguous. One sense is related to the fine product sense of the count noun. It denotes the product or result of some laborious goal-oriented activity,⁴ not necessarily a fine artistic or literary one. For example, assume that in order to protect a patch of herbs from scavengers, one constructs a fence around it; but the scavengers chew through the fence and destroy it. One can felicitously say:

The scavengers have destroyed my work (the thing that I have made).

I will call this the "ordinary product" sense of the mass nominal form "work."

Confirmation that in the preceding example "work" is mass nominal comes from the fact that it cannot be pluralized. For example, assume that one has constructed several fences to protect several patches of herbs, which again scavengers have destroyed. One cannot say:

* The scavengers have destroyed my works (the things that I have made).

Consider now the following example:

Great work, team!

This sentence is at least two-ways ambiguous. "Work" may occur here with the ordinary product sense. For example, assume the context is a clean-up of a neighborhood. A team of volunteers has completed the clean-up, and the leader of the team, pleased with the result, expresses the sentence to the others.

But "work" may also occur here in a sense denoting the activity in which the volunteers were engaged. For example, assume that the volunteers are in the process of the clean-up. The team leader may assert the sentence with this alternative sense of "work." Compare:

You all are doing great work!

"work" can have the sense of mere "effect." But the following comparison casts doubt on that idea: "The dunes are the works of wind and sand"; "The dunes are the effects of wind and sand." This minimal pair seems to show that "The dunes are the works are wind and sand" does entail the attribution of intentionality to wind (if not both wind and sand).

⁴ I discuss the properties of goal-orientedness and laboriousness below.

I will refer to this sense of the mass nominal form of "work" as the "labor" sense. The labor sense also occurs in the following sentences:

The work will take about three weeks.

You shouldn't interrupt her when she's in the middle of work.

His work has saved many lives.

To a first approximation, the meaning of the labor sense of "work" is goal-directed action or activity. Confirmation that goal-directedness is a condition of this sense comes from the following consideration. An action or pattern of activity needn't be goal directed. For example, one may walk nervously in circles without purpose. In contrast, the following is infelicitous:

Angela's work had no objective/goal.

Granted that goal-directed action is necessary, it is not sufficient for work in the labor sense. The action or activity must be laborious. I will develop this point shortly.

Presently, observe that the labor sense of "work," insofar as it is of a mass nominal form, can refer to one act or action or to a plurality of acts or actions. An example of plural reference is:

Work was occurring all over the city.

Contrast:

An act/action was occurring all over the city.

This is only felicitous if we read "act/action" as meaning "type of act/action."

Likewise, regarding the scavengers-and-herbs example above, assume that one has created multiple fences to protect multiple herb patches and that scavengers have destroyed them all. The singular mass nominal form "work" can be used to refer to all of the destroyed fences:

The scavengers have destroyed my work.

The labor sense of "work" is also gradable, as its admission of various degree modifiers and comparative constructions confirms; for example:

This will require a lot of work. (intensifier)

Getting the cap off this bottle took some work. (intensifier)⁵

This job required more work than that one. (comparative)

⁵ More precisely, "some" is a neutral modifier that, for pragmatic reasons, intensifies the degree associated with its modificand.

Preparation for the course was as much work as the course itself. (equative)

Observe that the so-called vague quantificational expression "a lot of work" is two-ways ambiguous. One sense denotes a large number of instances of work; the other denotes a high degree of work in a single instance:

Over the summer months I did a lot of work in my garden. (many instances)

Removing the copper tree took a lot of work. (high degree)

The former case owes to the fact that the mass noun can have plural reference. The latter owes to the gradability of the mass noun.

Consider again the removal-of-the-copper-tree example. The meaning of the sentence is, approximately, that removing the copper tree was especially laborious. In other words, the type of scale associated with the gradable mass noun "work" appears to be one of laboriousness or labor-intensiveness.

Given this, it is curious that that we can speak of certain work as easy:

Installing a new showerhead is easy work if you have the right tools and know what you're doing.

In appreciating why this expression is felicitous, consider first a simple act such as lifting a spoon of soup to one's mouth. Normally, it would not be sensible to describe this act as work. But consider its execution by an individual suffering from muscular dystrophy or Parkinson's disease. For such an individual, the act may be work. Likewise, consider walking, and compare walking down the street under normal conditions with walking through deep snow during a blizzard. Or consider the act of expressing a simple sentence, but performed by an individual undergoing speech therapy following a stroke that left them aphasic. The point is that certain act-types are normally not viewed as laborious or effortful enough to qualify as work, but under certain conditions, internal or external to the agent, the threshold is met.

Semantic confirmation of this last point comes from the following example:

Using a knife and fork to eat is work for an individual with muscular dystrophy.

Here, the prepositional phrase headed by "for" modifies the gerund phrase "using a knife and fork to eat." Without the "for"-phrase, the gerund phrase will be understood as denoting the action of using a knife and fork to eat performed by a generic and so typical agent. So, the "for"-phrase serves to specify a different type of agent, namely an individual with muscular dystrophy.

Note that this semantic function of the "for"-phrase differs from the following use of a "for"-phrase with a gradable adjective, as in:

Toby is tall for a first-grader.

In this case, the "for"-phrase modifies the predicate adjective "tall" – not the subject "Toby" – and its semantic function is to determine a comparison class, that is, a class of individuals with which Toby is being compared, in this case, with respect to height. In the eating-is-work

example, the "for"-phrase does not determine a comparison class. Granted this, the sentence conveys – we might say – an implicit comparison between typical use of a knife and fork to eat and such use as occurs among individuals with muscular dystrophy.

Compare the following sentence, in which the "when"-clause functions adverbially, thereby modifying the subject of the main clause "walking":

Walking is work, when it occurs during a blizzard and through deep snow.

Semantically, the "when"-clause specifies a different feature of the condition of the action denoted by "walking." In this case, it is not the agent, but the environment in which the action occurs. Again the sentence conveys an implicit comparison between walking in a typical context and in the laborious context specified.

With these points in mind, I return to the showerhead installation case. Among acts that one performs within one's home, installation of bathroom fixtures is a category of act that typically qualifies as work. In part, this is due to the fact that it requires the exercise of some atypical knowledge and skill. Contrast the knowledge and skill one exercises in one's ordinary acts within the home. As such, bathroom fixture installation requires a relatively effortful exercise of one's mental and physical capacities. And so, the installation of a bathroom fixture qualifies as work relative to ordinary acts within the home. Granted this, the installation of some bathroom fixtures is more laborious than others. Consequently, the work of installing a new showerhead is, it is here plausibly claimed, easy relative to the work of installing, say, a bathtub or heating vent.

In short, there is a laboriousness condition on the labor sense of "work," which is related to its gradability. As with gradable expressions generally, the threshold of laboriousness is context sensitive and thereby variable. When no contextual specification occurs, typical conditions are operative. And in such contexts, certain acts (for example, moving a refrigerator or a piano) are or (for example, moving one's hand or one's leg) are not laborious.

There is a third sense of the mass nominal form "work" that is akin to "place where one works"; for example:

At work we have a seminar on implicit bias.

I am on my way to work.

The distribution of this sense seems highly restricted.⁶ Call this the "workplace" sense of the mass nominal form "work."

Given the workplace sense of the mass nominal form "work," note also that there is a now dated sense of the plural count nominal form "works," which is akin to "place where a kind of industrial production or manufacture occurs." This nominal form occurs, for instance, in phrases such as "iron works" and "gas works." Observe here that the morphologically plural form functions syntactically as a singular. For example, note the indefinite article modifying "iron works" in the following sentence:

⁶ The phrase "at work" also occurs with the labor sense of "work" where its meaning is akin to "in the process of working."

Winthrop believed that because the colonies had a cheap and abundant supply of raw materials, an iron works in Massachusetts could produce goods that could be sold profitably in the colonies as well as in England itself.

Since mass nouns do not admit the indefinite article, the example also confirms that the term is a count noun rather than a lexically plural mass noun (such as "dregs" or "lees"). Call this the "factory" sense of the plural count noun.

Possibly, there is a fourth sense of the mass nominal form "work," which is also related to the labor sense of "work." Consider the following sentence said by a boss to an employee:

Get back to your office and do your work.

Here "work" seems to refer to laborious activity that the employee is required to do. In other words, the hypothetical sense of the mass nominal form "work" here has a modal entailment: one has an obligation or is required to do the work (in the labor sense). The word "task" – according to one of its meanings – seems to have this sense. So, for convenience, I will refer to the hypothetical sense of the mass nominal form "work" in question as the "task" sense.

Note that if in fact there is a task sense of "work," there is at least this difference between "work" in the task sense and "task" itself: "task" is a count noun. We speak of "one task" and "many tasks." Consequently, one cannot substitute "tasks" with "works" in the hypothesized task sense; for example:

I have numerous tasks to complete.

* I have numerous works to complete.

Granted this, there is reason to doubt the hypothesis that there is a task sense of the mass nominal form "work." Arguably, in the original office-boss example the labor sense of "work" is operative; however, the context in which it occurs serves to refer to labor that one has to or ought to perform. An analogous example is the following:

There is work that I have to complete by this evening.

Here the modality derives from the relative clause rather than from the meaning of "work" itself. More precisely, the relative clause both provides the modality of obligation and specifies the time when the obligatory work is to be completed.

Now, there are cases where the mass nominal form "work" occurs, apparently with a task sense, and without linguistic modification of the sort that conveys that the work in question is obligatory. Consider modification of "work" by a possessive adjective, for example "her work." Strictly, the possessive adjective conveys work that belongs to or, simply, is related to her. But the belonging relation is very general and the mere relation relation is maximally general. Neither entails that the work has been imposed upon her. For example, assume Sue has retired from her profession and has since devoted herself to painting in a studio behind her house. A visitor to Sue's house is greeted by Sue's daughter who informs the visitor:

Sue is out back doing her work.

Here "work" occurs with the labor sense and the possessive adjective "her" conveys a relation between Sue and the work of painting that involves no obligation, assignment, or imposition. Given the background information, Sue is merely committed to the work.

Compare this with the following example. Joan is a teacher who is in her study grading papers. Joan's husband is preparing dinner for their family and he asks Joan's daughter to check on her mother. Joan's daughter reports back:

She is still doing her work.

Here, what Joan is doing is obligatory. Granted this, and setting the term "work" aside, none of the other linguistic items in the sentence convey that what Joan is doing is obligatory. But this should not encourage the conclusion that a task sense of "work" is operative here. Rather, the background information, that the work Joan is doing is grading papers for her class, entails that "her work" here refers to work that Joan is obligated, in her professional capacity, to do.

I suggest then that there is no task sense of the mass nominal form "work." Rather, putative task meanings are of the labor sense used in contexts, immediate linguistic or background discursive, that refer to work (in the labor sense) that is obligatory.

I turn now to another possible sense of the mass nominal form "work." This sense is akin to the labor sense; its meaning is "paid labor." Consider then a sentence such as:

I'm looking for work.

This is naturally read as meaning that the speaker is looking for paid labor. Yet this is not a required reading; for consider the following continuation:

I'm looking for work. It doesn't have to be paid. I just need some productive way to spend my time. I'm happy to volunteer.

Furthermore, consider phrases such as "volunteer work" and "pro bono work." If "work" here entailed "paid labor," these phrases would be self-contradictory.

Granted this, consider the following sentence:

I'm out of work.

It is difficult to read this sentence as conveying anything but that the speaker lacks paid labor. So, it seems that there is a paid sense of "work," that is, a sense of the mass nominal form "work" that entails paid labor. However, surprisingly given the centrality of paid labor in our culture, this sense of "work" seems to be highly restricted.

So much for the meanings of the nominal form "work." In sum, I have distinguished two meanings of the count nominal form "work(s)" and four meanings of the mass nominal form "work":

COUNT NOMINAL

- ♦ fine product sense: object intentionally produced by fine artistic or literary activity
- ♦ factory sense: place where manufacture or industrial production occurs

MASS NOMINAL

- ♦ ordinary product sense: product or result of laborious goal-oriented activity
- ♦ labor sense: laborious/strenuous/arduous goal-directed action or activity
- ♦ workplace sense: place where one performs work (in the labor sense).
- ♦ paid sense: laborious/strenuous/arduous goal-directed action or activity that one is paid to do.⁷

The relations between the various senses are largely cases of regular polysemy. The relation between the labor and ordinary product senses is one of cause and effect. The relation between the labor and fine product sense is likewise, with the qualification that the labor is restricted to fine artistic or literary production.

The relation between the workplace sense and the labor sense or the ordinary product sense also seems to be a case of regular polysemy. For example, consider "newspaper":

The newspaper is on the coffee table.

The newspaper is going out of business.

Likewise, the relation between the factory sense and the ordinary product sense.

Comparison with the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary's* Entry for the Nominal Form "Work"

I will conclude this discussion of the meanings of the nominal form "work" by comparing my results with those of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary (COED)*.⁸

The *COED* distinguishes eight primary senses of the nominal form "work." It includes among these several sub-senses. I will focus on the primary senses. Note that the *COED* draws no explicit distinction between mass and count nominal forms.

Sense 1 is "activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result." This corresponds to my labor sense of the mass nominal form.

Sense 2 is "such activity as a means of earning an income." This corresponds to my paid sense of "work." But I claim that this sense is highly restricted.

Sense 3 is "a task or tasks to be undertaken." This largely corresponds to my hypothetical task sense of "work." Recall that if this sense existed, it would be of the mass nominal form. And in that case, it could not be pluralized; however, since a mass noun can refer to a plurality, it

⁷ In view of the semantic analysis of the nominal form "work," I suggest the following explanation of the opposition between "work" and "leisure" (understood as meaning "leisure activity"). Work is laborious goal-oriented activity, while leisure is non-laborious goal-oriented activity. Note, however, that leisure activities may be laborious in one respect, but not another. They may be laborious insofar as they are physically or mentally challenging or demanding. However, insofar as they are freely chosen versus imposed or obligatory, they may be non-laborious. In this latter case, the opposition of work and leisure is the opposition of a type of work, based on the way in which it is laborious, and a type of leisure.

⁸ A. Stevenson, M. Waite, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2011¹².