

**External Examiner’s Report on the Dissertation of Vojtěch Linka  
“Approaches to Pain in Classical Greek Philosophy and Medicine”  
Submitted in 2023 at the Department of Philosophy and Religious  
Studies**

**I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

This thesis focuses on pain in classical Greek philosophy and medicine, particularly its roles in the *corpus Hippocraticum*, Plato, and Aristotle. After a comprehensive introduction in which Vojtěch Linka (VG henceforth) sketches the scope, methodology, and structure of the thesis, three chapters, the main body of the thesis, are devoted to ‘Hippocratic’ writings, Plato, and Aristotle, organized around three core questions respectively: What is pain? Are there any kinds of pain? What is the role of pain? VG not only demonstrates the richness and significance of the understanding of pain in medico-philosophical texts but also reveals, through this case, the fruitful interaction between ancient medicine and philosophy.

**II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

Although pain is a universal experience, often adduced as an example of sensation or consciousness in philosophical discussions, it was rarely thematized by philosophers in the past. In recent years, however, pain has gradually received increasing scholarly attention, and a series of monographs and papers focusing on its different aspects have been published, not only in philosophy but also in the fields of classics and the history of science. VG’s dissertation can undoubtedly contribute to this rapidly expanding new field, not only through the comprehensiveness of the material it treats but also due to its interdisciplinarity across philosophy and medicine. A strength of VG’s approach is his careful way of dealing with the semantic scopes of various pain words in classical antiquity, which are not limited to the three core subjects (the Hippocratic writings, Plato and Aristotle) but even cover almost the entire literature of the archaic and classical Greece. It also illustrates well the similarities and differences between the medical authors and the philosophers concerning the nature and role of pain. The overall evaluation of this thesis is good, though there are also minor concerns here. First, while there are rich discussions of the semantics of pain, the conceptual work seems underdeveloped (for details, see below). Second, while there is an overview of the research status in the introductory section of the paper, substantial engagements with contemporary research are relatively rare in the main body of the text.

**III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects**

*1. Structure of the argument*

In this thesis, as noted, VG aims to illustrate how medical authors and philosophers in classical antiquity attempted to integrate pain, a distinctive, seemingly negative experience, into the comprehensive worldview about human nature, both from a biological and an ethical

perspective. The aim of the argumentation is lucid. In general, the author is also successful in pursuing its objective.

A slight concern: In p.18, VG seems to suggest that in addition to Plato and Aristotle, the thesis will also address ‘Democritus of Abdera, Diocles of Carystus, Praxagoras of Cos, Mnesitheus of Athens, Heracleides of Pontus, Theophrastus, and Strato’ since “[i]n order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Greek classical medicine, these authors and their texts cannot be overlooked”. This promise can hardly be taken as fulfilled. There is no discussion about Strato, Praxagoras of Cos, Mnesitheus of Athens, and Heracleides of Pontus later in the text.

## *2. Formal aspects of the dissertation*

From a formal point of view, the thesis exhibits a commendable clarity of structure and fluency of language, at least for me, a non-native speaker. Perhaps debatable is whether it would be more appropriate to put the long section of the Introduction (Ch. 1.5) - with its discussion of the use of the pain vocabulary from Homer to Demosthenes - would as a separate chapter. Moreover, Chapter 5 should be more explicitly emphasized as the conclusion of the whole thesis. I also doubt whether this concluding part should be taken as an answer to the question ‘Why does it (sc. pain) hurt’ as indicated in its present title. There are also a few errors: “was further discussed refined” (p.168) should be “was further discussed <and> refined”; Stern-Gillet, Gurtler (2014) (p.162) should be Stern-Gillet <and> Gurtler (2014). The translation of τὴν τε γὰρ ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν κακίαν τὴν ἠθικὴν περὶ λύπας καὶ ἡδονᾶς ἔθεμεν (*EN* 1152b4-6) as ‘being a morally good or bad person is all about pleasures and pains’ (p.152, emphasis mine) makes Aristotle appear to be a hedonist concerning morality. But a more faithful translation should be ‘virtue and vice of character are concerned with pains and pleasures’ (translated by Reeve)

The list of abbreviations used by the authors is acceptable. But given that a number of the abbreviations are based on Latin titles of ancient authors, I’m not sure that it would be better for authors to provide Latin titles in addition to their English titles. Other issues, such as bibliography and transcription, are also in principle impeccable. However, there are a few inconsistencies in capitalization (e.g., “*Melissus and Eleatic monism*”; “*In the grip of disease*”) and abbreviations (a few journals such as *TAPhA* are cited in abbreviated form, most are not), which could be easily corrected.

## *3. Use of sources and/or material*

The author has a good command of the sources and research literature on the topic, as indicated in the final bibliography. But it might have been better if the source/translation and the secondary literature are distinguished in the bibliography section. In addition, the thesis suffers a few errors and inconsistencies in quoting literature: Harris (2018), for instance, is cited in p. 21 n31 but is absent in the bibliography; Mann (2018) in p.21 n32 should be Mann and Harven (2018); there should be a comma between Gosling/Taylor (1982) and Harris (2018) as well as Delcomminette (2005) and Jinek (2021) in the same page; part of footnote 535 (p.104) seems to

repeat footnote 533 (p.103): ‘For pleasure and pain in the *Laws*, see Frede (2010), 108-126, Kamtekar (2010) 127-130, Jinek (2021).’

The thesis might also benefit from considering the following research: E. Salim (2012). Four puzzles on Aristotelian pleasures and pains (Doctoral dissertation). University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ; Wilson N. “The semantics of pain in Greco-Roman antiquity,” *J Hist Neurosci*. 2013;22(2):129-43; D. Wolfsdorf, “Plato on Pain,” *AntiPhilos* 9, 2015, 11–26; E. Cerroni. ‘Prose and Poetry of Pain: A History of the Term ἄλγος’, *The Paths of Greek: Literature, Linguistics and Epigraphy*, edited by Enzo Passa and Olga Tribulato, De Gruyter, 2019, 219-240, and some of my publications such as “A Battle Against Pain?: Aristotle, Theophrastus and the *Physiologoi*”, *Phronesis* (62), 2017, 392-416; “Neutral, Natural and Hedonic State in Plato”, *Mnemosyne*, 72 (4), 2019, 525-49; “Aristotle and Eudoxus on Argument from Contraries”, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 102(4), 2020, 588-618. A few articles and books appear too late to be taken into account but could be integrated in the future: W. Cheng, “Aristotle and the Pain of Animals: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1154b7–9”, *The Classical Quarterly*, 2023, 1-8; W. Cheng. “‘Every Perception is Accompanied by Pain!’: Theophrastus’ criticism of Anaxagoras Reconsidered”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 2023 (in print), and J. R. Clarke, D. King, and H. Baltussen eds., *Pain Narratives in Greco-Roman Writings*, Leiden: Brill, 2023.

#### 4. Personal contribution to the subject

As a first monograph on the role of pain in Greek medicine and philosophy, the overall result of the thesis undoubtedly furthers and deepens our understanding of pain in classical antiquity. The comprehensiveness and interdisciplinary approach of this work makes it a valuable resource for scholars from a variety of backgrounds, especially those of ancient philosophy and the history of medicine. But the author’s approach is sometimes too paraphrastic, with little exegetical or critical engagement with the original sources. Additionally, as mentioned above, although most of the important research literature is cited, the study would contribute more if it includes a more in-depth conversation with them.

#### IV. Questions for the author

Against the mainstream view, which takes pain in Plato as a *genesis* or *kinēsis*, Erginel 2019 argues that pain should be taken as a state rather than a process. VG mentions this article and discusses them in footnote 500 (p. 96). The result, however, is still unsatisfactory. First, VG doesn’t seem to present Erginel’s position accurately. According to VG, Erginel believes that pain is *both a state and a process*, whereas, in my view, Erginel argues for a static understanding of pain, according to which the related process is taken as a causal antecedent. If this is true, then it is unclear whether VG agrees with Erginel or not. In any case, VG seems to owe us a more substantial dialogue with Erginel 2019, which would be better placed in the main body of the text rather than in a footnote. Second, leaving Erginel’s position aside, if VG himself believes that pain is both a state and a process, independent arguments in favor of it are to be expected too. In particular, it needs to explain why Plato explicitly claims in some places that pain is a *kinēsis/genesis*. Again, a footnote seems insufficient.

The author mentions that he focuses on three main issues in Plato and Aristotle: What is pain? Are there any kinds of pain? What is the role of pain? But as noted, the author spent much more time on vocabulary and semantics than on concepts and theories. Therefore, what I'm particularly curious about here is still what VG thinks *is* pain for Plato and Aristotle, and whether both have essentially the same view of the ontology of pain, and if not, what their differences and relations are. This question is also related to the issue of the kinds of pain. For given the various kinds of pain mentioned (pain of the body, pain of the soul, moral pain, etc.), pains seem too heterogeneous to be unified. If so, how should we understand this what-is question? Is this a question that can be answered in terms of the standard Socrates-style definition, or should it be answered in some alternative way? Or is it even a wrong or illegitimate question here?

Finally, with respect to the evaluation of pain in Aristotle. VG points out not only that 'if the pain is a recurring phenomenon, and explanations cannot eliminate it entirely, it must be integrated and, in a sense, used for some greater good' (p.177) but also that 'a complete absence of toil is seen as being negative' (p.168). These claims seem to contradict or at least in tension with Aristotle's view that pain, in general, is something bad and should be avoided, that a perfect activity (*energeia*) is free from pain', or 'the activity of the movement of celestial bodies should not involve pain/effort (*epiponos*). In *EN* 7.14, Aristotle explicitly stresses that unlike pleasure, which people should only avoid its excessive kinds, 'it is not just the excess a base person avoids but *pain generally* (*ὄλως*), since pain is not contrary to excess except to someone who pursues excess' (*EN* 1154a18-21, translated by Reeve, italics mine). If so, would the evaluation of pain in the thesis too positive? How could such evaluation be reconciled with Aristotle's negative attitude to pain mentioned above.

## **V. Conclusion**

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

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