

OXFORD PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

Animals



A HISTORY

Edited by PETER ADAMSON & G. FAY EDWARDS

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Adamson, Peter, editor; Edwards, G. Fay, editor.

Title: Animals : a history / edited by G. Fay Edwards and Peter Adamson.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017036011 (print) | LCCN 2018004743 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780199375998 (online course) | ISBN 9780199375981 (updf) |

ISBN 9780199375967 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780199375974 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Animals (Philosophy)

Classification: LCC B105.A55 (ebook) | LCC B105.A55 A74 2018 (print)

| DDC 113/.8—dc23

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Webcom, Inc., Canada
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc.,
United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

Aristotle on Animals

Devin Henry

In this essay (I've marked sections to read, so you don't read it all), Devin Henry describes how Aristotle describes animals' ontology (meaning their essence or "being-ness"), especially how each organism has certain functions appropriate to its own flourishing. That is, organisms have certain traits "for the sake of" their own goals and ends. This "for the sake of" is known as *teleology*—how one trait or quality or entity is the means to a particular end. Aristotle points out how these traits are similar and different in animals and humans. Try to note all the ways Aristotle notes similarities of differences between human and other humans and humans and other animals.

ANIMAL PSYCHOLOGY

Start here; identify Aristotle's traits of the animal soul and how these traits differ from the human soul.

Animals are living things, and Aristotle takes living things to be primary examples of "natural" substances.¹ A natural substance, according to Aristotle, is a substance that has within itself a principle of change and rest (or "nature"), which is an intrinsic cause of its characteristic patterns of behavior (*Physics* II 1). In *Physics* II 2 Aristotle argues that each natural substance has two natures, a material nature and a formal nature, and that it is the job of the natural scientist to investigate both (194a12–15). The formal nature of a living thing is its soul (*Parts of Animals*, I 1, 641a21–27), which Aristotle treats as a set of capacities that the living body has for executing various kinds of life functions. Together these capacities constitute the essence of a living thing (*On the Soul*, II 1). According to *On the Soul*, the animal soul is constituted by two main parts. The souls of nonhuman animals

have (1) a nutritive part, which houses their metabolic and reproductive functions, and (2) a sensory part, which constitutes their essence (it is what makes a living thing an animal). Human souls include, in addition, (3) a rational part that sets them apart from all other animals.² However, unlike the Stoics, Aristotle assigned to the sensory part of the soul a wide range of complex psychological functions and so was able to afford even nonhuman animals a rich cognitive life. In this section I want to set out the basic architecture of the animal soul before going on, in the next section, to reflect on how Aristotle thinks the lack of reason impacts the moral status of animals other than humans.

First, all animals have the capacity for sense-perception. Sense-perception by definition has three kinds of object: proper sensibles, common sensibles, and so-called incidental sensibles (*On the Soul*, II 6). Proper sensibles are properties that can affect only a single sense modality (color for vision, odor for smell, sound for hearing, etc.) and where no error is possible, while common sensibles are those that can affect, and so are common to, multiple senses (number, shape, size, motion and rest). Aristotle says that of these first two kinds of sensible each is perceptible "in virtue of itself" (418a8–9). By contrast, incidental sensibles are not perceived in themselves but only in virtue of being "accidents" of things that are directly sensible. It is not entirely clear what Aristotle means by incidental sensibles or what the nature of incidental perceiving turns out to be.³ What we are told is this:

I call a sense object incidental, e.g., if the white thing is the son of Diaries. For one perceives this incidentally because what is perceived [the son of Diaries] belongs to the white thing only incidentally, and that is why [the sense] is not affected by the sense object insofar as it is that sort of thing. (*On the Soul*, 418a20–24)

The second sentence can be glossed by saying that sight is not affected by the sense object seen because it is the son of Diaries but because it is

white. In other words, Aristotle thinks I do perceive the son of Diaries, but I perceive this object not in virtue of that property but in virtue of its color, which directly activates my senses. It is in this sense that Aristotle says of proper and common sensibles that each one is perceptible "in virtue of itself," while the other is perceived only "incidentally," namely, because what is perceived in this case (the son of Diaries) is also accidentally something white (cf. 425a24–28). What is important for my purposes is that Aristotle treats incidental perception as an act of perception and not an inference; it is an affection of the sensory rather than rational part of the soul. This allows nonhuman animals, despite lacking the rational part, to have incidental perceptions so that the content of their experience is not limited to what is immediately given in sensation.⁴ A lion tracking a gazelle across the savannah does not just see a brown shape in motion but sees food, prey, or even a gazelle. This is, of course, controversial. But Aristotle nowhere says that incidental perceiving requires rationality of any sort.⁵

Aristotle also affords some animals a function he calls *phantasia*, which is a capacity for producing, storing, and recalling mental images.⁶ In *On the Soul* III 3, he describes *phantasia* as that capacity in virtue of which things appear to an agent (428a1–2). Aristotle not only includes under this description the sorts of appearances that arise in the absence of external stimuli (e.g., images that occur in dreams) but also those we experience under normal perceptual conditions (e.g., he attributes the fact that the sun appears to be a foot in diameter to *phantasia*, 428b3–4). Although it is often translated simply as "imagination," some scholars (not unreasonably) characterize *phantasia* more broadly as a capacity for mental representation.

Now Aristotle denies that *phantasia* is a function of reason, including belief.⁷ While he insists that thinking requires mental images (*On the Soul*, 431a14–9, 431b2–10; *On Memory*, 449b31–450a1), the ability to generate, store, and manipulate them does not belong to the rational part of the soul. Aristotle holds this position on the grounds that some nonhuman animals possess *phantasia*, despite lacking the rational part

of the soul. But he also denies that *phantasia* is identical with sense-perception. For example, when I form an image in my mind of a fox wearing socks and attend to his orange fur and blue socks, I do not literally *see* the image. For, properly speaking, sensations occur when my sense organs are acted on by the sensible properties of external objects. However, *phantasia* is a function of the sensory part of the soul (*On Dreams* I) and has its causal history in immediate sense-perceptions (*On the Soul*, III 3, 429a2–3). When an animal perceives a sensible object, that object sets up a “motion” in its sense organs, which travels down to the primary sense organ where it generates perception (see *On Sleep*, e.g. 455b10–11, and *On Dreams*). In animals with *phantasia* a second “motion” arises alongside the original, which is retained by the sense organ. These “residual motions” are stored and can be re-deployed later in the form of mental images of the original sense object (e.g., as in dreams or memory).⁸

Phantasia makes possible a whole host of other cognitive activities that enrich the mental lives of the animals that have them. Most important among these is memory. Aristotle is explicit that some non-human animals have the capacity to form memories, and so their encounter with the world is not limited to the present (*On Memory*, 450a15–22).⁹ For those that lack this additional psychological function the world just disappears when their senses shut off. Such animals, Aristotle says, have no knowledge outside sense-perception:

In those animals that have sense-perception, in some not only does a sense-perception arise but it is also retained, while in others it is not retained. In those where the sense-perception is not retained there is no knowledge¹⁰ outside of sense-perception (either no knowledge at all or none concerning the part that is not retained). But some can still hold it in their soul even after perceiving them. When this occurs, there is then a further difference: in some an account (*logos*) comes to be out of the retained sense-perceptions, while in others it does not. (*Posterior Analytics*, II 19, 99b36–100a3)

The last part of this text refers to the capacity that some animals have to systematize their memories into what Aristotle calls an “experience” (*empeiria*): “Thus from sense-perception comes memory (as we call it) and from many memories of the same item comes experience; for memories that are many in number form a single experience” (100a3–4; see also *Metaphysics* I 1, 980b29–981a12). According to Alexander of Aphrodisias, Aristotle denies that nonhuman animals have the ability to develop experiences since they lack reason (*On Aristotle Metaphysics*, 4, 15–7). “For experience,” he says, “is already rational knowledge of some sort” (4, 23). Yet in *Metaphysics* I 1, Aristotle explicitly says that nonhumans do have “a small share in experience” (980b26), which I take to mean they have a limited share in it.

Imagine a young rabbit that is attacked by an owl for the first time. Since rabbits have *phantasia*, the perception of this event is retained in the rabbit’s soul as a memory image whose content corresponds to that particular event. Over time the rabbit comes to acquire more memories of the same kind representing different attacks by different owls. If I am right, then Aristotle thinks that the rabbit has the cognitive machinery necessary to connect those many memories into a single mental representation of owls as predators.¹¹ In what sense is this experience limited? While Aristotle does not say, it will at least be limited in the sense that it does not involve the sort of universals required for scientific understanding and craftsmanship.¹² For he denies that nonhuman animals are capable of grasping universals.¹³ For this reason the content of the rabbit’s experience (whatever it includes) will be substantially different from that of a human being. It is only in the case of human beings that experience leads to the kind of grasp of universals that is necessary for science and the productive arts (*Posterior Analytics*, II 19, 100a3–b5). This requires what Aristotle calls *nous*, which is a state of the rational part of the soul.

The capacity for sense-perception, which all animals have, also entails desire (*orexis*) and a sense of pleasure and pain (*On the Soul*, 414b1–6,

431a8–14). Now Aristotle typically distinguishes three forms of desire: (1) sensual appetite (*epithumia*), (2) wish (*boulēsis*), and (3) decision (*proairesis*). Appetite is a non-rational desire for food, drink, and sex, while wish and decision are both types of rational desire that are directed toward an agent's conception of the good. Wish is a desire for certain ends—ultimately for happiness, which Aristotle thinks is the supreme end of all our actions—while decision is a desire to execute those actions that deliberation has shown to be the best means for achieving those ends (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1111b26–29, 1113a14, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1226b7–17, *Magna Moralia*, 1189a7–11).¹⁴ Aristotle says:

Since the object of a decision, which is desired as a result of deliberation, is among the things that are up to us, decision turns out to be a deliberative desire for things that are up to us; for when we have decided [to do X] as a result of deliberation, we desire [to do X] in accordance with our wish [for Y]. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II 2, 1113a9–12).¹⁵

Since wish and decision are the province of reason, and since Aristotle denies reason to nonhuman animals, it follows that only humans are capable of these kinds of desire. Nonhuman animals, though they have appetites, are incapable of having wishes and making decisions about how best to satisfy them.

While Aristotle went quite far in affording nonhuman animals such complex cognitive resources, and though (as we shall see) he has much to say about animal intelligence, especially in the biological works, he is categorical that they lack reason. Only humans have the rational part of the soul, which incorporates various mental functions such as discursive thinking (*dianoia*), abstract thought (*nous*, *noēsis*), deliberation (*boulēsis*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), and calculation (*logismos*). Aristotle even denies that nonhuman animals have the ability to form beliefs (*doxa*) (e.g., *On the Soul*, III 3, 428a18–24).¹⁶ As we shall see, all of this has significant implications for his views about the moral status of nonhuman animals.

ARISTOTLE'S ETHOLOGY

In *History of Animals* VIII Aristotle outlines his view of animal behavior. According to this view, “the behavior of all animals, including humans, is determined by a set of dispositions that collectively determine how the animal's capacities for feeling and doing will be exercised on a given occasion.”¹⁷ Aristotle refers to these dispositions collectively as states of character and argues that the same sorts of character traits can be found in human and nonhuman animals alike (588a17–b3, translated below). Some of these are states that the ethical works identify as moral virtues and vices (e.g., courage, cowardice, spiritedness). Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that in the biological works Aristotle appears to have no trouble ascribing various rational capacities to nonhuman animals, including practical wisdom, sagacity, and intelligence.¹⁸

Aristotle's student Theophrastus took this seriously and argued that nonhuman animals are akin to humans in their ability to engage in reasoning (Theophrastus ap. Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, 3.25).¹⁹ I shall return to Theophrastus below. For now we can simply note that if, in assigning reasoning to animals, Theophrastus intends to make animals rational, then he explicitly contradicts his teacher. For in the *History of Animals* Aristotle is clear that when he does speak of animal intelligence he is talking about something that is only analogous to human reason:

Using context, or looking the term up, what does “analogous” mean?

Some of these traits differ relative to humans by the more and less, in the sense that humans exhibit them to a greater extent relative to animals (for some of these sorts of things are present more in humans, some more in the other animals), while others differ by means of analogy. For example, just as we find skill, wisdom, and sagacity in humans, so too in some of the animals there is some other natural capacity of this sort. (*History of Animals*, VIII, 588a21–26)

This is an important qualification. Aristotle remains consistent throughout that nonhuman animals lack reason. Instead what they have is

“some other natural capacity” that is only analogous to reason. They are analogous, I want to suggest, in that both cause behavior exhibiting the same teleological (means-end) structure.

In the *Physics*, Aristotle argues that all goal-directed processes, whether natural or the result of skill, exhibit the same teleological structure where the intermediate steps occur for the sake of the end that results (199a9–19). “This is most obvious,” he says, “in animals other than humans; for they make things neither by skill nor as a result of inquiry and deliberation, which is why people wonder whether it is by reason or some other capacity that these animals work, e.g. spiders, ants, and the like” (199a20–24). Consider the spider. The purpose of her web is obviously to catch bugs; that is its end. When she constructs her web, the intermediate steps she performs are organized for the sake of that end. But this means-end structure is not the product of deliberation; the spider does not literally calculate how best to achieve that end. Rather, Aristotle thinks, her goal-directed behaviors are caused by a certain natural capacity that is the counterpart of human reason. On this reading the “practical wisdom” of nonhuman animals is analogous to human practical wisdom because it causes behavior with the same means-end structure.

But Aristotle does think that nonhuman animals possess some states of character that, in humans, are associated with ethical virtues (e.g., courage, anger, spiritedness).²⁰ They simply differ by degree “in the sense that humans exhibit them to a greater extent relative to animals (for some of these sorts of things are present more in humans, some more in the other animals).” However, even in these cases Aristotle denies that the states of character possessed by nonhuman animals qualify as genuine virtues. Instead he refers to them as the “traces and seeds” of virtues:

The actions and ways of life of animals differ according to their character and food. Even in the majority of other [sc. nonhuman] animals there are traces of the modes connected with the soul, which

← In Aristotle’s view, how is a spider’s web-making different from human goal-directed action?

← In Aristotle’s view, how do animals and humans differently express virtues?

are more clearly differentiated in humans. For just as we pointed to resemblances in the organs, so in a number of animals we find in them cultivation and wildness, gentleness and harsh temperament, courage and cowardice, fear and confidence, spirit and roguishness, and, concerning intelligence, sagacity. Some of these traits differ relative to humans by the more and less, i.e. humans exhibit them to a greater extent relative to animals (for some of these sorts of things are present more in humans, some more in the other animals), with others differing by means of analogy, e.g. just as there is skill, wisdom, and sagacity in humans, so too in some of the animals there is some other natural capacity of this sort. This sort of thing is most evident when we consider the case of children when they are young. For in children it is possible to see traces and seeds (*ichnē kai spermata*) of what will later become fixed states of character, though at that time their soul hardly differs from that of the beasts, so that it is not unreasonable if some traits are identical in the other animals, some nearly the same, while others are present only by analogy. (*History of Animals*, VIII, 588a17–b3)²¹

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Again in *History of Animals* IX 1 Aristotle says:

These latter animals appear to have a certain natural capacity corresponding to each affection of the soul—to practical wisdom and guilelessness, courage and cowardice, gentleness and harsh temperament, and to other sorts of character states. Some also have a share in learning and teaching, some from one another and others from humans, namely, those that have the ability to hear, and not merely those that can hear sounds but those that can distinguish the difference between signs. . . . The traces of these character states are more or less visible everywhere, but they are most conspicuous where character is more developed, and most of all in humans. For the nature of humans is most perfect, and consequently the above states of character are most conspicuous in them. (608a12–17, b5–8)²²

Both children and nonhuman animals are said to possess the “traces and seeds” of virtue; however, in the latter case they do not develop into genuine virtue. Why not? To answer this we need to turn to the *Ethics*.²³

In *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13, Aristotle tells us that virtues of character exist in two stages of development: natural virtue and full-fledged virtue. The natural virtues, which are said to be present in children and nonhuman animals from birth, seem to correspond to those natural capacities that *History of Animals* VIII refers to as the “traces and seeds” of virtue. The *Nicomachean Ethics* discussion fills out the *History of Animals* picture by adding that, in the case of humans, the natural virtues develop into full-fledged virtues because humans have practical wisdom:

In all of us each of the states of character are present somehow by nature; for we have just, temperate, courageous, and other such states of character already from birth. But, nevertheless, we are investigating something else, what is good in the proper sense (*to kuriōs agathon*), and the sorts of states that are present in another way. For the natural states of character are present even in children and beasts, but without reason they appear to be harmful. But this much seems clear, that just as a strong body moving without sight can happen to take a strong fall because of the lack of sight, so too here. If, however, a person acquires intelligence, it makes a difference to his actions; for the disposition that is like virtue [sc. natural virtue] will at that point be virtue proper. So, just as there are two species of belief, cleverness and practical wisdom, so there are two species of virtue in our character, natural virtue and virtue proper, and virtue proper does not arise without practical wisdom. (1144b3–17)

According to Aristotle’s picture, then, some animals have from birth a natural disposition toward justice, temperance, courage, and so forth. He is clear that these dispositions develop into full virtue only in

human beings, however, because only human beings have practical wisdom, which is necessary for the perfection of virtue proper.²⁴

Start reading again here ↓

ANIMAL LOCOMOTION AND VOLUNTARY ACTION

The final capacity of the animal soul to discuss is that of locomotion. Aristotle treats the ability to move from place to place as an essential part of the animal soul: “The soul of animals is defined by two capacities: the capacity for judgment, which is the work of thought and sense-perception; and the capacity for locomotion” (*On the Soul*, III 9, 432a15–17). The basic psychological causes of animal motion are the same for human and nonhuman animals. The object of desire is either directly perceived by the animal or else represented to it as a thought or mental image (*phantasma*).²⁵ The perception, thought, or image of the object then triggers the faculty of desire, which in turn causes the animal to move. Aristotle develops this model of animal motion in *On the Soul*, III 9–11 and *Movement of Animals*, 6–7.

It is clear that these two factors, desire and thought, are responsible for producing motion, if, that is, one posits *phantasia* as a kind of thinking process. For men often follow the appearances (*phantasiai*) contrary to knowledge, and in nonhuman animals there is neither thinking (*noēsis*) nor calculation (*logismos*), but only *phantasia*. Both of these, then, thought and desire, have the capacity to effect movement. [In the case of humans] the thought in question is the practical mind, which calculates for the sake of something. . . . And every desire is for the sake of something; for the thing at which desire aims is the starting-point of the practical mind, while the last step [in deliberation] is a starting-point of action. So these two, desire and practical thinking, appear quite reasonably to be the things responsible for initiating movement. For the object of desire effects motion, and on account of this thought moves the agent because the object of desire is the starting-point of this. But *phantasia*, too, when it causes motion,

does not effect motion without desire. That which moves, then, is a single capacity, namely, desire. (*On the Soul*, III 10, 433a10–21)

We see that the things that move the animal are thought, *phantasia*, decision, wish, and appetite. All of these are reducible to thought or desire. For both *phantasia* and sense-perception cover the same ground as mind, since they are all faculties of judgment (though differing according to distinctions stated elsewhere).²⁶ And wish, spirit, and appetite are all forms of desire, while decision is something common to intellect and desire (*Movement of Animals*, 6, 700b16–25).²⁷

When a lion encounters a gazelle, perception directly triggers the appetite, which moves the animal toward the object. No thought processes intervene. While humans may also act immediately on perception or appearance, thought can also trigger movement. In these cases the object of desire is first set up in the mind as a goal to be achieved, which forms the starting point of deliberation. The practical mind then calculates the best means of acquiring that object. The conclusion of this process is a decision—a rational desire—which then moves the agent. In both cases the object of desire moves the animal as a final cause, while desire (which is “primed” by sense-perception, thought, or *phantasia*) moves it as an efficient cause.

Despite the fact that Aristotle compares the motion of animals to automatons (*Movement of Animals*, 7), which may give the impression that he thinks of them as mere machines in the Cartesian sense,²⁸ he is explicit that nonhuman animals are capable of acting voluntarily (*Movement of Animals*, 11, 703b2–4; *Nicomachean Ethics*, III 2, 1111a25–26, b6–9). This makes them responsible for their movements in a more robust sense than inanimate objects. While the fire may be causally responsible for the blaze, it does not do so voluntarily. By contrast, when a tiger kills a chimpanzee Aristotle thinks there is a real sense in which her actions are voluntary.

Now, on Aristotle’s account, in order for an action to be considered voluntary it must satisfy two conditions: (i) the origin (*archē*)

of the action must be “internal” to the agent,²⁹ and (ii) the agent must know (*eidoti*) the particulars surrounding the action (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III 1, 1111a3–21). Aristotle’s account of animal motion helps explain why he thinks the behavior of nonhuman animals satisfies these conditions. Consider our tiger again. There is a sense in which she knows the particulars of the situation insofar as Aristotle treats sense-perception and *phantasia* as a kind of knowledge (432a15–17, 433a10–13; cf. *On Generation of Animals*, I 23, 731a34): she perceives (via the common sense: *On the Soul*, III 1–2) that she herself is a tiger; she correctly represents (via *phantasia*) the animal she is stalking as food rather than, say, her cub; and she grasps (via memory and experience) that biting its throat will kill it (cf. 1111a3–20). So there is a sense in which she knows what she is doing when she acts. Second, the causes of her movements are various internal mental states—her perception (or *phantasia*) of the chimp and the desire it triggered—which satisfies the first condition: the origin of her action was “internal” to her.³⁰

While Aristotle is explicit that nonhuman animals are capable of voluntary movements, their behavior does not count as “action” (*praxis*) in the robust sense. An action, in this sense, is a voluntary behavior that expresses the agent’s decision to pursue a certain end, and decision, Aristotle says, “is not shared by things that lack reason” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III 2, 1111b12–13). As we have seen, a decision is a rational desire formed on the basis of deliberation. Since nonhuman animals lack reason, they do not have the ability to engage in the kind of means-end reasoning process that issues in a decision.³¹ Therefore they cannot be said to act. We attribute *praxis* to adult humans alone: “Humans, when they reach a certain age, have both [sc. reason and desire], to which we assign the ability to act. For we do not use this term of children or beasts but only of the human being who acts through calculation” (*Eudemian Ethics*, 122.4a27–30). For this reason Aristotle denies that nonhuman animals can be happy (in his technical sense). While horses and dogs may be able to achieve some

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kind of well-being that is proper to their species, this well-being does not raise them to the level of true happiness.

Aristotle, we have seen, accepts that the dog who bites a child does so voluntarily, even if its conduct does not count as action in the full sense. But does he think the dog is morally responsible for its behavior such that its conduct warrants blame? There are two ways to interpret Aristotle on this question. On one reading, Aristotle has a rather thin concept of moral responsibility that equates it with voluntary conduct.³² On this reading an agent is morally responsible for doing X just in case X was done voluntarily. Aristotle does give some indication that voluntariness is necessary and sufficient for praise and blame, and therefore for moral responsibility. For example, in *Nicomachean Ethics* III, he says that praise and blame are bestowed only on voluntary behavior, while involuntary behavior is excused or pitied (1109b30–35; cf. 1102a1–32). Again in *Nicomachean Ethics* V, he says that what makes an action right or wrong is determined by its voluntariness or involuntariness: “for when it is voluntary it is blamed and is, at the same time, an unjust action” (1135a19–21). On the thin version of the concept, then, nonhuman animals can be held morally responsible for their conduct, and thus merit praise or blame, to the extent that they are in control of their behavior.

Others argue that Aristotle has a more robust concept of moral responsibility that excludes the behavior of nonhuman animals. Alexander, for example, argues that moral responsibility requires the conduct in question to be “up to” the agent and claims that this applies only to rational agents. Specifically he thinks this requires that the agent have the power to deliberate between alternatives³³ and decide whether or not to perform the action:

For activities that are “up to” the agent are only found among those things that come to be in accordance with a rational (*logikēn*) impulse. And rational impulse only occurs in things capable of deliberation and decision, that is, in the impulse of human beings when it comes to

be as a result of those things. For the activities of other creatures that are done in accordance with impulse are not like this because with them it is no longer the case that they have the power of also not doing the activity that is according to impulse. (*On Fate*, 33, 205, 16–206, 5)

More recently Susan Meyer has argued that the Aristotelian concept of moral responsibility is even richer than this. On her reading, Aristotle holds that the only agents who merit praise or blame, and are thus morally responsible for what they do, are those whose features properly subject them to the demands, expectations, and evaluations of morality.³⁴ One of these is that the agent be capable of voluntary action. But not all voluntary agents are morally responsible for their voluntary actions. Those actions must also flow from a virtuous or vicious character: “Briefly put, Aristotle thinks we are morally responsible for all and only those actions of which our moral character is the cause.”³⁵ Since, as we have seen, nonhuman animals are incapable of developing virtues and vices (even if they possess the “traces and seeds” of them), they are not properly subject to the demands, expectations, and evaluations of morality.

Read this last section ↓

THEOPHRASTUS ON THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

Aristotle does not have a lot to say about our moral responsibilities toward nonhuman animals, but he does make at least two passing remarks that are of some relevance to the topic. First, he denies that there can be either friendship or justice between humans and nonhuman animals because we share nothing in common with them (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII 11, 1161a31–b3). Second, and more importantly, he argues on teleological grounds that we are justified in hunting animals and otherwise using them as we see fit, whether for food, for clothing, or as tools:

In a like manner we may infer that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of

This passage, carried over from the previous page is from Aristotle's *Politics* I. Please try to understand the social structure laid out based on the "teleology" meaning the study of how one thing is a means to another end, i.e. "for the sake of . . ."

humans, the domesticated for their use and food, and the wild ones, if not all of them, then at least the majority of them, for their food and clothing and various tools. Now if nature makes nothing incomplete or in vain, the inference must be that all animals exist for the sake of humans. So, from one perspective, the art of war is a natural art of acquisition, for the art of acquisition includes hunting, which we ought to practice against wild animals, and against men who, though intended by nature to be governed, will not submit to rule; for war of such a kind is naturally just. (*Politics* I 8, 1256b15–25)

Writing in the context of the ethics of animal sacrifice, Aristotle's associate Theophrastus argues against this position on a variety of grounds.³⁶ For example, he claims that sacrificing animals is unjust and impious because it causes them harm insofar as it deprives them of life (and presumably we have a moral obligation not to harm other living things). Moreover, if someone should object (along the lines of *Politics* I 8) that the gods gave us animals for the sake of our personal use, Theophrastus argues that it is still wrong because it is impious to harm the property of another (the gods):

For nothing ought to be so noxious to all things as sacrifice. But if someone should object that the gods gave animals to us for our use, no less than the fruits of the earth, it does not follow that they are, therefore, to be sacrificed. Because in so doing they are harmed inasmuch as it deprives them of life. For sacrifice . . . is something pious. But no one acts piously who extracts a benefit from things that are the property of another, whether he takes fruits or plants from one who is unwilling to be deprived of them. For how can this be pious when those from whom they are taken are harmed? (Theophrastus ap. Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, 2.12.13 ff.)³⁷

By contrast, Theophrastus argues that when we eat fruit we do not thereby deprive the plant of life. For we typically do not kill plants by

taking their fruit. Moreover when we sacrifice animals or use them for food the animals are unwilling participants in the act (and presumably we have a moral obligation not to do something to another living thing against its will).³⁸ But, again, when we take fruit it is not given unwillingly, since the plant would have dropped it anyway.³⁹

Finally, Theophrastus argues that, pace Aristotle, there is something common between humans and nonhuman animals and so there can and ought to be justice between us. This is perhaps the most important argument. Theophrastus holds that humans are closely akin to and have an affinity with nonhuman animals in two respects. First, we share our proximate matter in common insofar as our bodies are composed of the same basic tissues (flesh, bone, sinew, etc.). Second, and more important, humans and animals share several soul functions in common, including reasoning and calculation:

The principles of the bodies of all animals are naturally the same. I do not mean the first elements of their bodies [sc. earth, air, fire, water], since plants also consist of these; rather, I mean the seed, flesh, and class of connate humors that is inherent in animals. But animals [including humans] are much more allied to each other through naturally possessing souls that are not different from each other, I mean in appetite and anger, and besides these, in reasonings, and, above all, in the senses. But just as with their bodies, so too with respect to their souls, some animals have them more, but others less perfect, yet all of them have naturally the same principles.⁴⁰ And this is evident from the affinity of their passions. If, however, what we have said is true, that the genesis of the character of animals is of this sort, then the whole race of them exhibits intelligence, but they differ both in terms of their training and in the blend of their primary elements. And if this be admitted, the genus of other animals has an affinity and is allied to us. . . . Hence, since animals are allied to us, if it should appear, according to Pythagoras, that they are allotted the same soul that we are, he may justly be considered as impious

How does Theophrastus argue against Aristotle's position in the *Politics*?

who does not abstain from acting unjustly towards his kindred.
 (Theophrastus ap. Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, 3.25)

Stop here; This concludes this reading.

Sorabji takes the key claim here to be that animals enjoy a natural kinship with us because they can engage in reasoning and so should be afforded the same ethical considerations as all rational beings.⁴¹

But, as we have seen, Aristotle is also willing to talk about animal intelligence without implying that animals have reason. When the spider constructs her web or the sparrow builds his nest, Aristotle freely speaks of them as exercising practical wisdom, cleverness, and sagacity. Yet he is explicit that their behavior is the effect of “some other natural capacity” that is only the analogue of human reason. They do not possess rationality in the proper sense. There is no reason to suppose that Theophrastus contradicted Aristotle on this front. (There is certainly no textual evidence to suggest that he thinks nonhuman animals also have the rational part of the soul.) Nor does he need to ascribe them rationality for his affinity argument to go through. For among those “common” features that Aristotle recognizes are those that are common by analogy (*Parts of Animals*, 645b27). Thus when Theophrastus says that the whole race of animals are akin to one another because they share reasoning in common, he could still hold, as Aristotle does, that the intelligence of nonhuman animals is only analogous to human reason. This may be a strong enough affinity in his mind to justify extending moral considerations to them without having to afford them full-blown rationality.