
Aesop, Aristotle, and Animals: The Role of Fables in Human Life

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“If someone has considered the study of the other animals to lack value, he ought to think the same thing about himself as well.”

—Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 645a

In Aesop’s fable of the Wolf and Lamb,¹ instead of simply seizing and devouring a lamb that has wandered from the flock, the wolf challenges him with a series of false accusations, looking for a way

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¹ Aesop’s fables are cited standardly with reference to their numbering in the collection of B. E. Perry, *Aesopica* I. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952); this fable is Perry 155. I will use Perry’s reference system in this article. I am using the translations from Laura Gibbs, *Aesop’s Fables* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) except where noted and therefore will also include the number Gibbs assigns to each fable; this fable is Gibbs 130. Another fable, Perry 16 (Gibbs 129), is very similar to this one. The *Augustana* collection, which is the earliest surviving written collection of the fables, dates from the third century A.D. and includes Perry fables 1-231. Zafiroopoulos says that “Scholars generally agree [the *Augustana*] represents the oldest compilation of Greek prose fables that we possess and it is seen as the apex of a long tradition and the most secure testimony of the ideas of Greek fables.” Christos A. Zafiroopoulos, *Ethics in Aesop’s Fables: The Augustana Collection* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 43. Rothwell says, “we know that Aesopic fables were already circulating, quite possibly in book form, by the late fifth century.” Kenneth S. Rothwell Jr., “Aristophanes’ *Wasps* and the Sociopolitics of *Aesop’s Fables*,” *The Classical Journal* 93:4 (1995): 233-254, 238.

to justify making a meal of him. The lamb is able to prove that each of the charges the wolf makes against him is unjustified: he has not, and in fact could not have, insulted the wolf a year earlier, eaten from the wolf's field, or drunk from the wolf's fountain since he is less than a year old and still gets all his nourishment from his mother. But although the lamb successfully proves his innocence, at the end of the fable the wolf devours the lamb anyhow, saying "You are not going to make this wolf go without his dinner, even if you are able to easily refute every one of my charges!" In this fable, then, power, wickedness and malice triumph over weakness, innocence and honesty.

A frequent message of early Greek fables that might makes right and that resistance by the weak is futile.

In the oldest recorded Greek fable, which is found in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, a hawk who has seized a nightingale says to her over her dying song, "Miserable thing, why do you cry out? One far stronger than you now holds you fast, and you must go wherever I take you, songstress as you are. And if I please I will make my meal of you, or let you go." Here the lesson, made explicit by Hesiod in the text that immediately follows, is that "He is a fool who tries to withstand the stronger, for he does not get the mastery and suffers pain besides his shame."² In other words, might makes right, the weak suffer at the whim of the stronger, and rebellion by the weak is futile and only brings more pain and the potential for destruction. Hesiod goes on to explicitly parallel this fable to his own situation, with himself in the role of the singing nightingale, and addresses the fable to "princes who themselves understand."³

Another fable tells of a growing dispute between a water snake and a viper, which they agree to resolve through battle. The frogs, hating the water snake who preys on them, come to the viper and offer to be his allies in the battle, and the viper accepts their offer. But once the battle begins, all the frogs are able to do on the viper's behalf is sit around watching the fight and croaking. In the end the viper defeats the water snake anyway, but is angry with the frogs for singing rather than offering aid. The frogs reply, "But you should have known that we had nothing to offer you except the sound of our voices!"⁴ Here, in addition to the lesson that

² The fable is in Hesiod *Works and Days* 202-211. Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Online: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/works.htm>. Accessed March 11, 2007. On this fable, see M. T. W. Arnheim, "The World of the Fable," *Studies in Antiquity* 1 (1980): 1-11, 3.

³ Perry 4 (Gibbs 131). See also Arnheim, 3; Zafiroopoulos, 133.

⁴ Perry 90 (Gibbs 54).

those with greater strength prevail, we learn that it is important to choose allies who are strong and that it is foolish to rely on those who have nothing to offer but their voices.

There are many similar fables in the *Augustana* collection,⁵ and collectively they seem to convey clearly the lesson that the strong rule and the weak must obey or suffer, and that ultimately it is strength that matters more than anything else.⁶ The weak risk defiance or opposition at their own peril, and no matter how well they might argue or how beautifully they might sing, their lack of power means that they ultimately have very little chance of successfully resisting a stronger adversary—and in the fables strength almost always means physical power.

The three fables described above, when taken together, clearly deliver a political message, and one that is applicable in at least two contexts when applied to human affairs.⁷ When put into the context of relations among individual human beings within a city, the message is that those who lack power must obey and try not to anger those who have it if they are to avoid bringing about their own destruction. And when it is put into the context of relationships between cities, it represents what is still a familiar view of international relations. One can easily imagine the Athenian ambassador to the Melians relating these fables to them before drawing his famous conclusion that the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must—and the Melians reflecting on these

Fables conveyed a political message both within and between cities.

⁵ See footnote 2 above.

⁶ Other themes that seem to emerge in the fables include the importance of knowing one's nature, place, and limitations; the importance of recognizing and submitting to the stronger; and the importance of sticking with one's group as a means of safety. Some fables are exceptions to these themes, but not many. These themes may well be surprising to today's reader, since the fables in the form in which they are commonly seen today have been exposed to centuries of Christian influence which worked to remove the original lessons and replace them with moral lessons that are consonant with Christian ethics and suitable for children, who are the primary intended audience for the fables today. Much of this influence has been through the addition of promythiums and epimythiums, which will be ignored in this article. On promythiums and epimythiums, see H. J. Blackham, *The Fable as Literature* (London: Athlone Press), 9-10. On the larger point, see Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 1. Also see Zafiroopoulos, Arnheim, and Rothwell.

⁷ For example, the message recalls the beginning of Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates is told that his powers of persuasion will have no effect on the strength of those wishing to prevent him from returning to Athens.

fables as they awaited their fate.⁸

According to the prevailing view of those who have commented on the fables, the messages conveyed are clear and straightforward. The fables are intended to be cautionary tales, warning of the dangers of being the weaker party, and providing advice on how to behave if one is in a position of weakness.⁹ The hierarchy and power relations in the fables, it is said, are analogous to those in the human world as it was in Greece at the time. The commentators who hold this view seem to determine the fables' audience and message by asking the question, "For whom would these fables represent an accurate portrayal of life, one in which the strong dominate and the weak are helpless to resist or to change their situation?" In answering this question, they conclude that the fables were meant to be, and were, heard and told primarily by the lower classes and slaves.¹⁰

A wide-spread view is that fables perpetuated the prevailing hierarchy.

It is certainly true that for slaves and those in the Greek lower classes an attitude of resigned helplessness might well have been the best possible strategy for staying out of trouble, and the fables would have provided valuable lessons for survival. It has even been suggested that the fables were largely written by someone who was part of the aristocratic class for the purpose of indoctrinating these values among the lower classes,¹¹ and it is obvious why this would have been a good strategy for those on top; resigned helplessness on the part of the vast underclasses was exactly the kind of attitude that would have helped the upper classes to maintain their power. But even if the fables were not written for the purpose of perpetuating the prevailing hierarchy, a world where a fixed class of the powerful permanently dominates

⁸ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.85-113.

⁹ For example, Blackham, 8; Rothwell, 235; Morten Nøjgaard, "The Moralisation of the Fable: From Aesop to Romulus," in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), 31. The main text for those interested in the ethical teachings of the fables is Zafiroopoulos.

¹⁰ Rothwell, 233-238. See also Nicholas D. Smith, "Aristotle's Theory of Natural Slavery," in David Key and Fred D. Miller, Jr., eds., *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Keith Bradley, "Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction," *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 110-125; Joan Hildreth Owen, *The Choice of Hercules and the Eighteenth Century Fabulists* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1969), 57-58. This view is reinforced by the tradition found in the pseudo-biographical *Life of Aesop* and elsewhere, which says that Aesop himself was a slave for much of his life. *Life of Aesop*, in Lloyd Daly, *Aesop Without Morals* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961).

¹¹ Zafiroopoulos, 31.

a fixed class of the powerless would have represented the reality of almost all Greek cities. Even though the fables themselves have no context—that is, they take place at no particular time or place—it is generally argued that they would have been told, heard, and understood in the context of everyday life. For the aristocrats the fables would reinforce the rightness and naturalness of their power and actions and would allow them proudly to compare themselves to lions and other powerful predators able to impose their will on others with impunity.¹² The slaves and lower classes would see their lives accurately depicted by the weaker animals and find useful cautionary tales that could help them stay out of trouble. Seen from this perspective, the purpose of the fables and their political message are very clear and simple.

In this article, however, I will argue that there is more to the political content of the fables than the message that appears on the surface.¹³ To read the fables in the way I have described above is to read them as though human beings are only animals, and only behave in the way that animals do; clearly, this is not the case. Certainly human beings *are* animals and certainly there are similarities between animal behavior and human behavior; if there were not, the genre of the animal fable would not exist. But another message could have been found in the democratic context of ancient Athens, which we can see if we read the fables with an eye not only to how animals and people are similar but also to how they are different, as those similarities and differences would have been seen by the Athenians.¹⁴ Human beings, because of their unique capability of reason, have the opportunity to live differently than animals. In fact, rather than providing lessons on how to survive in a brutal, predatory world, the fables can point towards a means for escaping that world. They can actually point towards democracy, equality, and justice rather than hierarchy, power, and exploitation.¹⁵

Fables can point toward democracy and justice when differences between humans and animals are considered.

¹² Homer frequently compares heroes to lions in the *Iliad*, a connection which the aristocrats would not have been likely to miss.

¹³ On the fables having a multiplicity of messages, see Zafiroopoulos, 28-31.

¹⁴ We should also think about how those differences are seen today, but this is not a subject to be addressed here.

¹⁵ For an example of how the fables were used in a political context in twelfth century Europe, see R. Howard Bloch, "The Wolf in the Dog: Animal Fables and State Formation," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15:1 (2004): 69-83. For a discussion of how this worked in the eighteenth century, see Joan Hildreth Owen, *The Choice of Hercules and the Eighteenth Century Fabulists*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, June 1969.

In order to make this argument, I must show that the fables had an audience in democratic Athens that was willing and able to interpret them this way, and I also must show that this audience would have thought about the relationship between the animal world and the human world in the way I have suggested. The first point is a relatively straightforward historical one: it is clear that the fables were used in settings where the adult male citizens of Athens would have heard them, and that the fables were seen as a legitimate part of democratic political, philosophical, and artistic discourse. Making the second point is more complicated. It is difficult to know exactly how the citizens of Athens thought about animals and the degree to which humans were considered to be a part of the natural world. Animals were much more a part of daily life for Athenians than they are for most people in the Western world today and so they were undoubtedly more familiar with the behavior and character of the animals found in the fables than most modern observers would be.¹⁶ Animals were encountered in myths, sacrifice, votive scenes, tomb monuments, and as companions, objects of the chase, and pets.¹⁷ They were used for transport, food, dress, adornment, agriculture, hunting, religion, pleasure, scientific interest, and public entertainment.¹⁸ And in addition to the tame animals that were so important to their lives, Athenians also had much more direct experience with wild environments than most Westerners do today and accordingly more direct knowledge of wild and dangerous animals—wolves and snakes, for example.

I need to show how the Athenians thought about the similarities and differences between humans and animals in order to make the case that the fables could have been seen as conveying a democratic message in addition to the more familiar one. Rather

¹⁶ Nicholas Howe, "Fabling Beasts: Traces in Memory," in Arien Mack, ed., *Humans and Other Animals* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 234-235 and 244-245. The argument could be made that, while the fables originally drew on what their audience already knew firsthand about animals' characteristics and behavior, nowadays fables are an important source of knowledge about those topics for people who lack that firsthand knowledge.

¹⁷ Gisela M. A. Richter, *Animals in Greek Sculpture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), ix.

¹⁸ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973). The Romans and Greeks were similar enough in their uses of animals that this list is applicable here. See also Rod Preece, *Animals and Nature: Cultural Myths, Cultural Realities* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 61.

than trying to piece together the Athenian view of animals from a variety of references, I will instead turn to Aristotle as a guide to Athenian views about how humans and animals are alike and unlike. While it is important that we not assume that Aristotle is, or represents the views of, the “typical” Athenian, there is no reason to believe that his views on animals were substantially different, although they were undoubtedly more carefully thought out. And Aristotle’s ideas would have been part of the general intellectual atmosphere for the part of the fables’ audience that interests me, and this increases the likelihood that his views and theirs were very similar if not identical. Therefore, I will examine Aristotle’s views about animals with a special emphasis on what Aristotle has to say about the specific characteristics human beings share with animals and those that are unique to humans to suggest how Athenians might have thought about these topics. I will conclude by arguing that their understanding of humans and animals makes it possible to find a democratic message in the fables.

The audience for the fables

It is said that Demades, the Athenian orator, was trying to address the assembly but could not get the citizens’ attention. He offered to tell them a fable of Aesop’s, and when they accepted and settled down to listen, he said, “‘The goddess Demeter, a swallow, and an eel were walking together down the road. When they reached a river, the swallow flew up in the air and the eel jumped in the water.’ Demades then fell silent. The audience asked, ‘And what about the goddess Demeter?’ ‘As for Demeter,’ Demades replied, ‘she is angry at all of you for preferring Aesop’s fables to politics!’”¹⁹

This story, and the similar story recorded about the orator Demosthenes’ telling of a fable to rebuke the Athenians for their lack of seriousness about political matters,²⁰ show that the Athenians of Aristotle’s time were not surprised at, or insulted by, the use of fables by orators at meetings of the assembly. While the use of fables was not likely to have been routine, it was also apparently not seen as out of place or as beneath the dignity of Athens’ political dis-

Fables were part of Athenian political discourse.

¹⁹ Perry 63 (Gibbs 1). Demades is a contemporary of Aristotle.

²⁰ Perry 460 (Gibbs 2), which is not in the *Augustana* but comes from pseudo-Plutarch, *Lives of the Ten Orators*. Demosthenes is also a contemporary of Aristotle.

course.²¹ The fact that Demades and Demosthenes apparently do not believe that fables are part of the highest or most serious level of political discourse does not detract from my argument; my point is not that fables represent the peak of the orator's art or are the best way to convey complex political ideas, but that the citizens of Athens believed that they were, when properly used, a legitimate part of political discourse and appropriate for the assembly.

Aristotle
endorsed use
of fables in
politics.

Aristotle held the same view, arguing in the *Rhetoric* that telling fables can be an effective method of arguing by example and is a useful rhetorical strategy in politics. Aristotle goes on to relate the fable of the Stag, the Horse and the Man as an instance of how to use a fable to argue by example, and he explains how Stesichorus used this fable as a way to warn the people of Himera not to give Phalaris, who they had made military dictator, a bodyguard, lest he enslave them all.²² His second illustration of the utility of fables in political settings is the fable of the Fox and the Fleas, which Aristotle puts into the mouth of Aesop himself, reporting him as telling this story as part of his defense of a client of his, a popular leader among the people of Samos who was thought to be exploiting the Samians.²³ Aristotle's support of the use of fables in political speechmaking again shows that such uses would have been expected and looked on favorably by the audience if they were properly used. In addition to recommending the use of fables by rhetoricians, Aristotle himself used them in a number of his writings. In the *Politics*, for example, he writes that if there were a truly exceptional group of individuals in the city they would themselves be law, and that if someone attempted to legislate for them "[t]hey would perhaps say what Antisthenes says the lions say when the

²¹ It has been suggested that collections of the fables such as the *Augustana* would have been compiled at least in part in order for orators to study them and refer back to them in creating their speeches. See Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable: An Introduction*, translated by Christine Jackson-Holzberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 24-25; Gert-Jan Van Dijk, *Aimoi, Logoi, Mythoi: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 38 ff.

²² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, translated and edited by Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1932) 1393b. This fable is Perry 269 (Gibbs 47); it is not in the *Augustana*. Note that it shows that fables were accepted as part of political discourse in a city that was not Athens.

²³ *Rhetoric* 1393b-1394a. This fable is Perry 427 (Gibbs 29), also not in the *Augustana*. According to the *Life of Aesop*, which presents itself as a biography of the fabulist, Aesop spent much of his life in Samos. Again, this would indicate a widespread acceptance of fables as part of political discourse in Greece and not just Athens.

hares are making their harangue and claiming that everyone merits equality."²⁴ He does not specify what the lions actually said,²⁵ and this shows that at least this fable was so well known that he did not need to quote this line explicitly but trusted his audience to know it well enough that retelling was unnecessary. Fables also appear in many of Aristotle's other writings, and his wide use of fables reveals their validity as a method of illustration and instruction in a range of contexts.²⁶

Fables are also used or referred to in several of Plato's dialogues. Plato tells us in the *Phaedo* that Socrates, while in prison waiting to die, spent time turning some of Aesop's fables into verse, and in that same dialogue Socrates creates the outline of a fable of his own, describing how Zeus, having failed to stop Pleasure and Pain from quarrelling, fastens their heads together, so that, whenever a man encounters one, he soon encounters the other as well.²⁷ Socrates also tells or alludes to fables in several other dialogues including the *Republic*.²⁸ This is not the place for a full discussion of their purpose and meaning in Plato's work, individually or collectively. All I am claiming here is that Plato accepted fables as having a useful role to play in philosophy and did not consider them out of place in philosophical discussions if they are properly used. Plato's use of fables also supports the idea that they are respectable. Socrates often claims that he is careful to do nothing against virtue, and therefore it seems clear that, if the fables or the act of telling them were shameful, he would not have referred to them or used them as material for verse.²⁹

Plato believed fables could convey philosophical meaning.

Aristophanes, the comic poet, more than once brings Aesop's fables into his plays.³⁰ Probably the best known example of this usage is in the *Birds*, when the character Pisthetaerus explains to the

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 1284a15.

²⁵ Lord says that it is "Where are your claws and teeth?" Lord 255 n37.

²⁶ For a full list of Aristotle's uses of fables, see van Dijk, 188. For a detailed discussion of Aristotle's use of a fable in the *Meteorologica*, see Doron Narkiss, "Beginning Again: On Aristotle's Use of a Fable in the *Meteorologica*," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 14 (1995): 42-51.

²⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, translated by David Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 60b. See the discussion of the function of this fable in the *Phaedo* in van Dijk, 324-326.

²⁸ See the discussion in van Dijk, 327-336.

²⁹ Zafiroopoulos, 19.

³⁰ See Rothwell.

larks of the chorus that their race is even older than Zeus and the Earth, and provides as evidence the fable of Aesop's in which the lark must bury his father in his own head because the earth does not yet exist and there is nowhere else to bury him.³¹ Later in the play Aesop is referenced again, when Pisthetaerus mentions the fable of the fox and eagle.³² Fables also play a significant part in Aristophanes' play *Wasps*, and one of the main characters tells several fables to comic effect.³³ These references to and uses of fables would only have had their desired dramatic and comedic effect if his audience was familiar with fables and if the use of fables was widespread among the Athenian citizens.

Rather than giving additional examples of the uses of fables by Greek orators, philosophers and poets,³⁴ I will simply conclude by saying that the examples I have given show that Athenian citizens were familiar with the fables and took them seriously. The fables would have been an important part of the shared oral culture of Athens, and would have been remembered from childhood and shared among adults. If they were recorded in written form at this time, which they may have been, it would be further evidence that they were part of the citizens' lives. Either way, orators like Demades and Demosthenes, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and poets like Aristophanes found uses for fables in their work.³⁵ They could not have done this without being able to assume that their audiences would know and understand these fables and that they would be able to think about them in a variety of contexts.³⁶ This means that the audiences did not merely take them at face value but could and did think about them in creative and nuanced ways. It also seems clear that the Athenians did not find hearing fables in political or dramatic settings or reading them in philosophical settings to be beneath them and that fables would have

³¹ Aristophanes, *Birds* 472-475. Translated by Ian Johnston. Online: <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/aristophanes/birds.htm#text48>. Accessed September 10, 2007.

³² Aristophanes, *Birds* 652-653.

³³ Rothwell.

³⁴ Roman authors and orators used the fables as well. For a sizable collection of the ways in which fables and allusions to fables were used by these authors and others, see van Dijk; Holzberg, 12.

³⁵ This is not to say that the slaves and lower classes would not have known and made use of fables, just that they were not the only ones who would have done so and that different audiences could find different meanings in the fables.

³⁶ Rothwell says, "Fables were well known in classical Athens." Rothwell, 238.

provided opportunities for reflection in democratic Athens.³⁷ In order to examine what form that reflection might have taken we need to know how the Athenians understood animals, humans, and the similarities and differences between them. In order to do that we must turn to Aristotle.

It is obviously beyond the scope of this article to discuss everything Aristotle has to say about humans and animals in his biological and political writings.³⁸ Fortunately for me, it is also unnecessary. Instead, I will focus on two of his central ideas: first, that in order to understand human beings we must understand their place in the animal world; and, second, that human beings have particular characteristics and abilities which, if properly used, enable them to rise above the other animals.³⁹ In the world of the fables, animals are limited creatures compared to human beings, and these limitations are the same ones animals have in the real world as that world is described by Aristotle. As a result of these limitations, their world is much more harsh and violent than the human world is, or at least more harsh and violent than the human world can be if human beings act as they should and use their abilities as their nature makes possible.

Rod Preece says that, "For Aristotle, the route to an understanding of the perennial questions of social and political philosophy lay in an understanding of human nature that could only be attained in the context of animal nature. It was thus partly through a contrast of humans with other species that we could approach an understanding of polity and society, the state and community, sovereignty and spontaneity, authority and freedom, family and individual."⁴⁰ But it is not only contrasts that matter. In his bio-

³⁷ Not necessarily instead of these uses, but in addition to them. See Blackham, 5.

³⁸ This field is not only vast, but full of conflict and disagreement. Among other works, see Cary Nederman, "The Puzzle of the Political Animal," *The Review of Politics* 56:2 (Spring 1994): 283-304; Larry Arnhart, "The Darwinian Biology of Aristotle's Political Animals," *American Journal of Political Science* 38:2 (May 1994): 464-485; Wolfgang Kullman, "Man As A Political Animal," in David Keyt and Fred D. Miller, Jr., eds., *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

³⁹ Kullman, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 107.

⁴⁰ Rod Preece, *Animals and Nature: Cultural Myths, Cultural Realities* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 65. Preece elsewhere blames Aristotle for positing that it is the possession of reason that differentiates human beings from animals, that moral agency depends on the possession of reason, and that only moral agents can be victims of injustice. See also Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), chapter three.

Traits humans share with other animals make fables relevant.

logical writings, Aristotle explains that some human characteristics are shared with other animals and that these characteristics must be understood as animal characteristics.⁴¹ He also describes how human beings ultimately differ from other animals, specifically by their possession of reason. This difference inevitably points humans towards politics—an activity in which animals cannot engage—and Aristotle’s explanation in his political writings of why human beings are uniquely suited to, and uniquely in need of, political life. Although their ability to use reason lifts human beings above other animals if properly used, we need to understand humans in the same way we understand other animals, from a biological perspective, in order to learn the moral and political lessons that are found in the *Politics* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I will begin with the relevant characteristics that humans share with animals. These shared characteristics are what allow us to see ourselves in the fables, recognizing the traits and actions on display there as human, not merely animal, characteristics.

There are four key connections between humans and the rest of the animal world in Aristotle’s biological writings that are relevant to thinking about how Aesop’s fables would have been perceived by the Athenians of his time. First, Aristotle claims that it is not correct from a biological point of view to divide animals into the categories of “tame” and “wild” as some before him have done: “For in a manner of speaking everything that is tame is also wild, e.g. human beings, horses, cattle”⁴² For each of these kinds of animal, some members are tame while others are wild and even those that are tame do not start out that way. Unless they are tamed by human beings, all animals remain in their wild condition—and

⁴¹ The biological writings include *Parts of Animals* (PA), *Generation of Animals* (GA), *History of Animals* (HA), *Movement of Animals* (MA), the *Parva Naturalia* (PN), and the *De Anima* (DA). For this article, the following translations have been used: *Parts of Animals*, translated by James G. Lennox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); *Generation of Animals*, translated by A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); *History of Animals*, Books I-III, translated by A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); *History of Animals*, Books IV-VI, translated by A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); *History of Animals*, Books VII-X, edited and translated by D. M. Balme (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); *Movement of Animals*, translated by E. S. Forster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961); *Parva Naturalia*, translated by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); and *De Anima*, translated by R. D. Hicks (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991).

⁴² PA 643b4. See also HA 488a.

even human beings are born wild. In a surprisingly little noticed passage in the *History of Animals*, Aristotle says that “in children, though one can see as it were traces and seeds of the dispositions that they will have later, yet their soul at this period has practically no difference from that of wild animals.”⁴³ Of course it is education that will shape those beginning dispositions and provide the character and characteristics that children will have later in life, and Aristotle believes that it is the job of politics and the city through laws and training to provide that education.⁴⁴

Humans, like other animals, are born wild.

Kullman calls attention to Aristotle’s observation that human beings are not only the only animals that live in cities but are also the only animals that live in households.⁴⁵ The household and the city are the two uniquely human institutions which work to tame the wild animals that are children, and Aristotle makes clear in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that this taming process must start with children at a very young age: “it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes a considerable difference, or, rather, all the difference.”⁴⁶ Elsewhere he argues that it is better for both animals and humans to be tame than wild: “The same holds with respect to man and the other animals: tame animals have a better nature than wild ones, and it is better for all of them to be ruled by man, since in this way their preservation is ensured.”⁴⁷ This observation is of course connected to Aristotle’s views on natural slavery, a topic about which there is considerable debate and one which is outside of the scope of this article. I simply want to note that even those human beings who Aristotle believes are not slaves by nature require taming by the household and by the city’s justice and laws. Even the adult male citizens in the best regime, according to Aristotle, are ruled by other men, taking turns ruling and being ruled,⁴⁸ and each of them individually should be ruled by the highest part of man, which is reason.⁴⁹ Yet for human beings to be capable of reasoning,

⁴³ HA 588a-588b. See also *Politics* 1260a10, where Aristotle says that in children the deliberative element is incomplete.

⁴⁴ *Politics* Book VIII.

⁴⁵ Kullman, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 103.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962) 1103b22.

⁴⁷ *Politics* 1254b9.

⁴⁸ *Politics* III.4.

⁴⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7.

Humans can tame their offspring with help of well-constituted institutions.

their ability to reason must be developed and trained by other human beings. So one similarity between animals and humans is that they are all born wild and will remain so unless they are tamed; and taming animals—human beings more than any of the others—requires extensive human intervention and is dependent on human skill. The difference between humans and animals here is that animals cannot tame their offspring and take them out of the wild state, but human beings can through the institutions of the household and the city if these are well constituted and administered.

Second, Aristotle says that animal species can be divided into those animals that are solitary and those that are gregarious, preferring the company of others of their species to living alone. Human beings are unusual in that they are both gregarious and solitary, presenting a mixed nature.⁵⁰ Among the gregarious animals, human beings are included in the subset of social animals: “The social animals are those which have some one common activity; and this is not true of all the gregarious animals. Examples of social animals are man, bees, wasps, ants, cranes.”⁵¹ What is the one common activity in which all human beings engage? For anyone familiar with the *Politics* it would seem obvious that the answer is politics, but that does not seem to fit here in the context of the biological writings. After all, Aristotle also makes it clear in the *Politics* and the *Ethics* that few human beings engage in politics, and, moreover, that most human beings (women and slaves, for example) cannot.⁵² Concluding that Aristotle is speaking of politics here would also mean that the barbarians who live together but do not live in Greek city-states are not social and do not have a common activity, which is clearly mistaken. It would also mean that we would have to ignore the role and purpose of the household, which is the first human community. It makes more sense here to conclude that the common activity is not the higher activity of living the political life as described in the *Politics* but is instead simply the activity of living—meeting our basic animal needs of food and shelter, as well as our need to live in communities and leave behind copies of ourselves.⁵³ The human activity of living in groups for the purpose of preserving life, in the same way that bees, wasps, and ants do, ex-

⁵⁰ HA 487b.

⁵¹ HA 488a. See also *Politics* 1253a.

⁵² *Politics* 1331b40 ff.

⁵³ *Politics* 1252a25.

ists even if it does not involve or cannot lead to the kind of rational activity which constitutes living well and which requires the city and its institutions. This idea is in keeping with the argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the partnership of citizens is based on utility—that is, citizens are useful to one another for securing the necessities of life as well as political well-being and must remain so if the political partnership is to survive.⁵⁴ It also means that the political partnership and political friendship finds its basis in self-interest and involves using other citizens to achieve one's ends of living, even if one is not interested in living well. This impulse is an important part of our animal natures, but by itself it is not enough to create the human institutions that can bring us above those natures. In order to create these institutions, human beings must use the rational part of their souls to create justice and agreement about the advantageous and the harmful, and the just and unjust, which is what unites people and creates a city as Aristotle says in the *Politics*.⁵⁵

Given the important roles that violence and power play in the fables, we may wonder what Aristotle has to say about the innate tendency to war that exists among human beings as part of their animal nature. In the biological writings, Aristotle addresses the existence of war among animals, and the reasons why animals make war on each other. He acknowledges that, like many other kinds of animals, human beings sometimes go to war with one another. He says in the *History of Animals* that, while some wild animals are at war with other wild animals at all times, some are so only at certain times and under certain circumstances; man is such an animal. Among animals, war is caused by competition for resources: "If their food is scarce, even those of the same breed fight against each other. . . . But if there were no shortage of food, those that are now frightened and grow wild would probably behave tamely both towards humans and in the same way towards each other. This is illustrated by the way animals are looked after in Egypt; for because food is available and they are not in want, even the wildest animals live with each other."⁵⁶ Thus the violence of the animal world is in part a result of their circumstances: with the exception of the fortunate animals living in Egypt, animals live

⁵⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.9.

⁵⁵ *Politics* 1253a14.

⁵⁶ HA 608b.

in a world in which there is not enough food to go around. As I have said above, it is the desire to live, including the desire to have sufficient food and the other necessities of life, that pulls human beings away from their impulse toward solitude (although it does not entirely eliminate it) and towards life in communities.

Therefore, if human beings are going to live without war, they must be able to provide for their material needs. They cannot easily do this in households or villages and so the city comes into being for the purpose of living. If the city is able to do this, the citizens can potentially live together in peace. If the city is not able to do this, peace will not be possible. Again, we see that human beings need the city and its institutions to take them out of the natural situation in which animals live and in which war is inevitable. So humans are similar to other animals in that they will sometimes go to war with each other, but different in that they can change their natural situation to provide conditions in which that is less likely to happen.

The fourth way Aristotle links human beings to the animal world is based on Aristotle's theory of the parts of the soul. In fact, this is the aspect of Aristotle's thought that shows how human beings are rooted not only in the animal world but in the world of all living creatures, for this theory links human beings to plants as well as animals. In *De Anima* Aristotle lists the functions of the soul: nutrition, appetency, sensation, locomotion, and understanding.⁵⁷ Plants and animals both have the nutritive function, which is the function that provides for the organism's growth, maturity and decline; it is what separates living things from non-living things. Animals are distinguished from plants because they have sensation: "But all animals have at least one sense, touch: and where sensation is found, there is pleasure and pain; and, where these are, there also is desire, desire being appetite for what is pleasurable."⁵⁸ The sensations that animals feel lead them to seek what is pleasant, and humans have this impulse as well. Sensation, in its turn, leads to locomotion among animals, as they actively seek to avoid things that are painful and harmful and to gain what is pleasant and helpful. Humans do this in the same way as other animals, and these aspects of the soul cause human beings to act in the same way that they cause other animals to act. Some of the results of this have

⁵⁷ DA 414a. See also PN 436b.

⁵⁸ DA 414b, PA 653b22, PA741a.

been considered above.

But, unlike humans, other animals lack the ability to step back and evaluate the sensations which lead them to desire the things they desire: "Aristotle denies animals reason, reasoning, thought, intellect, belief."⁵⁹ As Nederman says, "Distinctive among all animals, human beings calculate rationally the best means to achieve the ends they desire."⁶⁰ Human beings have a level of reason that gives them opportunities that animals do not have, as Aristotle discusses at length in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. It allows them to redefine their environment and themselves, which animals cannot do, and in doing so they can create a city and citizens that are compatible with principles of equality and justice.⁶¹

Reason enables humans to redefine themselves, making institutions of justice possible.

The reader who is familiar with the format of the fables will undoubtedly have noted that one feature shared by most of them is that, contra Aristotle and real life, the animals appearing in them do talk, and in fact frequently offer reasons why they or their victim has ended up being destroyed (as in the three fables which begin this article). However, while they have the ability to speak, they do not use that ability to pursue justice, as human beings can and should do; nor do they use the ability to speak to construct a political environment. They are essentially communicating the pleasurable and the painful in a more sophisticated way than actual animals are capable of doing. They are not capable of planning, or reflection, or changing their environment in ways that may bring about better outcomes. And as a result they are not capable of participating in justice⁶² or in a city.⁶³

Let us return to the three fables with which we started and re-examine them in light of the differences between human beings and animals that we have seen in Aristotle's work. In the first fable, we see an explicit rejection of the idea that the strong have any obligation to exhibit justice towards the weak. The wolf enacts a parody of justice, inventing charges against the lamb that are obviously false and easily proven to be so. By eating the lamb anyhow, the wolf reveals that strength is the only thing that matters in the world of the fables. It is doubtful that the wolf would ever have

⁵⁹ Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 12.

⁶⁰ Nederman, 289.

⁶¹ Steiner, 13.

⁶² *Politics* 1253a9.

⁶³ *Politics* 1253a27.

*Animals
cannot live
according to
justice.*

done anything else, since justice does not really matter to him; and, since he is an animal, justice cannot matter to him—it is impossible for him to live according to justice. Besides, there is not sufficient food in the world for animals to be peaceful to each other; the need to eat leads the powerful to prey on the less powerful. But because human beings can adopt principles of justice and mechanisms for enacting them, this does not need to be the way that the human world operates. In a well-ordered city, all citizens can find enough to eat and can share resources so as to collectively benefit. Human justice is capable of protecting the weak from the strong and those who are honest from those who are not.

Hesiod explicitly uses the story of the hawk and nightingale to explain his condition “to princes that understand” in order that justice might be done; his current situation is like that of a nightingale in the grip of a hawk who is relying on power to dominate. But while the beauty of the nightingale’s song has no effect on the hawk, the voice of the poet and the power of the message it conveys can and should have an effect in the world of human beings. Human justice would not put decisions about the nightingale’s freedom in the hands (or the talons) of the more powerful hawk. It is acceptable and understandable for hawks to treat nightingales in this way, because the animal world is ordered into hierarchies on the basis of power, but it is not all right for human beings to treat each other in this way because human beings have—or should have—justice, and it is the responsibility of those with power to make sure that justice guides human political relationships.⁶⁴

*For humans,
power entails
more than
mere physical
force.*

Finally, in the fable of the snakes and the frogs, we see that in the natural world all that the weak can offer is the sound of their voices and their voices do not have any impact on the actions of the powerful. But this does not need to be true in the human world, where in a well-organized city the voices of even the least powerful citizens can nevertheless be very powerful when expressed in the political assembly. In the animal world, the frogs can only watch as the powerful snakes battle and will have to accept the consequences; in the human world the people can add their voices to the strength of their leaders and in so doing can make sure that their interests prevail.

If we think about the audience in the democratic Greek city of Athens, we can see that such an audience could understand the

⁶⁴ Steiner, 45.

fables as showing not the value of accepting the inevitability of domination and subordination, or the pleasures to be found in the domination of others, but instead the values of equality and justice. The fables emphasize the hierarchical relationships that are dangerous for the weak while allowing the strong the advantages of power and domination, but it might be that the most prudent approach for someone not wishing to be exploited is to make it as difficult as possible for these kinds of relationships to arise in the first place—that is, to create a democratic system. It might open up the possibility for reflection along these lines: if these fables represent a kind of morality that I do not want to be subjected to, and that I do not want to see others adopt, then what kind of context can I, or even better can we, create in our social world that would prevent this story from playing out as it does? If we take the blank canvas that is the fable’s setting and begin to put boundaries around the action by placing it in a particular frame that can both limit and define it, then we are free to create a variety of scenes and to imagine a wide range of places, times, and institutions in which the conflict of the fable can be resolved in a more satisfactory way than the domination of the weak by the strong. Indeed, it might even be possible to imagine settings in which the conflict is prevented from occurring in the first place. Instead of a world in which inherently different and unequal characters encounter one another and establish relationships of dominance and submission, usually through violence, human beings can create one in which encounters are among equals and relationships are based on peaceful equality rather than violent inequality. While animals cannot reason, plan for the future, or think through a long-range plan of action, people can and should engage in these actions. Why should we choose to act like animals when we can choose not to and when we can create an environment in which acting like animals is unnecessary?

I will conclude by pointing out that in the very act of interpreting fables we use the distinctly human traits that keep us from being condemned to living the life of the animals that are their subjects. The fables generally show us short, conflictual interactions between two animals that are unequal in power and who do not reflect on their situation or plan for the future. There is simply a response to the sensations that drive them into action, leading to consequences that are basically predetermined, with no possibility of change in behavior or in circumstances. Human beings,

By dramatizing the limits of mere animal nature, fables can inspire efforts to become more human.

in reading the fables and reflecting on them, can see that while humans have the same animal characteristics that lead the animals into these situations of inequality and injustice, they also have the unique characteristic of reason that enables them to reflect on the lessons found in the fables, plan for the future, and change their environment and behavior. I believe that this would also have been the case for the citizens of Athens. They would have been familiar with the fables and, perceiving the ways in which human beings and animals are similar and different, would have been able to find in the lessons of the fables support for the institutions of equality and justice that sheltered them from the animal world.

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