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Aristotle and animal mind

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Abstract

I propose a study on Aristotle's philosophy of animal mind by facing the perspective that the Stagyrite denied thought and reason to non-human animals due to their failure to speak. I will discuss basic concepts of Aristotle's philosophy of mind to conclude that Aristotle's position is open to a concept of animal mind with three main features.

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1. The problem

As a historian of philosophy I am fully aware that the subject of this panel, the applied philosophy, are important in contemporary philosophical debates and that there are connections with many others like animal ethics, animal rights, hierarchy of animals and other issues of this kind.

But again as a historian of philosophy I am aware of the different perspectives one can encounter when it comes to establishing the historical foundations of such debates. In philosophy of mind it is quite common to say that the Aristotelian mind philosophy claim that animals do not have a mind or reason in the sense of capacity to think or calculate, because they lack what Aristotle called a *logos*. Since Aristotle defined humans as *rational animals*, it seems natural to conclude, as it was for the Stagyrite himself, that non-humans do not possess reason. But how we understand that concept of reason and how it is connected to the modern concept of mind is a question not so often posed.

In his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Minds*, Robert Lurz (2009, 1-5) favors the perspective that Aristotle refused reason to animals, considering that the absence of speech („failure” as Lurz prefers to say) stated by Aristotle is the main ingredient of the problem. Although the presentation begins with the remark that „the minds

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of animals has been an abiding topic in philosophy since its earliest beginnings”, the notion of mind is afterwards used in a narrower sense that only legitimates references to reason and speech. When it comes to emotions and memory, it is hard to tell whether these are referred to by the term *mind* or not.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Lurz proposes readers to accept that *philosophy of animal minds* should be regarded as a field in its own right. This is exactly the rationale for taking into discussion the starting point of this proposal, since there is a new discipline at stake. Is the founding of this supposed new field of enquiry dependant of exact and accurate narrative about past opinions and doctrines or is it not, that is a rhetorical question. Aristotle is very often made responsible for our own views of the past rather than his. In this way, animals are excluded from a philosophy of mind analysis. Several arguments are being used to support this position, like for instance Aristotle’s theory in *Politics*, that bees or other social animals cannot plan their social life, cannot be *taught* and therefore have no *logos*. For this reason I will face Lurz’s claims on Aristotle’s philosophy of animal mind to a more accurate investigation in order to critically contribute to a sensitive perspective.

As counterpart, historians of philosophy that go back to the ancient commentators, insist on the fact that, according to Aristotle, beasts have sensory perception, desires, memory, imagination, and even emotions, which make them serious candidates to the status of beings that bear a mind (Sorabji: 1995). Naturally, the discussion opens towards what we understand by mind: in a broader sense mind is similar to what Aristotle would call *soul* or *psyche* but, in a narrower sense, mind means faculty of thinking only. The difficulty arises also from the modern notion of body, as we shall see.

These two extreme notions of mind bear between a mind reduced to reasoning, on one hand, and mind as a whole that includes perception, desire, imagination, memory, emotions (and, of course, reason only for humans), on the other hand. Thus, historians of philosophy study the concept of mind in Aristotle by using contextual methods that favor reconstruction of ideas as they can be traced in Aristotelian texts, whereas analytic philosophers, the main developers of philosophy of animal mind, prefer to offer rather oversimplified perspectives of what they regard as simple historical curiosity. Is it possible to bridge the gap between the two perceptions? Or, in other words: does the lack of thinking or *logos* entail the absolute denial of an animal mind, even in a modern sense? I am thinking here that modern notions of mind like those of John Locke for instance have a very large meaning and include a wide array of activities starting from sensation, representation and feelings and going to reasoning and abstracting. We are going to observe how the notion of mind in Aristotle is developed and try to argue that there is an Aristotelian complex notion totally compatible with a concept of animal mind.

2. Soul or mind?

To start with, there is the canonical assertion at the beginning of *On the Soul* II.1, that soul is form for the substance called living thing, which is therefore *alive* and *actual* for that very reason. The kind of form soul is becomes clearer at 412a 11, a 22-27, 417a 20-30 when, by means of examples, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of actuality. Soul will mean something similar to “having a grammatical knowledge” therefore neither a substance *per se*, nor an act understood as factual *action*. Any natural body that can be predicated as potentially alive and capable of exercising consequent function of a living thing is rightly thought of as alive. Soul is then exactly a *capacity* to do an entire set of things specific to living beings.

What we would call a subject is actually a substantial compound of form and matter, a distinction very different from the classical separation body-soul. The soul is the form of a *body having life in potency*, therefore the potency of a specific kind of living body. This means that certain bodies, the inanimate ones, must have some different kind of form that could not be called a soul (Polanski: 2007, 166-167).

The first two chapters of *On the Soul* II list these activities of animate substances for which souls are exclusively responsible: self-nourishment, growth, decay, movement and rest (in respect of place), perception, intellect. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* there is a similar passage as well which we are going to illustrate.

“Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as ‘life of the rational element’ also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean...” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 7, in Barnes, 1991)

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