

# Aristotle's Conception of Animal Life



Aristotle studying animals (1791)

**Christiane Bailey**

PhD Candidate

Department of Philosophy

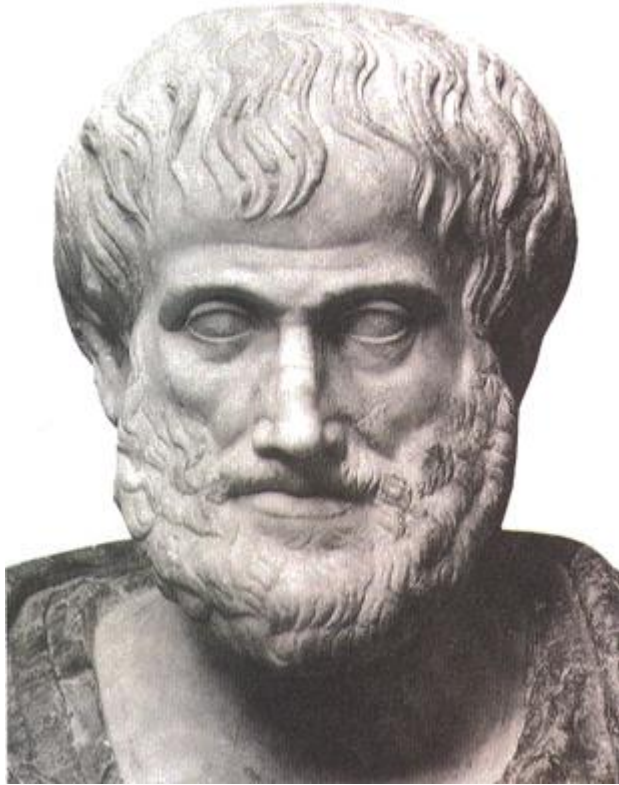
Université de Montréal (Quebec, Canada)

[christianebailey.com](http://christianebailey.com)

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# Aristotle



Aristotle  
(384 BC – 322 BC)

Aristotle devoted more than 2/3 of his writings to the study of living beings :

## Biological and Zoological Treatises

**On the Soul (*De Anima*)**

**The Parts of Animals**

**The History of Animals**

**The Movement of Animals**

The Progression of Animals

On Sense and Sensible Objects

On Memory and Recollection

On Sleep and Waking

On Dreams

Of Prophecy in Sleep

On Length and Shortness of Life

On Youth and Old Age

On Life and Death

On Respiration

On Breath

On Plants

# Aristotle's tripartition of the soul (*psyche*)

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Growth, nutrition/digestion and reproduction

## **Sensitive Soul** (All animals)

Sensation and locomotion

## **Intellective/Thinking Soul** (only humans)

Reasoning, discourse (*logos*),  
deliberation, decision (*prohairesis*),  
scientific knowledge (*episteme*)

# Plants as merely living beings

« It is the possession of **perception** [*aisthesis*] that leads us for the first time to speak of **living things as animals** [*zōia*]: for even those beings which possess no power of local movement but do possess the power of perception we call animals [*zōia*] and **not merely living beings** [*ou zen monon*]. »

(Aristotle, De Anima, II, 413b 1-4)

« For Aristotle, **plants are merely living beings; zōnta; but they are not zōia**, because they have no share in perception, which is a form of cognition. [...]. The fact that Aristotle normally uses the term *zōia* to refer to animals, to the exclusion of plants, is ultimately due to his conviction that **animals are a distinct class of living beings**. »

(Falcon, Aristotle and the science of nature, 6)

# Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis:*



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**Perception and appetite are equiprimordial powers:**

**“Where there are feelings of pleasure and pain (*lupe te kai hedone*), there must be desire (*orexis*)”**

**(DA, 434 a 1; 413 b 23)**

# Aristotle's Definition of Animals

***aisthēsis***: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

***orexis***: desire, appetite

***kinesis kata topon*** : locomotion, mvt from place to place

# The Movement of Animals

**Involuntary** movements (*to akousion*)

*eg. heart's beating*

**Non-voluntary** movements (*ouk hekousion*)

*eg. sleep/waking, respiration, digestion*

**Voluntary** movements (*to hekousion*) [or action (*praxis*)\*]

*eg. actions such as walking, hunting and other similar behaviors*



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***“It is insofar as an animal is capable of appetite that it is capable of self-movement and it is not capable of appetite without possessing phantasia”***

*(De Anima, 433b27)*

***“It is always the desirable [to orekton] that moves the animal, but it can be either the real or the apparent good [to phainomenon agathon]”***

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# Aristotle's Practical Syllogism

*Voluntary movements (or actions) follow the **formal structure** of the syllogism :*

**1. MAJOR PREMISE : A desiring state (*orexis*)**

(eg : being thirsty)

**2. MINOR PREMISE: A cognitive state (perception or imagination)**

(eg : there is water in the bucket)

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**3. CONCLUSION : Action (*praxis*) or voluntary movement**

(= the animal goes to look for the drink)

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*The action follows naturally the conjunction of the premisses as does the conclusion of a logical syllogism without any decision or deliberation.*

*Animal behaviors are genuine **actions** (*praxis*), even if they are not rational or deliberated actions (*praxis meta logou*).*

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***aisthēsis***: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

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***phantasia***: imagination, representation

# Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience **emotion**

*orexis*: desire, appetite **volition**

*kinesis kata topon* : locomotion, mvt from place to place **cognition**

*phantasia*: imagination, representation

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***phronesis***:

# ***Phronesis : intelligence, prudence, foresight***

Animals endowed with memory are “more intelligent [*phronimotera*] and apt at learning”

(*Metaphysics*, 980b26)

In the *History of Animals*, he often describes animals as *phronimos*, intelligent (eg. HA, 588a20).

“Some animals are classified as **prudent (*phronimos*)**, those which, in all matters relating to their own lives, have a clear ability to predict.”

(*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a25-28)

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***phone*** : voice, meaningful sounds (*semantikos psophos*)

**Voice or *phone***



# Voice or *phone*

Sounds produced by animals are **signs (*semeion*)** of their pleasure and pain and they use their **voice (*phone*)** to communicate these affections to each other.

(Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a8-14)



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(Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a8-14)

Birds use their voice **to communicate among themselves** (*pro hermeneian alloesis*) and to teach something to another.

(The Parts of Animals, 660a17-b2)



# Meaning & Communication

*(The Crane)*

“Many indications of **high intelligence [phronesis]** are given by cranes. [...] They have a leader in their flight [...]. When they settle down, they go to sleep with their heads under their wing [...] while **their leader, with his head uncovered, keeps a sharp look out, and when he sees anything of importance signals it with a cry [sêmainei boon].**”

(History of Animals, 614b21-26)







« Animals have the faculty of **hearing** so that **something can be communicated to them** and have a **tongue** so that **it may communicate with its fellows.** »

*(De Anima, 435b24-25)*

Even deprived of language (*logos*), animals can communicate with one another through **meaningful sounds** (*sêmantikos psophos*) and signify (*sêmainein*) something to another.

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***kinesis kata topon*** : locomotion, mvt from place to place

***phantasia***: imagination, representation

***mneme***: memory (and learning: *mathesis*)

***phronesis***: intelligence, prudence, foresight

***phone*** : voice, meaningful sounds (*semantikos psophos*)

# Conclusion : Living or Living Well ?

« Touch is indispensable. Necessarily, if an animal is to survive, its body must have tactual sensation. (...) Without touch it is impossible for an animal to be. »

« All the other senses are necessary to animals, as we have said, not for their **being**, but for their **well-being** (*eu zēn*). »

End of the *De Anima*

“*eu zēn*” can also be translated by  
*happiness*



**Animals are defined through two basic capacities :**

**to feel (*aisthesis*) and to move by oneself (*kinesis*)  
through some form of discrimination (*krinein*)  
and representation/imagination (*phantasia*)**



# Modalities of Understanding in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

Perception	( <i>aisthesis</i> )
Memory	( <i>mneme</i> )
Experience	( <i>emperia</i> )
Art	( <i>techne</i> )
Science	( <i>episteme</i> )
Wisdom	( <i>sophia</i> )



*Aisthesis* is the most primitive form of *aletheuion*, “because **it discloses the world, though indeed not in speech and assertion (*logos*)**” (Heidegger GA 22, 186), it is a form of uncovering that lets something be “known” in a certain sense.