Aristotle’s Conception of Animal Life

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Aristotle studying animals (1791)

Lennoxville, Bishop University, November 2012
Aristotle

(384 BC – 322 BC)

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

**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

**Biological and Zoological Treatises**
Aristotle's tripartition of the soul (psyche)
Aristotle's tripartition of the soul (*psyche*)

**Nutritive Soul** (Plants and all other livings beings)

Growth, nutrition/digestion and reproduction
Aristotle's tripartition of the soul (*psyche*)

**Nutritive Soul** *(Plants and all other living beings)*
- Growth, nutrition/digestion and reproduction

**Sensitive Soul** *(All animals)*
- Sensation and locomotion
Aristotle's tripartition of the soul (*psyche*)

**Nutritive Soul** *(Plants and all other living beings)*
- Growth, nutrition/digestion and reproduction

**Sensitive Soul** *(All animals)*
- Sensation and locomotion

**Intellectual/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 zên 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*:
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception,
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

\textit{aisthēsis}: perception, sensation,
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception, sensation, consciousness
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

\textit{aisthēsis}: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

*orexis*: desire, appetite
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis:* perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

*orexis:* desire, appetite

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]”

*(De Anima 433a 27-28)*
The Movement of Animals

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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)

3. **CONCLUSION**: Action (*praxis*) or voluntary movement
   (= the animal goes to look for the drink)
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3. CONCLUSION: Action (*praxis*) or voluntary movement
   (= the animal goes to look for the drink)

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*).
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

\textit{aisthēsis}: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

\textit{orexis}: desire, appetite

\textit{kinesis kata topon}: locomotion, mvt from place to place

\textit{phantasia}: imagination, representation
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

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

**orexis:** desire, appetite

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

**phantasia:** imagination, representation
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

*orexis*: desire, appetite

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

*phantasia*: imagination, representation

*mneme*: memory
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

*orexis*: desire, appetite

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

*phantasia*: imagination, representation

*mneme*: memory (and learning)
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

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

**orexis**: desire, appetite

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

**phantasia**: imagination, representation

**mneme**: memory (and learning)

**phronesis**:
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.”

(Nichomachean Ethics, 1141a25-28)
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

*aisthēsis*: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

*orexis*: desire, appetite

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

*phantasia*: imagination, representation

*mneme*: memory (and learning)

*phronesis*: intelligence, prudence, foresight
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

aisthēsis: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

orexis: desire, appetite

kinesis kata topōn: locomotion, mvt from place to place

phantasia: imagination, representation

mneme: memory (and learning)

phronesis: intelligence, prudence, foresight

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)
Voice or phone

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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.
Aristotle's Definition of Animals

aisthēsis: perception, sensation, consciousness, sentience

orexis: desire, appetite

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 | (aisthesis) |
| Memory     | (mneme)    |
| Experience | (emperia)  |
| Art        | (techne)   |
| Science    | (episteme) |
| Wisdom     | (sophia)   |

*Aisthesis* is the most primitive form of *aletheuien*, “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.