

Introduction
Aristotle's Anthropology
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1 Is There Even Such a Thing?

One might well wonder whether there is such a thing as ‘Aristotle’s anthropology’. Isn’t the title a blatant anachronism? The term ‘anthropology’ was not in use in ancient philosophy. And Aristotle might have resisted the label for philosophical reasons, too. Let us begin by addressing these concerns.

(a) The term ‘anthropology’ was not used before the sixteenth century. The Latin-Greek word ‘anthropologia’ is said to have been coined by the German philosopher, theologian, and physician Magnus Hundt in 1501. Late in the sixteenth century, the humanist philosopher Otto Casmann defined ‘anthropologia’ as ‘doctrina humanae naturae’, thus consolidating the philosophical use of the term.¹ Nowadays, the English term ‘anthropology’ encompasses a wide array of loosely connected academic subjects. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘anthropology’ as ‘the comparative study of human societies and cultures and their development’. The sub-entry ‘physical anthropology’ adds ‘the study of human biological and physiological characteristics and their evolution’. In fact, many university departments of anthropology host biological and medical sciences, over and above the social and cultural study of people and places. Trying systematically to relate this wide array of subjects to Aristotle’s investigations of human beings does not seem promising. As James Lennox remarks:

The Anthropology Department at my home institution consists of four major divisions: Archaeology, Social and Cultural Anthropology, Medical Anthropology and Physical Anthropology. It would be a puzzling and ultimately fruitless enterprise to try and figure out whether any of Aristotle’s many investigations of human beings would find a home in any of these categories.²

¹ ‘Anthropologia est doctrina humanae naturae. Humana natura est geminae naturae mundanae, spiritualis et corporeae, in unum hyphistamenon unitae particeps essentia’ (Casmann 1594, 1).

² Lennox, Chapter 5, 99.

(b) In German-speaking philosophy, the situation is a little different because the term ‘anthropology’ is often coupled with the epithet ‘philosophical’. The phrase ‘Philosophische Anthropologie’ denotes a distinctively philosophical field of enquiry, i.e. a philosophical investigation of the ‘anthropological difference’ that sets humans apart from other animals.³ More narrowly, the term denotes a particular school of thought that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner wrote influential books on human nature, partly building on Kant’s and Herder’s groundwork, while taking into account biological, sociological, and psychological research. The ‘philosophical anthropologists’ tried to carve out a core structure that integrated the different aspects of human beings that were being studied, largely in isolation from each other, by the various human sciences. But, apart from occasional references to Aristotle’s hierarchy of vegetative, sensitive, and rational capacities, they did not engage with Aristotle’s thoughts on human nature.

(c) Aristotle wrote no treatise on human nature. At least the *Corpus Aristotelicum* contains no book entitled *Peri physeōs anthrōpou* or *Peri anthrōpou*. The phrase that comes closest in his work is ‘hē peri ta anthrōpeia philosophia’ (*EN* X 10, 1181b15), i.e. ‘the philosophy of human affairs’, or ‘the philosophy of human nature’, as Ross translates it. Aristotle uses this phrase in a comment on the architecture of his practical philosophy: in the concluding section of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he announces that his investigation of the principles of legislation will complete ‘the philosophy of human affairs’. Hence, the phrase is used in order to bind together his ethics and politics as a coherent enterprise of practical philosophy.⁴ On the face of it, this is not a descriptive investigation into human nature, but a normative project that tries to identify the ways in which human beings should conduct their lives and organise their communities.

(d) Aristotle definitely had enough material for a book on human nature, but instead of collecting it in one treatise he preferred to scatter it throughout his writings. He discusses human nature extensively and frequently, but under various headings, ranging from biology to metaphysics. (Likewise, within contemporary philosophy, the study of human nature is not an established subfield, but a shared concern of at least the philosophy of mind and action, metaphysics, moral psychology, the

³ We use the term of art ‘anthropological difference’ interchangeably with ‘human–animal difference’.

⁴ The phrase is discussed in Frede’s Chapter 13, 268–9.

philosophy of biology, and the philosophy of religion.) Aristotle's study of human nature even extends to practical philosophy, because humans, unlike other animals, need to cultivate their virtues in order to live well. Such a heterogeneous discipline, if it is one, does not fit into Aristotle's classification of the sciences. Accordingly, the topic of anthropology is orthogonal to the classification of his works, as it is to the research agenda of Aristotle scholarship.

(e) A possible reason for Aristotle not establishing a distinct science of human nature is his view that a science of some X has to be built on a definition of X. And, although he famously characterises the human being as a *zōon logon echon*, it is controversial whether the phrase is meant as a definition in his sense of the term. The phrase does follow the scheme of *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*, since *logos* isn't shared by any other animal. But, for Aristotle, definitions do more than that: they capture essences.

While specifying a unique feature (an *idion*) of some natural substance is one thing, capturing its essence is quite another. Given the strict requirements Aristotle sets for essential definitions in his *Organon*⁵ and in *Metaphysics* Zeta, there is reason to doubt that he regarded any *idion* or any combination thereof as amounting to a definition of human essence. Essences, unlike mere *idia*, are supposed to explain whatever they are essences of. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle wonders 'wherein consists the unity of that, the formula of which we call a definition, as for instance in the case of man, two-footed animal; for let this be the formula of man. Why, then, is this one, and not many, viz. animal and two-footed?' (*Met* VII 12, 1037b11–13, transl. Ross/Barnes).⁶ So, among other things, definitions have to establish a particular kind of unity between their terms in order to do their explanatory work. Aristotle's view in *Met. Zeta* is that, in a correct *dihairesis*, the ultimate *differentia* of a thing constitutes the *logos tēs ousias*, its essential definition. Counting *zōon logon echon* as such a definition requires further argument then. And there are reasons to doubt that the non-biological characteristic of possessing *nous* can work as a *differentia* that defines a biological species. What needs to be shown is that the formula *zōon logon echon* meets the unity condition.

Optimistic as Aristotle is about the prospects of finding definitions for various substances, he may be less optimistic when it comes to defining

⁵ See *Top.* I 8, 103b7–16 and VI 6, 143a29–b10.

⁶ An interesting question is how serious Aristotle is about the idea of defining humans as 'two-footed animals', which is often taken to be a joke. See Kietzmann, Chapter 1, 28.

human beings. At least this is what Kietzmann argues in his contribution to this volume. According to him, Aristotle is worried about a severe tension inherent in the phrase – a tension between the terms *'zōon'* and *'logon echon'* that stands in the way of a unified definition. Kietzmann concludes that there can be no proper and separate science of human nature for Aristotle:

Human beings belong to two completely different ontological realms and, therefore, must be investigated by two different kinds of sciences: humans as animals are investigated by physics, and, more particularly, by zoology, whereas humans as rational beings are investigated by theology.⁷

This is controversial, however, and other contributors to this volume are more sanguine about a unified study of human beings. For one thing, one might deny or at least qualify the premise that, for Aristotle, a science of X requires a proper definition of X. In many contexts, 'nominal' definitions that build upon *idia* may suffice (this would also depend on what Aristotle means by 'science' in different contexts). Secondly, even if one agrees with the premise, perhaps possessing *logos* is the required ultimate difference that makes *zōon logon echon* an essential definition and there is no tension after all. Also, the idea of a *hybrid* science that combines human characteristics established by both natural science and practical philosophy might not be ruled out for Aristotle. All of this remains to be debated.

In calling this book 'Aristotle's Anthropology', we have set aside concerns about terminological anachronism. And, in light of the controversy just mentioned, we also do not wish to commit to ascribing to Aristotle an anthropology in the sense of a proper and separate science of human nature. Instead, the aim of this book is to study the various intriguing and sometimes curious observations Aristotle makes about human beings. He was obviously deeply interested in whether there is such a thing as a human nature and, if so, what it consists of. In many of his major works, he considers the 'anthropological difference', i.e. traits that set humans apart from other animals. For example, in addition to being 'rational animals', humans are also characterised as 'political animals'. According to the pertinent passage in the *Politics*, we are not the only political animals, but the *most* political of all. What does he mean by 'most political', and why and how is this related to being rational?⁸ In other places, he points out further uniquely human features: humans are the

⁷ Kietzmann, Chapter 1, 25.

⁸ Although 'mallon' could also be translated as 'rather' instead of 'more'. This would change the claim in interesting ways (see below).

only animals capable of *self-induced agency*, *active memory*, *anticipation of the future*, *happiness*, *laughter*, and *true friendship*. He also observes that their physique is strikingly different from that of any other species, in particular because humans have *free hands* and an *upright posture*.

The relations between these various characteristics are underexplored in the literature. This book aims to fill this lacuna: it wants to shed light on these relations and explore their importance for the rest of Aristotle's philosophy. Consider the above controversy again, for instance, and assume for a moment that Aristotle doesn't believe in the possibility of a unified account of human beings. What would this mean for his ethics? Without a definition, are we also unable to specify the human *ergon*? If that is so, then what precisely is going on in his ethical writings when he appears to be doing precisely that?

2 'Man Alone of All Animals': Aristotle on Continuity and Discontinuity

Recent philosophy has seen a revived interest in the question of what distinguishes humans from other animals. This interest was partly stirred up by the emerging interdisciplinary research field of human–animal studies. In the philosophy of mind, we have witnessed the establishment of a new subdiscipline called 'the philosophy of animal minds'.⁹ Both within and outside of philosophy, the anthropological exceptionalism of otherwise diverse thinkers such as Aquinas, Descartes, Herder, Kant, and Hegel has fallen out of favour. In recent debates on the anthropological difference, a new terminology has been suggested: '*Differentialists* maintain that there are categorical differences separating us from animals; *assimilationists* maintain that the differences are merely quantitative and gradual'.¹⁰ Most participants in the recent debate sympathise with assimilationism.¹¹

Aristotle's position on this issue is hard to pinpoint. Both assimilationists and differentialists will easily find support in his writings. In many places, Aristotle insists that human traits and abilities are continuous with those of other animals. The resemblances he finds include physical, emotional, and intellectual qualities:

⁹ See the brief overview in Glock, Chapter 7. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹ Dissenters who make a strong case for discontinuity between human and non-human minds include Davidson (1982), Tomasello and Rakoczy (2003), Premack (2007), Penn et al. (2008), and Penn and Povinelli (2012).

For just as we pointed out resemblances in the physical organs, so in a number of animals we observe gentleness or fierceness, mildness or cross temper, courage or timidity, fear or confidence, high spirit or low cunning, and, with regard to intelligence, something equivalent to sagacity. Some of these qualities in man, as compared with the corresponding qualities in animals, differ only quantitatively; that is to say a man has more of this quality, and an animal has more of some other; other qualities in man are represented by analogous qualities: for instance, just as in man we find craft (*technē*), wisdom (*sophia*) and insight (*synesis*), so in some animals there exists some natural capacity akin to these. (*HA* VIII 1, 588a16–31, transl. Thompson)

The view that many differences between the capacities of humans and other animals are either merely quantitative or to be understood analogously accords well with Aristotle's general notion that nature proceeds little by little (*kata mikron*). He maintains that all living things can be arranged in a single *scala naturae* and, accordingly, even leaves room for intermediate steps in his tripartite classification of plants, animals, and humans: marine invertebrates such as *adscidians* (sea squirts) and *testacea* (seashells), he argues, stand between plants and animals.¹² This is to be expected:

In fact nature passes continuously from soulless things into animals by way of those things that are alive yet not animals, so that by their proximity the one seems to differ very little from the other. (*PA* IV 5, 681a11–14, transl. Lennox)¹³

It is worth noting that this continuity thesis goes slightly beyond the gradualism that the *scala naturae* metaphor expresses. Literally speaking, both the *scala naturae* and the medieval metaphor of the *great chain of being* posit discrete steps or links in a chain. Genuine continuity, by contrast, does not. A truly continuous transition has no steps. A continuity thesis that deserves its name abandons steps or degrees in

¹² *GA* I 23, 731b and III 11, 761a; *PA* IV 5, 681a.

¹³ See also *HA* VII 1, 588b4–17. Aristotle's continuity thesis is in obvious tension with his essentialist metaphysics. The concern is that 'the continuity of kinds in Aristotle's biology overthrows the theories of essentialism and classification of the logic and metaphysics' (Granger 1985, 186). Some scholars argue that Aristotle actually allows for organisms that 'dualise' (Peck's translation of the Aristotle's term *epamphoterizein*), in the sense of sharing essential properties of more than one kind and, hence, participating in different, overlapping kinds. Others argue for a weaker reading of the continuity thesis. According to Granger (1985), the difficulty of neatly classifying 'dualisers' is merely epistemic: Since nature proceeds *kata mikron*, as Aristotle says, often 'it is impossible to determine the exact line of demarcation, nor on which side thereof an intermediate form should lie' (*HA* VII 1, 588b4–6). On dualisers, see also Pellegrin (1987) and Müller, Chapter 6, 121.

favour of a seamless transition. In ordinary parlance, the phrase ‘matter of degree’ is ambiguous between both readings.

The differentialist picture, i.e. anthropological exceptionalism, also finds support in Aristotle. Even in his biological works, he makes repeated use of the phrase ‘man alone of all animals’, and sometimes it serves to introduce features that don’t even have analogues in other species. Some of these features were mentioned above: only human beings stand erect, make equal use of both hands, are capable of deliberation and decision, or can recall the past at will.¹⁴ In *De Anima*, Aristotle describes the most striking case of an *idion* that has no analogue in the animal kingdom: the intellect (*nous*) is uniquely human, comes from outside (*thyrathen*),¹⁵ is not associated with a specific bodily organ, and does not belong to the proper study of natural science. It is by virtue of their *nous* that humans partake in the divine. But this partaking is imperfect and temporary:

[I]f human beings are active in theoretical thinking they activate what is the best and the most divine portion within them and thus attain a small and limited piece of the kind of life that the divine intellect enjoys without interruption and limits.¹⁶

The partly divine nature of the active intellect makes humans belong to two distinct realms, as it were, and seems to belie the continuity thesis. And so perhaps the either-or question of whether Aristotle favours a differentialist or an assimilationist view of the anthropological difference is oversimplified. What we need is an exegetically plausible reconciliation of the continuity thesis in his natural philosophy and his metaphysical view that the active *nous* ‘comes from outside’, whatever that means exactly.¹⁷

3 The Transformation Thesis

A fresh approach to this challenge is the ‘transformational’ view of what sets humans apart from other animals, in short: the *transformation thesis*.¹⁸ Roughly speaking, the idea behind this thesis is that a new character’s arrival on the scene can change everything. According to the transformation thesis, human beings’ rational faculties are not a mere addition to

¹⁴ *PA* IV 10, 686a27–29; *HA* II 1, 497b13; *HA* I 1, 488b24; *HA* I 1, 488b25.

¹⁵ *DA* III 4/5; cf. *GA* II 3, 736b27–28 and 737a10. ¹⁶ Rapp, Chapter 4, 90.

¹⁷ Frede (Chapter 13, 260) argues that *thyrathen* ‘does not mean that reason is bestowed by some supernatural power’, but only ‘that it is not contained in the semen and does not develop organically, for there is no organ of reason’, as Aristotle says in *GA* II 3, 737a10.

¹⁸ Section 3 is authored solely by Geert Keil.

‘lower’ capacities they share with other animals, but rather convert those capacities into something substantially different.¹⁹

Take perception (*aisthēsis*): Both human and non-human animals are capable of sensation. All animals have sensory organs, even if some species have to get by only with a sense of touch (*DA* II 3, 414b4). In humans, however, sensory impressions give rise to *perceptual judgements* with *propositional contents*, which in turn depend on the possession of the required *concepts*. Perceiving that such-and-such is the case goes far beyond having sensory impressions. Propositional perception requires additional abilities – abilities that, as Davidson famously argues, non-linguistic creatures lack:

However, speech is not just one more organ; it is essential to the other senses if they are to yield propositional knowledge. Language is the organ of propositional perception. Seeing sights and hearing sounds does not require thoughts with propositional content; perceiving how things are does, and this ability develops along with language.²⁰

Speech, according to Davidson, transforms the faculty of seeing sights and hearing sounds into something substantially different: into the distinctively human faculty of grasping truth-apt propositions.²¹ When applied to Aristotle, the suggestion is that the possession of *logos*, and in particular the rational soul’s capacity to actively apprehend forms, transforms the other mental capacities in a similar way.

We find no explicit and general statement of the transformation thesis in Aristotle. What we do find are particular instances of this line of thought. Cagnoli Fieconi (Chapter 3) explores the transformation thesis with respect to imagination. Non-human animals are capable of imagination

¹⁹ ‘Transformative theories of rationality contrast with *additive* theories, which hold that the capacities which make us rational can be added to capacities for perception and voluntary movement that remain essentially similar to those of nonrational animals. . . . What rational and nonrational animals ‘share’, on this view, is not a separable *factor* that is present in both, but a generic *structure* that is realized in different ways in the two cases’ (Boyle 2017, 114–15). For an exposition of the transformation thesis, as advocated by the Pittsburgh philosophers Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell, see Glock, Chapter 7, 155–57. The Pittsburgh philosophers interpret both Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s hierarchical models of capacities along the lines of the transformation thesis.

²⁰ Davidson (1997, 22). Perception is also McDowell’s and Boyle’s primary example: ‘a *transformative theory* of rationality . . . takes the nature of our perceptual capacities themselves to be affected by the presence of rationality, in a way that makes rational perception different in kind from its nonrational counterpart’ (Boyle 2017, 114).

²¹ For a critique of the view that animals are confined to object perception, without being capable of perceiving facts and, in general, ‘without encompassing that-ish intentionality and, hence, truth conditions’, see Glock, Chapter 7, 151.

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in some sense, but human *phantasia* has a wider cognitive range as a result of its cohabitation with reason and thought:²²

Despite the similarities with non-human animals, humans are peculiar because in them non-rational cognition and desire cooperate with the rational part and with *logos*. . . . Humans have a peculiarly expanded non-rational perceptual and desiderative range. This difference in sophistication is not merely a matter of enhanced discriminatory capacities: humans also have the peculiar ability to exercise deliberative *phantasia* at will and the peculiar ability to synthesise many *phantasmata* into one.²³

According to the transformation thesis, being able to exercise *phantasia* at will and to synthesise many *phantasmata* into one is not a mere addition to an otherwise unchanged ability.

Another case in point would be *desire*. Both human and non-human animals have desires, but a human desire, as Rabbås interprets Aristotle,

is not a mere urge or impulse towards a certain object; rather, the desire itself partly consists in a logically structured representation of the object as connected in a certain way to its appropriation and the satisfaction of a need. Only a rational creature – a *zōon logikon* – is capable of such representation, and in such creatures even the most basic desires, such as the desire for food and drink, are structured representations of this kind. That is how in human beings reason, *logos*, is not something added on to the desires that we share with animals, with the further difference that we have the capacity to step back from and take a stand towards these desires; rather, reason fundamentally transforms these desires themselves and makes them rational desires, or the desires of rational creatures.²⁴

Rabbås explicitly formulates the transformation thesis that he attributes to Aristotle:

But while it is, in some sense, true to say that we share these activities and functions with the lower kinds of organism, they are *transformed* when they are part of human life, and that is because the way we perform these activities is informed by reason.²⁵

Memory and *anticipation of the future* are further cases in which ‘being informed by reason’ also transforms those abilities that humans seem to

²² See Cagnoli Fiecconi, Chapter 3, 64–5. ²³ Ibid., 61 and 60.

²⁴ Rabbås (2015, 101). For a similar interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine that whatever is desired is desired under the guise of good (*quidquid appetitur, appetitur sub specie boni*, as the schoolmen codified *DA* III 10, 433a28–29), see Boyle and Lavin (2010).

²⁵ Rabbås (2015, 100).

share with other animals. According to Aristotle, both abilities are shared in a sense by non-human animals, albeit not in another.²⁶

The transformation thesis about the anthropological difference has a number of advantages. It can, first, serve to explain certain ambiguities and tensions in Aristotle's comparisons of humans and other animals. Take the notion of agency. In his ethical works, Aristotle says that humans are the only animals capable of agency, while in his biological works he also attributes actions (*praxeis*) to non-human animals.²⁷ Obviously, he sometimes uses *prattein* and *praxis* in a relaxed sense and sometimes in a more demanding sense. In the more demanding sense, only conduct that is both self-initiated and responsive to reasons counts as agency. These requirements, however, are not mere additions to an otherwise unchanged ability, but make a huge difference for a being's agential powers. Now, in many contexts it may not matter much in exactly what sense of *praxis* ants or bees can perform *praxeis*. Yet, when discussing the anthropological difference, it matters crucially.

The transformation thesis may also help defuse the ill-defined either-or question of whether the mental abilities of human and non-human animals differ in kind (qualitatively) or in degree (quantitatively): They can differ in kind in one sense, and be gradual in another (of which more below). Such a disambiguation strategy could account for the coexistence of Aristotle's gradualist and his non-gradualist claims about the anthropological difference. The passage in the *Politics* mentioned above can serve as an example: Aristotle states that 'man is more of a political animal [*mallon politikon*] than bees or any other gregarious animals' (*Pol.* I 2, 1253a7–8, transl. Jowett/Barnes).

On the face of it, comparative phrases like 'more of', 'in a greater measure', 'to a higher degree', or 'to a greater extent' are indicative of a gradualist view. But, in his subsequent explanation of what the higher degree of the *zōon politikon's* being political consists of or is due to, Aristotle makes a number of claims that are anything but gradualist. He states (a) that man alone possesses speech, (b) that speech serves a uniquely

²⁶ 'Many animals have memory, and are capable of instruction; but no other creature except man can recall the past at will' (*HA* I 1, 488b25–26; cf. *Mem.* 2, 453a7–14). While 'we say that some even of the lower animals ... have a power of foresight with regard to their own life' (*EN* VI 7, 1141a27–29, transl. Ross), 'mankind alone becomes expectant and hopeful for the future' (*PA* 669a20) in a demanding sense, because hope (*elpis*) requires imaginative anticipation of a future good.

²⁷ See *EE* II 6, 1222b18–20; *EN* VI 2, 1139a19–20; *HA* VIII 1, 588a18.