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IWONA BARWICKA-TYLEK

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4482-9243>
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
i.barwicka-tylek@uj.edu.pl

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Aristotle's concept of *zoon politikon*: on political benefits of being not too perfect

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The article discusses the concept of *zoon politikon* in order to provide arguments justifying the attractiveness of Aristotle's practical philosophy.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: There are three quasi-definitions of man in Aristotle's works, each of which emphasises a different aspect of humanity. According to the philosopher, we are speaking animals, political animals (*zoo politika*) and the only animals endowed with reason. I argue that it is the condition of *zoon politikon* that comes to the fore as the most human of human properties. The article uses a historical-philosophical method supported by textual analysis.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: In the first part of the text, Aristotle's term *zoon politikon* is analysed as a concept intended to show the superiority of humanity over animality. In the second part, it is presented as a limitation that distinguishes humans from gods. By analysing how these two perspectives overlap, it is then possible to discuss some political consequences of the tension between them.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The analysis leads to the conclusion that, according to Aristotle, a good human is not someone who "exercises rationality to a high degree" (Hurka, 1993, p. 3), but above all someone who is political to a high degree. It also suggests that Aristotle's concept can be used to distinguish between

two kinds of politics, which should not be reduced to each other: “artificial” politics (which can be equated with power), and natural human politics (which is based on free individual action in the area of *praxis*).

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The notion of *zoon politikon* reflects the relational character of the individual human self, and thus offers a perspective that allows both methodological and political individualism to be challenged. It can also be (and is; see: Arendt, 1958; Crick, 1962) a source of inspiration for those scholars, who argue that politics cannot be reduced to power.

KEYWORDS: **ARISTOTLE, ZOON POLITIKON, HUMAN NATURE,
POLITICS**

INTRODUCTION

The term perfectionism has various meanings, but whenever it is discussed, whether approvingly or critically, the name of Aristotle appears. The general and still appreciated perfectionist idea that runs through Aristotle’s philosophy is this: the good life requires practicing the properties which make us human, so the development of human nature in individual human beings is ultimately a good thing and should be facilitated by the state. Consequently, a state can be judged as having a good or a bad constitution (in the broad sense of all the arrangements that contribute to its functioning), depending on its ability to fulfil the perfectionist task of supporting individual human development. In other words, the state cannot ignore the humanity (or the lack thereof) of its citizens.

From the works of Aristotle three basic human properties can be retrieved. According to the philosopher, we are speaking animals, political animals (*zoa politika*), and the only animals endowed with reason. This last quality is divine in that it allows the mind to be freed from the chaos of contradictory and uncertain sensory data and to be anchored in the metaphysical reality of the gods. There is no doubt that for Aristotle these three properties are not equal in terms of their intrinsic metaphysical value. Speech is the most inferior, political cooperation with others is in the middle, and reason is definitely superior. No wonder that in discussing Aristotle’s perfectionism it is

tempting to emphasise his supposed insistence on developing human reason to the extent that it controls all the other aspects of human nature. "A good human", writes Thomas Hurka in his judgement passed on Aristotle, "exercises rationality to a high degree" (Hurka, 1993, p. 3). However, this interpretation is not the only one that can be justified in the light of Aristotle's works. The philosopher had a strong preference for middle terms. Trusting this inclination, it is possible to look at the triad of speech-politics-reason from a different perspective, in which it is political condition that comes to the fore as the most human of human properties. Moreover, as will be shown, the other two qualities mentioned by Aristotle, speech and reason, only deserve to be regarded "human" if they are discussed in relation to the concept of *zoon politikon*.

ZOON POLITIKON AND POLIS: MORE THAN ANIMALS

In its most famous formulation, the quasi-definition of *zoon politikon* appears in the first book of the *Politics*, where it merges with the genealogy of the *polis*:

It is evident from these considerations, then, that a city-state is among the things that exist by nature, that a human being is by nature a political animal, and that anyone who is without a city-state, not by luck but by nature, is either a poor specimen or else superhuman (*Pol. 1.1253a*, Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 4).

In other words: "he is either a beast or a god" (*Pol. 1.1253a*, Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 5). What gives rise to the political community are basic (animal) needs, but "what sustains a *polis* in existence is that we are able to live well and achieve happiness only in it", because "it is the community within which we perfect or fully realize our natures or functions" (Reeve, 2009, p. 516). The *polis* "does not exist for the purpose of preventing mutual wrongdoing exchanging goods", but "for the sake of noble actions" (*Pol. 3.1280b-81a*; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 81).

There are at least three (Mulgan, 1974, pp. 438–445) ways in which Aristotle uses the category of political animals in his many works. The

basic definition he gives is simple: “political animals are those among whom some one work common to all is produced” (*HA I 1.488a*; Aristotle, Reeve, 2019, p. 5). Besides humans, these are bees, wasps, ants, and cranes. In case of humans, however, “being political” allows for emancipation from the animal world. “Nature”, writes Aristotle in *Politics*,

makes nothing pointlessly, [...] and no animal has speech except a human being. A voice is a signifier of what is pleasant or painful, which is why it is also possessed by the other animals [...]. But speech is for making clear what is beneficial or harmful, and hence also what is just or unjust. For it is peculiar to human beings, in comparison to the other animals, that they alone have perception of what is good or bad, just or unjust, and the rest. And it is community in these that makes a household and a city-state (*Pol. 1.1253a*; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 4).

Speech, which for Aristotle is a cornerstone of the *polis*, must be rational speech (*logos*, see: Yack, 1993, p. 65). This means that in order to build a political community, human beings must employ not only their animal, but also their godlike capacities. As the quote also makes clear, politics is inseparable from ethics, and the two are complementary modes of practising humanity in the world. They answer two practical questions: how to live well (ethics) and how to live together (politics).

The existence of the *polis* adds something positive to the otherwise negative condition of man being “neither beast nor god”. As we use the capacities that nature has endowed us with, we tend to use them in such a manner that they bring us together, which introduces an important change in the natural world. The *polis* is for Aristotle as natural a community as the family or the village, but it deserves to be seen as a unique entity whose design (the constitution) is no longer natural but artificial: it is the product of political craft. The state becomes the setting for our “practicing being human”, which means individually acquiring and performing human properties within a network of interpersonal relationships that are public in the sense that they contribute to the production of “some one work common to all”.

The Greeks has showered the Mediterranean region with about 1498 *poleis* (Hansen, 1998, p. 98). This unprecedented achievement

still fascinates us two and a half thousand years later, and for many writers the *polis* remains “the first form of human life to produce political energy”, even if it “was finally consumed by its own energy in the catastrophe of the Peloponnesian War” (Manent, 2013, p. 5). This energy, Aristotle makes it plain, is produced by individuals, but it is captured by a common energy network of the *polis* so that it can be used for the common benefit. In this way the state, unlike the individual, has the chance to become self-sufficient (*Pol.* 7.1326b; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 199). Once established, the state is prior to its members, because the whole is always prior to its parts (*Pol.* 1.1253a; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 4). Moreover, the political community educates its citizens in virtue, thus making them more human: “a human being is the best of the animals when perfected” (*Pol.* 1.1253a; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 5).

If we were to stop here, it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that even if human beings are not gods, their political communities are quite divine. Like gods, they bring order and stability to the chaos of individual actions; like gods, they can immortalise some words by making them laws; like gods, they can become self-sufficient. All this is achieved with the help of reason, which anchors politics in invariable truth and thus informs it of the principles and rules necessary to ensure the health of the *polis*.

Trusting the above interpretation we could imagine human development as moving along a vertical ladder, with animality at the bottom, and the godlike rationality at the top. In this case, the natural “politicality” (that is: the condition of being political animals) would inspire individuals to climb a rung or two on their own (forming a family, then a village), but once they reached the rung of the *polis*, this new invention of theirs would climb much faster than any of them individually could. Importantly, being more perfect than citizens (in terms of rationality and goodness, not humanity), this new invention, a state, would be entitled to take politics with it in order to use it more rationally (which also means better). The resulting discrepancy between the *polis* and the individual would then pave the way for politics to be equated with (state) power, rather than with an everyday human practice in which each individual *zoon politikon* performs their humanity with others. Politics-power is more efficient, first, in shaping the character of citizens so that their

speech and behaviour would become more rational and predictable (this includes disciplining and punishing the marauders who would prefer to remain animals who value pleasure more than the good); and second, in ensuring the self-sufficiency of the whole community.

It is an appealing opinion: in the *polis* it is possible to facilitate human development, if only politics-power is guided by reason, and some universal human good is grasped through rational (in Aristotle's case: metaphysical, but it can as well be scientific) inquiry. As noted, for example, by Piotr Świercz (Świercz, 2011, p. 12), who does not distinguish between Aristotle and Plato in this respect, (philosophical) wisdom is the most important instrument of power. In the rational and well-organised (political) environment, it is assumed, it will also be easier for individuals to climb the ladder of (ethical) perfection higher and higher, and to limit their animality, or perhaps even to leave it behind. Of course, biologically we cannot help being animals. We have bodies and senses. However, with some help provided (laws, education), it is expected that all the unpleasant aspects of our *zoon* part would either be kept under control or transformed into virtues. Nevertheless, if we examine the concept of *zoon politikon* closely enough, such conclusion becomes questionable. As much as this concept is meant to add something important to our animality, it is also meant to limit to the godlike rationality of the *polis* (also: the godlike aspirations of its eventual rulers).

LESS THAN GODS: *POLIS* AND *ZOA POLITIKA*

If "being political" is viewed as a limitation then politics is not something that improves the human condition by bringing us closer to the gods (against our animality), but quite the opposite: something that should discourage us from imitating the gods (because we are animals). "The greater degree of the human being's political character", writes Refik Güremen, "must be accounted for on the basis of its animality and as a differentiation of its political praxis, understood as a zoological feature" (Güremen, 2018, p. 176).

The term *zoon* used by Aristotle cannot be equated with "an animal" without further comment. For the Greeks *zoon* was any living organism (Nass, 2018, p. 32), and "living" meant "having a soul".

This is obvious to Aristotle, just as it was obvious to the Greeks that ensouled are not only humans or animals, but also plants (to a minimal extent) and gods, as well as the stars and the whole universe. The soul is the form of the body, while the body is the matter of the soul, which means that the conjunction of the two is necessary to actualise the potentiality of life. There is, however, a sharp difference between the matter that is used to actualise the life of extra-terrestrial beings and that of earthly creatures. The former are made up of the imperishable "first matter". Earthly matter (the four elements: air, water, fire, earth) is constantly changing and is mortal. This is what makes human beings radically different from the gods. It is true that Aristotle speculates that the intellect (*nous*) may be less enmeshed in our bodies than the human soul, but he never goes so far as to suggest that in the *polis* it is possible to use the intellect in such a way that the earthly nature of the citizens should (or even could) be mastered to the extent that it would attain godlike quality. On that he is quite explicit: "statesmanship does not make human beings, but takes them from nature and uses them" (*Pol.* 1.1258a; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 18), or as the same sentence is also translated: "political science does not make men, but receives them from nature and uses them" (in: Leunissen, 2010, p. 42).

Aristotle's claim that politics "receives" men is often overlooked by the second claim: that politics "uses" them. Teleological thinking, for which Aristotle is famous, suggests that everything that exists, exists for a purpose. The question: "What for?" justifies, wherever possible, a top-down analysis that presents smaller units from the perspective of their users. Thanks to such a perspective, Aristotle introduces hierarchical but harmonious relationships between different objects in the world, and he concludes, for example, that nature created all animals "for the sake of human beings" (*Pol.* 1.1256b; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 14). This does not mean, however, that nature produces animals simply to satisfy human needs. On the contrary, in order to make use of animals, man must respect their nature. Shepherds, for example, are compelled to follow their sheep which means that they cannot simply force the sheep to follow them (*Pol.* 1.1256a; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 13). "The direction of causality is important", concludes Mariska Leunissen, "because it shows that the formal nature of each kind of living being produces that living being *with*

a view to its own individual substantial being" (Leunissen, 2010, p. 42). The state "receives" human beings as they are; and they are, first and foremost, animals. Therefore, the top-down teleological argument needs to be complemented by the bottom-up counter-argument.

The animal soul is exceptional because its faculties include not only nutrition (the plant soul also has this capacity), but also locomotion and perception, the latter combined with imagination and desire. As Hans Jonas points out,

The emergence of perception and motility opens a major chapter in the history of freedom that began with organic being as such and was adumbrated in the primeval restlessness of metabolizing substance. Their progressive elaboration in evolution means increasing disclosure of world and increasing individuation of self (Jonas, 2001, p. 99).

Animals, like all living things, are not self-sufficient. They depend on the world to provide them with matter to satisfy their biological needs. However, through perception, they can distance themselves from the world and actively choose the means they find appropriate for their sustenance. In this way, biology provides the basis for individuality (Jonas, 2001, pp. 185–205), which becomes much more than simple material singularity; it gathers its own experiences and has its own intrinsic identity that persists over time. Even if for Aristotle individuality is ultimately only an "instantiation" of the universal form of being human (Jonas, 2001, p. 41), he does not deny its importance. Bearing that in mind, the fact that human beings are political and able to create a "common thing" (the state) can be seen as the choice of individuals who are capable of a solitary life (*HA I 1.488a*; Aristotle, Reeve, 2019, pp. 4–5), but who are attracted by the possible self-sufficiency of the *polis*. What they desire is security in the exercise of their freedom. In the *polis*, this freedom grows, as the range of needs that can be satisfied by living together grows. At the same time *logos*, i.e. reasoned speech (Yack, 1993, p. 65), can be used by individual citizens to communicate and to argue about what they personally perceive to be beneficial or harmful, and therefore think to be worth promoting as just and unjust. This is how the state "receives men" – free and argumentative creatures for whom natural politicality is the means of personal growth and further individuation. The important aspect of this natural politics is to draw general

and universal conclusions from their particular everyday experience. These conclusions are opinions cannot be rationally proven (they are merely probable), but they motivate concrete actions that are judged and responded to by other citizens. For Aristotle, such everyday “public” actions produce diversity and allow for change. Both of these elements are important in any state that can be called “good”. The politicality described here has nothing to do with power. It is a free contribution to the common order within the limits of personal interests and goals. It can be called natural human politics, which is intertwined in the realm of *praxis*, and practical things (*ta praktika*) are things that are changeable and they change through human action (*NE VI.1140b*; Aristotle, Reeve, 2014, p. 102). Competence and experience in this natural politics is extremely important to Aristotle. Those who have it, make the best rulers (politicians). Such politicians, whom Aristotle calls practically wise (*phronimoi*), are also the best examples of *zoa politika*. They are able to exercise power in such a manner that others can see in their actions what is good or bad for a human being as such (*NE VI.1140b*; Aristotle, Reeve, 2014, p. 102). It is true that for Aristotle the most perfect outcome of individual development is to become a philosopher, not a *phronimos*, and that the philosopher is someone who is rational to a high (or the highest, as in the case of his master Plato) degree. But there is plenty of evidence in the *Corpus Aristotelicum* to suggest that the best philosophers are more akin to gods than to human beings. Even they, Aristotle advises, should take care to build interpersonal relationships in which they can share their wisdom and contemplate the noble actions of others (*NE IX.1169b*; Aristotle, Reeve, 2014, p. 168).

To sum up, natural, human politics derives from our animality and freedom, which provide energy (motivation, also emotional) that is invested in interpersonal relations as actions that make personal opinions about what is good and just evident and observable. Such opinions and actions influence the common *praxis* at both the theoretical (deliberation) and practical (cooperation) levels. As a result, they can also be recognised by “artificial” politics that is based on the explicit or tacit distribution of power. There are many possible constitutions, but according to Aristotle there is only one rule that is truly political: that which respects the freedom and equality (“similarity in birth”) of all the citizens (*Polit. 3.1277b*; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998,

p. 72). In such a *polis*, where “those ruled are like makers of flutes, whereas rulers are like the flute players who use them” (*Polit.* 3.1277b; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 73), natural politicality that is exercised by individual citizens supports but also limits the artificial politics (power). In fact, it is a rather weak constraint, and those in power can easily overcome it. After all, the state is largely an artificial invention whose constitution and survival depend largely on the dialectics of power and obedience. In the state, natural politicality, arising from our being *zoa politika*, is only a small appendix to the artificial politics, in which *episteme* and *techne* (rational truth and political craft based on it) prevail over practical wisdom (*phronesis*) of individual citizens. Every institution prefers stability to change. But *poleis* in which the development of natural politicality in individuals is not encouraged, or worse, in which such natural politics is deliberately reduced or blocked, are not human communities. They dehumanise individuals, reducing them to animals or allowing them to become gods. Either way, the effect is neither political, nor human.

CONCLUSION

Perusing the vast literature on human nature, one is confronted with an interesting paradox. On closer inspection, it seems that there is nothing uniquely human about individual human beings. To use the old Pico della Mirandola’s metaphor, we are like chameleons, glowing in either animal-like or godlike colours. This troubling idea pervades the entire Western philosophical tradition, producing familiar problems, often presented as contradictions: emotion-reason, perception-reflection, body-soul, freedom-necessity, particular-universal, individual-collective, and others.

Many philosophers have tried to offer their own solutions to this paradox, but Aristotle’s is particularly interesting, especially if we remember the philosopher’s golden mean principle. Aristotle suggests that humanity is a wide interval, open on both sides, capable of containing all possible amalgamations of animality and divinity (that is: individuals as different as they may be given their experience, personality, choices, opinions, etc.). It even extends as far as to include pure animality and pure divinity. There are three ways of

living that the philosopher describes (Armada, 2010, p. 40). It is possible for a human being to live the life of an animal, guided only by the subjective perception of pleasure and pain, and using speech to manipulate others in order to gain more pleasure. It is also possible (though rare) to develop reason to the point of becoming an almost omniscient god, who knows the truth, has no doubts, and makes no mistakes. It is the life of a philosopher who contemplates the truth but is not so good at acting in the world of practice. But truly human is only that way of life which lies between these two extremes and which, unlike them, requires animal and divine capacities to be used not only for our own sake but also for the sake of others. We are relational creatures, Aristotle argued, and this idea resonates with both the contemporary philosophical critiques of individualism and psychological data. Only by investing both animal and divine capacities in good (ethics) cooperation (practice) with others (politics) is it possible to grow human.

The birth of the *polis* (and artificial politics-power) is a result of natural human politicality. Thus, the state should facilitate conditions under which most individuals (the citizens) would choose humanity over animality or divinity. To achieve this, however, the *polis* itself must have a constitution that respects and helps to develop the natural politics of its citizens. The problem is that such a constitution is as fragile as the human condition. It must allow for diversity and freedom, but it must also promote the unity necessary for the society to function as a whole. Aristotle realised that it was much easier to govern a state in which the citizens could be treated as animals, focused on their animal interests and bound to seek pleasure and avoid pain. For him, this was the case of pure democracy, especially when it lacked politicians as practically wise as Pericles. But he would also criticise the model of liberal democracy, if it is to be understood in terms of Joseph Schumpeter's procedural democracy, or Anthony Downs's economic theory of democracy (Downs, 1957). On the other hand, the concept of *zoon politikon* also allows for a critique of democratic projects *à la* Rousseau, including so-called illiberal democracy (Antoszewski, 2018, p. 11), in which the representatives of the majority claim to serve a general will or a superior national "truth" that demands obedience and unity. In this respect, it is plausible to examine the argument by which Aristotle rejects

Plato's idea of the rule of the godlike philosophers. For him, the Platonic state, in which there was no place for the ever surprising and renewed natural politicality of individuals, was a community inferior even to a village (*Pol. 1.1261a*; Aristotle, Reeve, 1998, p. 27); it would become a family (*oikos*). It is worth remembering that in the family, according to Aristotle, there is only one person who is fully human (the father, who is also a citizen and has power over his household). All the other members (important as they are) are at best domesticated animals performing specific functions. Indeed, Aristotle's language and his argument that human politicality is natural and brings us together in the hope of cooperation that is primarily personally satisfying (as it stimulates the personal growth), even if it requires effort and brings no immediate pleasure, is a game changer for contemporary social science and political philosophy. No wonder that Thomas Hobbes, considered one of the founders of modernity, devoted much attention to discrediting the concept of *zoon politikon* in his *Leviathan* (Hobbes & Gaskin, 1996, p. 113). In recent centuries, this concept, though never completely forgotten, has existed on the margins of political theory. In the 21st century, however, it deserves more attention, as it provides a common thread that can unite various concepts that include references to political practice, action and the need for individual engagement in public (common) affairs. There are many of scholars whose work follows the direction first indicated by Aristotle (see: Crick, 1962; and in Poland: Koczanowicz, 2015). The philosopher's message is relatively simple, but following it is a difficult theoretical and practical task, because the human condition, as seen through Aristotle's lens, is very unstable and easily tends towards the extremes from which it seeks to distinguish itself. The message is that we should do our best, individually and collectively, to perfect humanity – but also our best not to transcend it, as this can easily lead to the dehumanisation of individuals as well as whole groups of citizens who are claimed to occupy a position far too close to the animal end of humanity to allow them freedom, and even less to invite their natural politicality to serve the common order.

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