CHAPTER 5

The Social and Political Nature of Animals

We know that social behaviour and cultural learning are common in the animal kingdom.[1] Attributing culture to animals is a rather recent trend, but the notion that animals teach various skills to their offspring and that human beings are in many respects similar to other social animals who live in organised groups is old. Aristotle defends these views, and medieval philosophers follow suite.[2] As we saw in previous chapter, Aristotle begins his linguistic argument by comparing human beings to other animals that can be considered gregarious or even political: "a human being is *more* of a political animal than a bee or any other gregarious animal."[3] The wording suggests that the difference between humans and animals is a matter of degree. Being political can be understood as a biological trait that we share with ants, bees, cranes and the like, and this means that our political life is not different in kind but only an intensification and modification of the political way of life that we share with other political animals.

Aristotle's claim raises several questions. As we have seen, the central element of the linguistic argument is that rationality and the ability to speak about what is just and unjust distinguish humans from other animals. Does this mean that there is a qualitative difference between the political nature of humans and that of other animals after all? Are there any other political animals besides humans? Are human beings political to a higher degree or in a completely different way? If human beings are more political than bees, does it follow that bees are political as well, either *tout court*, or perhaps in a metaphorical sense? Is the fact that humans are political *animals* significant?

1 Whether animals can be said to have culture similar to that of humans is a complex question. An overview of the state of discussion can be found in Kevin N. Laland and Bennett G. Galef, eds., *The Question of Animal Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). This chapter is partially based on Juhana Toivanen, "Like Ants in a Colony We Do Our Share," in *State and Nature: Essays in Ancient Political Philosophy*, ed. P. Adamson and C. Rapp (Berlin: De Gruyter, submitted); and id., "Estimative Power," 115–136.

2 *HA* 4.9, 536b15–20; Labarrière, *Langage*, 19–59. For similarities between animals and humans in medieval philosophy, De Leemans and Klemm, "Animals and Anthropology," 153–177; Toivanen, "Marking the Boundaries," 121–150; id., *Perception and the Internal Senses: Peter of John Olivi on the Cognitive Functions of the Sensitive Soul* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–18.

3 *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a8–10; trans. Reeve, my emphasis. Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.44.157.

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A further complication arises from the fact that Aristotle uses the concept of 'political animal' in different senses in his *œuvre*.[4] Two of them are relevant in the present context: the concept refers either to (1) animals that are members of a *polis*, a special kind of community that aims for a good life and is necessarily based on rational considerations of justice; or to (2) animals that collaborate with other members of their species in order to achieve a common aim (*koinon ergon*). This distinction between what might be called "a city-dwelling animal" and "a collaborative animal" is important because the idea that human beings are more political than other animals means different things depending on how the concept of political animal is understood. According to the first interpretation, the comparison can be easily dismissed as metaphorical: only human beings are truly political animals due to their rationality, whereas bees and other gregarious animals are political in a radically different way, if at all.[5]

The other interpretation is based on the idea that being political is a trait that admits of degrees and can be found among many different animal species. Some animals are less political than humans, but nevertheless they are political in the proper sense of the word. According to this view, one does not have to be a member of a *polis* to be political. Rather, the key elements are common

4 Cf. Mulgan, "Aristotle's Doctrine," 438–445. A contextual reading of Aristotle has been suggested also in Lloyd, "Aristotle on the Natural Sociability," 291–293.

5 Mulgan, "Aristotle's Doctrine," 438–445; Cooper, "Political Animals," 222–225. Certain Renaissance commentaries adopt this line of reasoning. For instance, Antonio Montecatini (1537–1599) writes that "[…] these names are taken in two ways. In the first way properly, and in this way they refer to a certain association of life between human beings, which is properly and truthfully called a political association and a political community (*civilis communio ac civitas*); in the second way metaphorically and due to a similarity to the first way, and in this way they refer to the whole community and society of human beings, or of other animals which belong to same species and which nature has instructed to pursue the necessities of life together. Only human beings are called political (*civilis*), that is, suitable for real political communities, in the first way; not only human beings but also bees, ants, cranes and many other animals are called political, that is, social and gregarious, in the second way." ("Accipiuntur haec vocabula [i.e. civile et incivile aut non civile] duobus modis: uno modo proprie, ut referuntur ad certam quandam inter homines vitae communionem, quae civilis communio ac civitas vere, proprieque nominatur: altero modo ex translatione, ac similitudine modi prioris ut referuntur ad communitatem, societatemque universam sive hominum inter se, sive aliorum animalium eiusdem generis, quae idonea vitae simul degendae natura finxerit. Ex primo modo soli homines civiles, idest ad veras civitates idonei nominantur: ex secundo non solum homines, sed etiam apes, formicas, grues, et multa alia animalia civilia, idest sociabilia, et congregabilia appellant." (Antonio Montecatini, *In Politica, hoc est in Civiles libros Aristotelis progymnasmata* (Ferrara: Baldini, 1587), 1.5, 59–60; see also ibid., text 22, 70.)) For translating "ex translatione" as "metaphorically," see E. Jennifer Ashworth. "Metaphor and the Logicians from Aristotle to Cajetan," *Vivarium* 45 (2007): 311–327.