**Before Sunrise, After Midnight: Humanity’s Evanescence in Aristotle and the New Materialists**

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From quotations which I had seen, I had a high notion of Aristotle’s merits, but I had not the most remote notion what a wonderful man he was. Linnaeus and Cuvier have been my two gods, though in very different ways, but they were mere schoolboys to old Aristotle.

----Charles Darwin to William Ogle, on the publication of his translation of *The Parts of Animals*, 1882.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When I began discussing my proposed dissertation topic back in 2003, a well-meaning member of my committee (at least I think he meant well) told me that while my subject seemed intellectually interesting enough, there was a problem: it wasn’t really *political* theory. At the time I was thinking about animals and humans and how the ancient Greeks in particular constructed the boundary between these two groups, and especially how this might be relevant to the way that humans in the present acted towards nonhuman animals. My committee member thought that while this might be a reasonable topic in moral philosophy, it wasn’t really something that we were up to in the humanistic wing of “political science.” Fortunately for me, the last ten years have seen a veritable outpouring on nonhumans by political theorists: as subjects of justice (Nussbaum 2007), as members of the Rawlsian social contract (Smith 2012), as multicultural citizens (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), as “propositions” in need of representation (Latour 2004), as cosmopolitan citizens (Steiner 2013), and as material agents (Bennett 2009). And if I think my committee member wasn’t quite right in his advice, I think he was mistaken in an importantly representative sense that is of continuing salience.

As political theorists we tend to be trained in a set of canonical texts, and while we read broadly we do not always read deeply. This broad-yet-shallow reading of texts like Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics*, or Aquinas’s *Summa* is neither surprising nor lamentable, given that we tend to be more concerned with problems of contemporary democratic politics than, say, with whether the Guelphs or Ghibellines were in the right.[[2]](#footnote-2) But while this reading strategy is understandable, it comes with a tendency to accept what we might term a “gloss” on these canonical works, and in the case of a thinker like Aristotle this gloss comes pretty close to the advice given to me back in 2003. We all remember, from Theory 101, that Aristotle says in the *Politics* that humans are “political animals” (1253a2).[[3]](#footnote-3) Most of us probably associate the idea of the human as *zoon politikon* with Hannah Arendt’s *Human Condition* (Arendt 1958), since Arendt is one of the key figures (perhaps *the* key figure) in the reclamation of Aristotelian philosophy for contemporary political theory. There we might recall that Arendt emphasizes the way that Aristotle’s original terms have suffered horribly in the transition from Greek to Latin to English, since many of her contemporary parrot the idea of humans as “social animals,” an idea derived from Aquinas’ and others’ mistranslation of *zoon politikon* as *animal socialis*. This, Arendt says, fundamentally mistakes the Greek original, since:

It is not that Plato or Aristotle was ignorant of, or unconcerned with, the fact that man cannot live outside the company of men, but they did not count this condition among the specifically human characteristics; on the contrary, it was something human life had in common with animal life, and for this reason alone it could not be fundamentally human. The natural, merely social companionship of the human species was considered to be a limitation imposed upon us by the needs of biological life, which are the same for the human animal as for other forms of animal life (Arendt 1958, 24).

While Arendt may not have entirely endorsed the view that she attributes to Aristotle (though her description of “action” certainly seems to track fairly close), she is typically seen as defending an anthropocentric view of political life in which politics (along with speech and reason) is one of the key features that distinguishes human from animal life (see Depew 1995, 162, for instance).[[4]](#footnote-4) Interestingly, the other school of thought that takes inspiration from the Greeks, of Leo Strauss, is just as committed to this idea of the uniqueness of human political life, however much Strauss differs from Arendt in other ways (Strauss 1978, 16-17).[[5]](#footnote-5)

While both Arendt and Strauss are erudite readers of Aristotle, neither of them cite frequently to Aristotle’s biological writings, which comprise a quarter of his extant works.[[6]](#footnote-6) This limits their interpretive range, though it is a limitation that dovetails with most graduate training in political theory, where the *Politics* takes precedence and is, at best, supplemented with *Nicomachean* *Ethics* and perhaps *Rhetoric*. And while a growing number of contemporary philosophers do take cognizance of the relation between Aristotle’s biology and his political philosophy (as I will detail soon), this connection has a) not made its way into mainstream political theory, and b) neither has the connection been pursued from the vantage of “animal politics” (my loose term for Nussbaum, Smith, Steiner, et al.).

In what follows I want to trouble the assumed anthropocentrism of Aristotle’s *zoon politikon*, and offer several connections between Aristotle the assumed-humanist and the recent trend in animal politics. I will not claim that Aristotle can be taken as a proponent of “Critical Animal Studies” (CAS) or New Materialism (NM) in any simple sense, since such an appropriation, beyond the obvious anachronism, would also suffer from the troubling assumptions that a) Aristotelian thought is a unified whole,[[7]](#footnote-7) and b) that an author’s intentions hold primary exegetical weight.[[8]](#footnote-8) If we avoid making these two problematic moves, we can allow a more complicated Aristotle to come to the fore – he certainly has his humanist moments, to be sure – an Aristotle whose analytic and ethical commitments shift with his subject matter, so much so that at points I will claim that his thinking is positively *posthuman*.[[9]](#footnote-9) My contention is that many in the CAS camp, in fact, are disinclined to look to thinkers like Aristotle because they do not incorporate insights from New Materialism, and part of my task here is to make the claim that a dialogue between NM and CAS allows for a more capacious understanding of the tradition of political theory. By listening to the multiple voices in Aristotle, humanist *and* posthumanist, we gain a surprising interlocutor in contemporary debates on the moral and political status of nonhumans. Aristotle’s thought is not reducible to these more recent trends in political theory, nor is New Materialism or Posthumanism simply reducible to Aristotle – there is nothing in this essay that suggests an attitude of “oh, everything was there in Aristotle all along!” is an appropriate response – but I will contend that opening a dialogue between the hoary Aristotle and Posthumanism can be fruitful for classicists (Aristotle is stranger than they think), Posthumanists (Aristotelian thought too is an actant), and humanists (the Ancients were never humanists) alike. In order to do this we need to see how strange some of Aristotle’s biological writings actually get, and I will suggest that attending to this “weird Aristotle” (Harman 2013)[[10]](#footnote-10) has value both for designing political institutions in the present, as well as how we understand the nature of our intellectual inheritance from the distant past.

My itinerary in the paper is as follows: first I will chart some developments in New Materialism, for those readers unfamiliar with the basic terrain of this emerging interdisciplinary field. Next I will then move to a discussion of Aristotle’s humanism, since there are certainly moments in his texts where he talks like the philosopher described by Arendt. Following this I will move to discuss “weird Aristotle” more directly, looking in particular at a number of passages from the *Historia Animalium* (roughly, “Inquiries into Animals,” though it is often inaccurately translated as “History of Animals”) and the *De Partibus Animalium* (“Parts of Animals”), especially, and connect these texts with New Materialist perspectives. I will then move back to the animal politics literature, as exemplified by Gary Steiner’s critique of Aristotle, since Steiner provides a recent example of how Critical Animal Studies tends to close itself off from fruitful but tense intellectual encounters. Finally I will close with a brief reflection on how this dialogue between Aristotle and the New Materialists might be carried forward, both as a practice of reading political theory, and with an eye toward new political institutions.

*New Materialism as a Posthumanism*

Posthumanists (and more recently, New Materialists) have been suggesting, for some time now, that “we have never been human” (Haraway 2008), though the term is a labile operator and is easily misunderstood. Most all posthumanists are not anti-human (in the sense of opposing themselves to the survival of the human species), but rather oppose the perquisites of humanism (often with the adjective “liberal” prefixed), understood as the claim that humans are rational, autonomous agents who are fundamentally distinct from “nature” (variously defined), and is thus typically characterized by strong dualisms (human/animal, soul/body, mind/brain, etc) (Braidotti 2013). Human uniqueness is typically lodged in some peculiar capacity allegedly possessed by humans alone (language, speech, reason, morality, tool-use, etc.), and this trait is figured as a property that defines humans, while also being something that humans own and wield *as* property – hence the common humanist claim that language is a tool like any other that humans use in order to navigate their environment (Wolfe 2010). Humanism is thus linked by posthumanists with fantasies of control that lead to various imperialisms (against other nations, or species) in a struggle to master an environment which is, at its base, unmasterable.

While New Materialism is slightly more unified than Posthumanism, my selection of criteria is somewhat subjective and I can only ask forgiveness of those versions of NM that I may be slighting in my summary. I rely primarily on the accounts of Jane Bennett and William Connolly, who see NM as comprising a loose orientation (Bennett calls it “vital materialism”) that includes attention to: a) distributed agency, b) emergence, defined as autotelic dynamism, and c) an interconnected cosmos rather than a dualistic world (vis a vis mind/matter, or soul/body, or human/animal). Distributed agency refers to the way in which agency, defined loosely as a capacity to respond in non-automatic ways to environmental stimuli, is a characteristic possessed by human, animal, and material bodies. Bennett (2009) famously talks about the miraculous capacity of organic bodies, approximately a billion years ago, to spontaneously develop rigid mineral structures (which we will later come to call “bone”). Only with matter’s spontaneous (agentic) transformation into bone are any of the more complex forms of life (like us) possible, but there was nothing pre-ordained (well, not as far as we can tell…) about the advent of mineralization. This process also illustrates the other aspects of the New Materialist cosmos, since the emergence of bone is a phenomenon that was a potential within the pre-bone material entities, but one whose complexity arose through simple interactions in conjunction with systemic-level processes that were neither reducible nor derivable from the individual entities (Connolly 2013). We can also see, through this depiction of the agency of minerals, that no qualitative or transcendent principle separates inorganic from organic material – the New Materialist cosmos does not know how to segregate itself into dichotomous zones like human/animal or mind/matter (Braidotti 2013). And while Bennett, Connolly, and Braidotti typically orient themselves vis a vis Spinoza, I shall argue that Aristotle’s world (at least its posthumanist moments) is not markedly different from this monist universe.

*Aristotle, Human All Too Human?*

Before I can get to the Aristotle of the “strange stranger” (Morton 2013), though, I need to give full credence to the traditional Aristotle of Arendt and Strauss. Focusing on the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, they are not wrong to think that Aristotle is a dyed-in-the-wool humanist. Let’s look at the evidence: Aristotle says that humans are “more political” than other animals, since nature “makes nothing pointlessly, as we say, and no animal has speech except a human being…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 a community in these that makes a household and a city-state” (1253a7-18). A polis seems also to definitively exclude nonhuman animals, since animals (and slaves) associate merely “for the sake of life” rather than “for the sake of living well,” and there cannot be a polis of animals (or slaves) “because these share neither in happiness nor in a life guided by deliberative choice” (1280a30-33). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he adds some texture to this account, since animals have neither the ability to be incontinent nor intemperate because they lack “universal supposition” and have only “appearance and memory of particulars” (1147b5-6), and furthermore it seems that humans cannot have friendships cross species lines, “for where ruler and ruled have nothing in common, they have no friendship, since they have no justice either…nor is there any towards a horse or a cow, or towards a slave, in so far as he is a slave” (1161a33-34, 1161b3-4).[[11]](#footnote-11) But it is in the *Politics* that Aristotle adds the anthropocentric crown to all these observations. Not only are animals better off being ruled by humans, “[f]or domestic animals are better by nature than wild ones, and it is better for all of them to be ruled by human beings, since this will secure their safety” (1254b10-12), but animals are apparently find their natural end in use by humans: “we must suppose in the case of fully developed things too that plants are for the sake of animals, and that the other animals are for the sake of human beings, domestic ones both for using and eating, and most but not all wild ones for food and other kinds of support, so that clothes and the other tools may be got from them. If nature makes nothing incomplete or pointless, it must have made all of them for the sake of human beings” (1256b15-22). Was Homer Simpson then simply riffing on Aristotle, when he said, “If God didn’t want us to eat animals, why did he make them out of meat?”

*Weird Aristotle*

Let’s look at a couple of passages from the *De Partibus Animalium* and *Historia Animalium* and consider how they might relate to the anthropocentric passages from the *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the first book of *PA* we can see that Aristotle is aware that his exploration of animals may not be considered sufficiently philosophical, perhaps acknowledging the prejudice that he himself evinces in the *Politics* and *NE*. He admits that of the two sorts of “works of Nature,” those that change and perish and those that are eternal, the eternal are more “divine” but are also harder to come by in this life (644b23-25). However, because we have better access to the changeable things of this world, “our knowledge of them has the advantage over the other” (645a3), and animals are valuable for precisely this reason, even if at first blush we find the animals under study somewhat unattractive: “for though there are animals which have no attractiveness for the senses, yet for the eye of science, for the student of a philosophic spirit and can discern the causes of things, Nature which fashioned them provides joys which cannot be measured” (645a7-10). He then adds a kind of parable that I will cite in detail not just because of its charm:

Wherefore we must not betake ourselves to the consideration of the meaner animals with a bad grace, as though we were children; since in all natural things there is somewhat of the marvelous. There is a story which tells how some visitors once wished to meet Heracleitus, and when they entered and saw him in the kitchen, warming himself at the stove, they hesitated; but Heracleitus said, “Come in; don’t be afraid; there are gods even here.” In like manner we ought not to hesitate nor to be abashed, but boldly to enter upon our researches concerning animals of every sort and kind, knowing that in not one of them is Nature or Beauty lacking. I add “Beauty,” because in the works of Nature purpose and not accident is predominant…If, however, there is anyone who holds that the study of the animals is an unworthy pursuit, he ought to go further and hold the same opinion about the study of himself (645a15-28).

There are a number of remarkable things about this passage. The first, and most obvious, is the connection that Aristotle makes between the “meaner” (“less noble,” or “dishonored”) animals and the vocation of philosophy itself, since Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* uses the same term (*thaumazo*) to describe what leads humans to philosophize in the first place (982b12). This term, wonder or marvel, also connotes (in the Greek) something that demands honor or worship, and that Aristotle is willing to connect it to animals (especially those that *appear* ugly to human senses) indicates that his perspective in *PA* may not be identical with that of the political treatises. That before which we wonder is not something of which we humans are in control (like the tools, slaves, and cows of *NE*) (1161b3-4), nor is it something that is simply intended for human use (as are animals in 1256b15-22), since we are the ones brought into question by the animal, rather than the animal being for the sake of us. And on top of this we get to see something of Aristotle the scold, or at least Aristotle exercising a little fun at his audience’s expense: don’t be a baby, he says, which is what you’re acting like if you think you’re somehow better than the animals I’m about to describe (and he goes on to say that humans too are just flesh and blood and guts – animals all!). He concludes with his claim that beauty too is present in these animals, and that because of the way they are imbued with purpose and are not merely the products of accident. I will say a little more on the subject of final causality and animals in another section of this paper, but here I will just note that Aristotle, unlike in the *Politics*, emphasizes that the purpose (or, “for the sake of which” as it is often rendered in translations of his work) of animals does not derive from any orientation (or particular relation) toward human beings.

If *De Partibus* is something like a methodological roadmap for Aristotle’s “natural science,” the *Historia Animalium* is more of an encyclopedic survey of the anatomy and behavior of most of the 500 animal species that Aristotle discusses in his oeuvre (Pellegrin 1986). In Book VIII of the *HA* Aristotle undertakes an exploration of the “character” of animals, and perhaps the first surprising thing is that he uses the same term, *ethos*, that he uses to describe the habits and character of humans in the political writings. He also refers, in this opening section of VIII, to the “intelligence” (*phronesis*),[[12]](#footnote-12) “courage” (*andreia*), and receptivity to “learning” (*mathesis*) and “instruction” (*didaskalos*) of animals as a general introduction to what follows in the rest of the book (608a1-18). After these preliminaries he goes into great detail describing the habits, “ways of life” (*bioi*), and actions (*praxis*) of various kinds of animals, and Aristotle at many points refers to animal intelligence as *dianoia* (e.g. 612b21) and *nous* (e.g. 610b22), terms that in the *NE* would seem restricted to humans alone, though more frequently he returns to *phronesis* (e.g. 612b1, on the weasel’s strategy in dispatching birds) as the default descriptor.[[13]](#footnote-13) Many of these examples seem quaint (or even simply absurd) to modern eyes, though Aristotle makes no comment that suggests he is being ironic. For instance, as one case of animal *phronesis* he notes that “in Crete they say the wild goats when struck by arrows look for dittany; this is believed to have the effect of expelling arrows in the body” (612a3-5). Whether the goats actually eat this plant based on such a calculation may be dubious, but that dubitation does not seem to be in Aristotle’s mind since he lists a number of similar behaviors by other animals (to wit: he says that dogs eat a certain plant in order to vomit, in the very next sentence after the goat example), also without comment. If we can get over our incredulity over Aristotle’s credulity in these accounts, we see that Aristotle is far from dismissing animal intelligence as a shadowy imitation of human intelligence, but instead shows it standing on its own account as cause of animal action and a part of many animals’ habitus.

Aristotle devotes a great deal of attention (five Bekker pages) to the behavior of bees in *HA*, which is not surprising since bees are one of the other species (ants, cranes, and wasps are the others, though he does not devote as much attention to them – perhaps because cranes are less easily observed than bees) to which he applies the adjective “*politikon*” (along with humans). This passage in *HA* Book I is worth citing at length:

There are also differences about ways of life (*bious*) and actions (*praxeis*). Some of these [animals] are gregarious (*agelaia*), while others are solitary (*monadika*) – footed and winged and swimming – while yet others of these tend toward both sides. And of the gregarious [and of the solitary] there are on the one hand (*men*) the political (*politikos*) and on the other (*de*) the scattered (*sporadikos*). There are gregarious animals among the flyers: for example in the *genos* of pigeons and the crane and the swan (although crooked-taloned birds are in no way gregarious). Among the swimmers, moreover, many kinds of fish, such as those called migratory – tuna, *pelamudes*, bonito – [are gregarious animals]. Humankind, however (*de*), tends toward both sides. Political, on the other hand (*de*), are those among whom some one (*hen*) and common (*koinon*) thing is (*gignetai*) the work of all (*ergon pantôn*). That is something that not all gregarious animals do. Such are humans, bees, the wasp, the ant, and the crane. Of these, some live under leaders, while others are anarchic. For example, the crane and the *genos* of bees follow leaders, while ants and many other kinds are leaderless (487b33-488a13).[[14]](#footnote-14)

It is interesting that for Aristotle, bees and the other get to be counted as “political” because they cooperate on a common project (I note in passing that Aristotle’s “common thing” would be translated literally, in Latin, as *res publica*). Aristotle evinces great respect for the habits and *bios* of the bee, and he describes a polity (a term I use pointedly, though it is in line with Aristotle’s description of bees as political animals) that is divided into leaders and followers, highly organized, complex, and (this is most important) functionally differentiated. Groups of bees have specific tasks that are necessary to the survival of the common life of the hive – some gather flowers, some gather water, some smooth the combs, some lead (625b18-27) – and it seems that the combination of a common task, and role differentiation, is sufficient for Aristotle to term a species political. He certainly knew of other species that cooperate together (say in a hunt), but apparently the lack of different role-specific “jobs” indicated to him that “political” was not an appropriate description. I hesitate to speculate on whether this criterion of functional separation in animals may have influenced Aristotle’s views in the *Politics*, where he also sees the need for social classes among humans based on the division of labour (manual laborers of various stripes are not properly citizens of the ideal city of Book VII), though I suspect the causal arrow runs in the other direction – it would seem his humanist vision of functional separation leads him to see politics in bees but not less-differentiated species like wolves.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In Aristotle’s thick description of the political life of bees, etc., we see analogues to the New Materialist tropes of distributed agency and the monist cosmos. Aristotle argues that even non-political animals like goats, dolphins, and elephants possess varying degrees of agency, exercising choice in their lives via both *phronesis* and *dianoia*, and he uses similar principles of explanation (his four causes – material, formal, final, efficient – are present across domains, though they do not operate identically in all cases) to account for animal as well as human behavior. His cosmos is not bifurcated by claims of human exceptionalism, or by any fundamental dualisms akin to soul/body or mind/matter (since the soul *is* the form of the body, in its radical particularity). There is “purpose” everywhere, in human and nonhuman alike, though this does not mean that animals design themselves in exactly the way that a human might build a house (though he says that some birds actually *do* build houses in basically the same way as humans, 612b20ff.), nor that the “unmoved mover” is actively shaping the cosmos. Instead, he reads purpose back into animal (and human) behavior as an empirical principle necessary to explain what cannot be reduced to “necessary” (i.e. material) causation, and it is far from the mystical or transcendental assertion that many have presumed (Gotthelf 1987b).

Aristotle is similarly interested in something like what New Materialists call “emergence” or *autopoiesis* – animals (and humans) are constantly creating new things that could not have been predicted by any account of the world *ex ante*. Much like Arendt’s natality or the Deleuzean “virtual,” Aristotle sees potential (*dynamis*) as a constant possible reservoir of novelty in the world (Gotthelf 1987b). This occurs in profound ways with semen in the creation of new (but unpredictable) life,[[16]](#footnote-16) but Aristotle also discusses emergence at the level of mature animals: “their characters too change in accordance with their activities (*praxeis*), and often certain bodily parts change as well” (631b6-7). Not just their character but their form (*morphe*) can also alter, in accordance with what contemporary biologists call epigenetic change, and it is becoming increasingly common to see Aristotle as a progenitor (often unacknowledged) of the new field of evolutionary-development biology (“evo-devo”) (Anzaldo 2007).

*Animals Against Aristotle?*

Is it possible to incorporate these examples of “weird Aristotle” within the standard narrative? Indeed it is. For those philosophers who take note of Aristotle’s biological inclination, the usual strategy (indeed it is universal among this group, so far as I have been able to find) is to maintain that Aristotle’s references to animal politics, intelligence, and language are all metaphorical (though Aristotle does not explicitly state this on most of the relevant occasions), and are meant only to show analogs between human and animal behavior without fundamentally disturbing the anthropocentric provenance of his philosophy (Keyt 1987). This is also how Gary Steiner, an animal rights philosopher, reads Aristotle in his thorough *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents* (2010). While Steiner acknowledges many of the same passages to which I have devoted attention, he ultimately discounts their significance: “My working hypothesis is that Aristotle’s metaphorical usage is born of a sensitivity to the richness of animal capacities, but that this sensitivity is later attenuated by Aristotle’s intensive focus on the human condition in the ethical and psychological writings… Ultimately he is unable to do justice to both sides of the dichotomy between the human and the animal realms. But he may come closer to doing so than any other Western advocate of the superiority of human beings over animals” (Steiner 2010, 72). I have several reasons for not being persuaded by Steiner’s position, though I have no single knockdown argument, and I agree with much of his analysis.

I will begin with a minor point, though greater philological clarity could make it a major one: Steiner’s claim that the ethical works are “later” than the biological writings seems not to be correct, although there is no way to be sure. At the very least it appears that the *Historia Animalium* is a relatively later work of Aristotle’s, so that whatever may be said of the relative dates of other scientific works *HA* is no longer thought to be from an early period (Pellerin 1986). The actual evidence for a firm chronology is lacking, but there is no strong reason for thinking that the *NE* or *Politics* represent Aristotle’s “mature” views in contrast to the accounts of animal intelligence in the *PA* and *HA*, and certainly the Heraclitus parable in *PA* seems to indicate that it is coming later in Aristotle’s career, perhaps even after the *Metaphysics*. Beyond this minor point, however, my major disagreements are: 1) that Steiner relies too much on a unitary view of Aristotle’s work, 2) he does not account for the New Materialist elements in Aristotle like emergence or distributed agency, and 3) that he also seems to privilege authorial intent as an interpretive principle. To start with the last issue first: Steiner appears to require Aristotle to state explicitly something akin to an animal rights credo in order to fully validate Aristotle’s worth as an interlocutor. But pace Quentin Skinner, it is not clear why this interpretive commitment is necessary or even advisable – and in Aristotle’s case the history is certainly one of creative appropriation (given that Aristotle, no Christian, has long been considered of importance for his proto-Thomism as much as for anything else). In the case at hand, we see Aristotle writing things about animals in *HA* and *PA* that flatly contradict what he writes in the ethical oeuvre, with no compelling reason to assume which version should control over the other. Aristotle’s narrative in the biological works runs away from him, performing operations that he may not have fully intended and yet which get said anyway. Why must we discipline his text, force it to say only one thing rather than two (or more than two), if Aristotle himself didn’t go to the trouble of reigning himself in? Let him contradict himself – does he not contain multitudes?

That Steiner and others opt for a unitary view (my next qualm) to resolve this tension is another questionable hermeneutic move. Aristotle himself tells us in the first book of the *Ethics* to beware being too systematic across philosophical subject areas, and there is a general acknowledgement in the philosophical literature on Aristotelian biology that this kind of systematicity is simply not there (Depew 1995, following Balme 1962; Balme 1987c; Gotthelf 1985a; Lennox 1980). One cannot simply take the account of final causality and the unmoved mover from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and apply it to human and animal causality in the rest of the corpus, for instance, as John Protevi (2001) does in pronouncing (and criticizing) that for Aristotle “the organism is the judgment of God” (Gotthelf 1987b). But if Aristotle is heterodox across various subject areas, then we cannot simply overlay the claims about rationality from the *Ethics* onto the *HA*, even *if* it were the case that the *Ethics* was the later work.

Finally, then, Steiner suffers from a lack of engagement with posthumanist or New Materialist thought, which is not surprising given his general disdain for anything that smacks of postmodernism (Steiner 2013). Steiner is apparently uninterested in the fertile cross-pollination that has been occurring for some years between posthumanists trained in the humanities and the sciences (that interests Braidotti, Connolly, Hayles, and Anzaldo 2007, for instance), so that any of the insights developed therein do not find any purchase in his analysis. Listening to these other voices, however, as I have suggested, open new avenues both for scholars of Aristotle as well as animal politics.

*Conclusion: Traditions and Institutions*

So how might our encounters with bees be different, after “weird” Aristotle – might we be called to inaugurate new kinds of political institutions? If we see bees as political in the full sense of the term, and not just metaphorically, we should be more open to calls for seeing groups of animals as deserving something like a right to sovereignty (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011). But more than this, we might consider what “common thing” might bring together our two polities, the bee and the human. This does not imply erasing all differences between bees and humans, or humans and other animals, but it would situate these differences within a larger analogical universe of the “more and less” (as Aristotle describes the possession of differing traits, across species lines). It might incline us to give us the perch of superiority that anthropocentrism has arrogated to itself, and we may also try to think more creatively about the ways that members of differently organized polities encounter one another. Isabelle Stengers (2010) and Bruno Latour (2004) have talked of a new role for “diplomacy” and for intermediaries (human and non-human) between polities in tension, but thinking of this inter-species diplomacy is also a way of returning to the oldest of the old – the origins of political theory. The *theoros*, as we know, was the ancient Greek city’s representative at foreign religious festivals: he was the one who saw and reported on the gods of the Other. These new diplomats, new theorists, are now called upon to visit places that until recently didn’t seem like polities at all, though Aristotle seemed to think otherwise. Perhaps our diplomat-theorists will also see strange alien species-gods, as well, like the *theoros* of old? Xenophanes thought that if horses had gods they would depict them with hooves – I eagerly await confirmation or disconfirmation of his working hypothesis.

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1. This is the epigraph to Peck, 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Trick question: the answer is neither. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All references to Aristotle’s texts cite to the Bekker page numbers, unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Arendt’s later work is not so clearly anthropocentric. Her *Life of the Mind* cites the work of biologist Adolf Portmann in some detail, to the effect that all life, not just human life, begins to take on the characteristics that she had restricted to the realm of action in *Human Condition* (Arendt 1981, 27-30). Even in *HC* her explicit denigration of the *animal laborans* is vitiated to some extent by the fact that the key concept for action, natality, draws on the reproductive process shared by human and animal life. I owe this insight to a conversation with Rom Coles. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Josh Ober combines the anthropocentrism of Arendt and Strauss with Aquinas’s mistranslation, in an interesting twist. He talks of humans as “political animals,” hewing closely to the Greek with Arendt, but when talking about other animals he repeatedly calls them “gregarious” or “social” but not political, in spite of Aristotle’s use of the same adjective throughout both human and animal examples that Ober otherwise translates as “political” (Ober 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This neglect of the biological writings is not limited to political theorists. The Perseus Project, an online database of ancient literature through Tufts University, contains only the political writings plus the *Metaphysics* and *Poetics*. It also includes several ethical works now considered spurious, yet has nothing of genuine (and crucial) works like *De Partibus Animalium* or *Historia Animalium*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Pellegrin 1986, for instance, or Balme 1987a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anachronism is defensible, of course, per Margaret Leslie, who also gives political theorists strong reasons for not overvaluing the intentions of the author (Leslie 1970). As Foucault might add: it’s not what something (or *someone*) means, but what you can *do* with a text that matters (Foucault 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I will cash out this term shortly. I am lumping the “New Materialists” of my title under this rubric, thought there are many different varieties of “posthuman” and this is merely one of them. The other main branches of posthumanism (and representative texts, respectively) could be termed a) transhumanist (Bostrom 2005); b) cybernetic (Haraway 1985; Hayles 1999); c) deconstructive (Derrida 2002; Wolfe 2010); d) Spinozist/monist (Bennett 2009; Braidotti 2013; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Grosz 2011), and finally e) OOO (object-oriented-ontology) (Harman 2013, Morton 2013), though I would freely acknowledge that one could construct these categories very differently. For another classification of posthumanism see Wolfe 2010, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Though I use Harman’s term I do not follow his specific treatment of Aristotle’s weirdness, which for him stems from Aristotle’s attention to the radical particularity of objects in the world (stemming from Harman’s development of object-oriented-ontology). This is related to his connection to New Materialism, but I do not develop these particular arguments here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Though whether a friendship between animals and humans that is not based on utility or mastery is possible, Aristotle does not say. Tellingly he only mentions domesticated animals that are used, like a slave, as “living tools.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is better translated “practical wisdom” or “political knowledge” – *phronesis* is what the *phronimos* (statesman, politician) knows best of all. Aristotle will call deer and wild goats *phronimos*, among other animals to which he applies this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As a side note, I would observe that attending to the Aristotelian biological corpus renders Giorgio Agamben’s (Agamben 1998) opposition of the terms *bios* and *zoe* as fundamentally suspect. Whether there is something more to his conceptual claim is another matter, but in Aristotle the nonhuman zoon is constantly also a being inhabited by bios. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The translation is from Depew 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. We now have some evidence that bees are far less hierarchical and differentiated than Aristotle believed, as Seeley (2010) argues in *Honeybee Democracy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The next iteration of this draft will see a much fuller account of potentiality and virtuality through an explication of Aristotle’s vision of procreation, in *On the Generation of Animals*, and his account of movement in *De Motu Animalium*. I will also develop Aristotle’s empirical, non-essentialist vision of what makes a species, since there is a widespread misperception that Aristotle believed in the “eternity of species” (Balme 1962; Pellerin 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)