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HOW TO CARE ABOUT ANIMALS

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1. Small Is Beautiful (Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 1.5)

In 1980, art critic John Berger published a widely read and highly influential essay entitled “Why Look at Animals?” about the alienation that sets in between human and nonhuman animal species in a capitalistic age of mechanical reproduction. Why look at animals? The following excerpt is Aristotle’s answer to that question, formulated over two thousand years prior. Somehow, in only a few paragraphs, Aristotle manages to present the best case perhaps ever made for the inherent worth of both physical and metaphysical pursuits. Remarkably fresh and contemporary is his insistence that all scientific investigation, of whatever sort, should be concerned with systemic wholes, about which, he says, looking at animals has much to teach us.

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Τῶν οὐσιῶν ὅσαι φύσει συνεστᾶσι, τὰς μὲν <λέγομεν> ἀγενήτους καὶ ἀφθάρτους εἶναι τὸν ἅπαντα αἰῶνα, τὰς δὲ μετέχειν γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς. συμβέβηκε δὲ περὶ μὲν ἐκείνας τιμίας οὐσας καὶ θείας ἐλάττους ἡμῖν ὑπάρχειν θεωρίας (καὶ γὰρ ἐξ ὧν ἂν τις σκέψαιτο περὶ αὐτῶν, καὶ περὶ ὧν εἰδέναί ποθοῦμεν, παντελῶς ἐστὶν ὀλίγα τὰ φανερὰ κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν), περὶ δὲ τῶν φθαρτῶν φυτῶν τε καὶ ζώων εὐποροῦμεν μᾶλλον πρὸς τὴν γνῶσιν διὰ τὸ σύντροφον· πολλὰ γὰρ περὶ ἕκαστον γένος λάβοι τις ἂν τῶν ὑπαρχόντων βουλόμενος διαπονεῖν ἱκανῶς. ἔχει δ' ἑκάτερα χάριν.

τῶν μὲν γὰρ εἰ καὶ κατὰ μικρὸν ἐφαπτόμεθα, ὅμως διὰ τὴν τιμιότητα τοῦ γνωρίζειν ἥδιον ἢ τὰ παρ' ἡμῖν ἅπαντα, ὥσπερ καὶ τῶν ἐρωμένων τὸ τυχὸν καὶ μικρὸν μόριον κατιδεῖν ἥδιόν ἐστιν ἢ πολλὰ ἕτερα καὶ μεγάλα δι' ἀκριβείας ἰδεῖν· τὰ δὲ διὰ τὸ μᾶλλον καὶ πλείω γνωρίζειν αὐτῶν λαμβάνει τὴν τῆς ἐπιστήμης ὑπεροχὴν, ἔτι δὲ διὰ τὸ πλησιαίτερα ἡμῶν εἶναι καὶ τῆς φύσεως οἰκειότερα ἀντικαταλλάττεται τι πρὸς τὴν περὶ τὰ θεῖα φιλοσοφίαν.

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We assert that there two sorts of beings in Nature, those that are without origin, eternal, and indestructible, and those that participate in processes of birth and decay. It follows that those beings in the first category, although precious because divine, are less susceptible to investigation because there is scant empirical evidence for what we yearn to know about them. But concerning beings that perish, like plants and animals, we are better provided for in gaining knowledge because we live alongside them. Indeed, anyone who cares enough to put in the work can discover a great deal about each of their various kinds. Nonetheless, both sorts of beings have their own charm.

So, while it's clear that our grasp of eternal subjects is slight, nonetheless, because they are precious, knowledge of them is more delightful than knowledge of everything else that falls in our orbit, just as it is more delightful to get a partial, fleeting glimpse of those we love than to review a host of quotidian details with precision, even if those, too, are important. Subjects of study on Earth, on the other hand, because we have more and better information about them, take priority

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ἐπεὶ δὲ περὶ ἐκείνων διήλθομεν λέγοντες τὸ φαινόμενον ἡμῖν, λοιπὸν περὶ τῆς ζωικῆς φύσεως εἰπεῖν, μηδὲν παραλιπόντας εἰς δύναμιν μήτε ἀτιμότερον μήτε τιμιώτερον. καὶ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς μὴ κεχαρισμένοις αὐτῶν πρὸς τὴν αἴσθησιν κατὰ τὴν θεωρίαν ὅμως ἡ δημιουργήσασα φύσις ἀμηχάνους ἡδονὰς παρέχει τοῖς δυναμένοις τὰς αἰτίας γνωρίζειν καὶ φύσει φιλοσόφοις.

καὶ γὰρ ἂν εἴη παράλογον καὶ ἄτοπον, εἰ τὰς μὲν εἰκόνας αὐτῶν θεωροῦντες χαίρομεν ὅτι τὴν δημιουργήσασαν τέχνην συνθεωροῦμεν, οἷον τὴν γραφικὴν ἢ τὴν πλαστικὴν, αὐτῶν δὲ τῶν φύσει συνεστώτων μὴ μᾶλλον ἀγαπῶμεν τὴν θεωρίαν, δυνάμενοί γε τὰς αἰτίας καθορᾶν. διὸ δεῖ μὴ δυσχεραίνειν παιδικῶς τὴν περὶ τῶν ἀτιμοτέρων ζώων ἐπίσκεψιν· ἐν πᾶσι γὰρ τοῖς φυσικοῖς ἔνεστί τι θαυμαστόν·

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when it comes to knowledge because they are nearer to us and their nature more akin to our nature. Such pursuits compensate somewhat for the philosophy that concerns itself with theology.

So, now that we have rehearsed and presented our views on theological subjects, it remains to speak about animals and their nature. To the extent that we can, we will leave no animal out, whether it be regarded as valueless or highly prized. For even in dealing with animals that are less pleasing to the senses, when a person of natural philosophic bent considers them from a scientific point of view, someone who can understand the causes of things, Nature, in displaying its handiwork, presents pleasures beyond compare.

It would be strange and illogical, I would add, to take pleasure in looking at artistic representations of animals, and to study the craftsmanship that produced them, say, in painting or sculpture, but not to welcome even more so studying the actual creatures fashioned by Nature, especially when we can understand the causes from which they're sprung. Therefore, we must not flinch, as if we were children, at the careful consideration of less-esteemed animals, for in all of Nature there is something wonderful.

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καὶ καθάπερ Ἡράκλειτος λέγεται πρὸς τοὺς ξένους εἰπεῖν τοὺς βουλομένους ἐντυχεῖν αὐτῷ, οἱ ἐπειδὴ προσιόντες εἶδον αὐτὸν θερόμενον πρὸς τῷ ἱπνῷ ἔστησαν (ἐκέλευε γὰρ αὐτοὺς εἰσιέναι θαρροῦντας· εἶναι γὰρ καὶ ἐνταῦθα θεοῦς), οὕτω καὶ πρὸς τὴν ζήτησιν περὶ ἐκάστου τῶν ζώων προσιέναι δεῖ μὴ δυσωπούμενον, ὡς ἐν ἅπασιν ὄντος τινὸς φυσικοῦ καὶ καλοῦ. Τὸ γὰρ μὴ τυχόντως ἀλλ' ἔνεκά τινος ἐν τοῖς τῆς φύσεως ἔργοις ἐστὶ καὶ μάλιστα· οὗ δ' ἔνεκα συνέστηκεν ἢ γέγονε τέλους, τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν εἴληφεν.

εἰ δέ τις τὴν περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ζώων θεωρίαν ἄτιμον εἶναι νενόμικε, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον οἴεσθαι χρὴ καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ· οὐκ ἔστι γὰρ ἄνευ πολλῆς δυσχερείας ἰδεῖν ἐξ ὧν συνέστηκε τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος, οἷον αἶμα, σάρκες, ὀστᾶ, φλέβες καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα μόρια. ὁμοίως τε δεῖ νομίζειν τὸν περὶ οὐτινοσοῦν τῶν μορίων ἢ τῶν σκευῶν διαλεγόμενον μὴ περὶ τῆς ὕλης ποιεῖσθαι τὴν μνήμην, μηδὲ ταύτης χάριν, ἀλλὰ τῆς ὅλης μορφῆς, οἷον καὶ περὶ οἰκίας,

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There is a story that some strangers from out of town once came to visit the philosopher Heraclitus, and when they found him warming himself by the bread oven, they stopped short at the door, whereupon Heraclitus said, “Take heart! Come on in! For there are gods here, too!”¹ Just so, we, too, ought to enter into research on every kind of animal with no fear or squeamishness since all of them contain Nature and possess Beauty. I add “Beauty” because it is purpose and not chance that is most at work in Nature, and the purpose for which animals have been formed or the end for which they have been created takes its place among what counts as beautiful.

If, however, someone has concluded that the study of animals is an undistinguished pursuit, on that same logic he ought to think the same about the study of himself. For it’s impossible to look on the components from which a human being is constructed—blood, flesh, bones, veins, and so on—without a good deal of disgust. Relatedly, we should understand that someone who discusses any of these individual parts and their arrangements is not describing their material composition for its own sake but is concerned rather with the conformation of a whole. The same is true of a

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ἀλλὰ μὴ πλίνθων καὶ πηλοῦ καὶ ξύλων· καὶ τὸν περὶ φύσεως περὶ τῆς συνθέσεως καὶ τῆς ὅλης οὐσίας, ἀλλὰ μὴ περὶ τούτων ἃ μὴ συμβαίνει χωριζόμενά ποτε τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῶν.

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house—it's the whole structure that matters, not the bricks, mortar, and timber. Likewise, too, in Nature—the objective is to describe the synthetic whole, not the individual parts that do not occur separately apart from their combination as an entity.