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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.
Τῶν οὐσιῶν θαυμάζει συνεπάγων, τὰς μὲν <λέ­γομεν> ἀγενήτους καὶ ἀφθάρτους εἶναι τὸν ἀπαντα αἰώνα, τὰς δὲ μετέχειν γενέσεως καὶ φθοράς. συμ-βέβηκε δὲ περὶ μὲν ἐκείνας τιμίας οὖσας καὶ θείας ἐλάστους ἦµιν ὑπάρχειν θεωρίας (καὶ γὰρ ἔξ ὃν ἄν τις σκέψω σε περί αὐτῶν, καὶ περὶ ὃν εἰδέναι πο­θοῦμεν, παντελῶς ἐστὶν ὅλιγα τὰ φανερὰ κατὰ τὴν αἰσθήσιν), περὶ δὲ τῶν φθαρτῶν φυτῶν τε καὶ ζωῶν εὑ­πο­ρούμενος μᾶλλον πρὸς τὴν γνώσιν διὰ τὸ σύ­ντροφον· πολλὰ γὰρ περὶ ἕκαστον γένους λάβοι τις ἂν τῶν ὑπαρχόντων βουλόμενος δια­πονεῖν ἰκανῶς. ἔχει δ’ ἑκάτερα χάριν.

τῶν μὲν γὰρ εἰ καὶ κατὰ μικρὸν ἔφαστομεθα, ὡς φυσικῶς διὰ τὴν τιμιότητα τοῦ γνωρίζειν ἦδιον ὡς παρ’ ἦµιν ἀπαντα, ὡστε καὶ τῶν ἐρωμένων τὸ τυχόν καὶ μικρὸν μόριον κατιδεῖν ἦδιον ἐστὶν ὥστε πολλὰ ἑτερα καὶ μεγάλα δι’ ἀκριβείας ἰδεῖν· τὰ δὲ διὰ τὸ μᾶλλον καὶ πλεῖω γνωρίζειν αὐτῶν λαμβάνο­ντες τὴν τῆς ἐπιστήμης ὑπεροχήν, ἐτε δὲ διὰ τὸ πλη­σιαίτερα ἦµιν εἶναι καὶ τῆς φύσεως οἰκείοτερα ἀντικαταλάττεται τι πρὸς τὴν περὶ τὰ θεία 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
ἐπεὶ δὲ περὶ ἐκείνων διήλθομεν λέγοντες τὸ φαινόμενον ἡμῖν, λοιπὸν περὶ τῆς ζωικῆς φύσεως εἴπειν, μηδὲν παραλιπόντας εἰς δύναμιν μήτε ἀτιμότερον μήτε τιμιώτερον. καὶ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς μὴ κεχαρισμένοις αὐτῶν πρὸς τὴν αἴσθησιν κατὰ τὴν θεωρίαν ὁμοίως ἡ δημιουργήσασα φύσις ἀμηχάνους ἠδονὰς 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, οἶον τὴν γραφικὴν ἢ τὴν πλαστικὴν, αὐτῶν δὲ τῶν φύσει συνεστῶτων μὴ μᾶλλον ἀγαπῶμεν τὴν θεωρίαν, δυνάμενοι γε τὰς αἰτίας καθορᾶν. διὸ δὲ η ὑσχεραίνειν παιδικῶς τὴν περὶ τῶν ἀτιμότερων ζώων ἐπίσκεψιν· ἐν πᾶσι γὰρ τοῖς φυσικοῖς ἔνεστι τι θαυμαστόν·
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.
καὶ καθάπερ Ἡράκλειτος λέγεται πρὸς τοὺς ξένους εἰπεῖν τοὺς βουλομένους ἐντυχεῖν αὐτῷ, οἱ ἐπειδὴ προσιόντες εἶδον αὐτὸν θερόμενον πρὸς τῷ ἵππῳ ἔστησαν (ἐκέλευε γὰρ αὐτοὺς εἰσιέναι θαρ-ροῦντας· εἶναι γὰρ καὶ ἐνταῦθα θεοὺς), οὗτω καὶ πρὸς τὴν ζήτησιν περὶ ἑκάστου τῶν ζῴων προσίε-ναι δεῖ μὴ δυσωπούμενον, ὡς ἐν ἄπασιν ὁντος τινὸς φυσικοῦ καὶ καλοῦ. Τὸ γὰρ μὴ τυχόντως ἄλλ’ ἑνεκά τινος ἐν τοῖς τῆς φύσεως ἔργοις ἔστι καὶ μάλιστα· οὐ δ’ ἑνεκα συνεστηκεν ἢ γέγονε τέλους, τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν εἰληφεν.

εἰ δὲ τις τὴν περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ζῴων θεωρίαν ἄτι-
μον εἶναι νενόμικε, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον οἶεσθαί χρὴ καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ· οὐκ ἔστι γὰρ ἄνευ πολλῆς δυσχε-
ρείας ἱδεῖν ἐξ ὧν συνεστηκε τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος, οἶον αἷμα, σάρκες, ὀστᾶ, φλέβες καὶ τὰ
tοιαῦτα μόρια. ὡμοίως τε ἀνθρώπων διὰ
tοιαῦτα μόρια. ὡμοίως τε δεῖ νομίζειν τὸν περὶ ὀὔ-
νοσοῦν τῶν μορίων ἢ τῶν σκευῶν διαλεγόμενον
tὸ περὶ τῆς υλῆς ποιεῖσθαι τὴν μνήμην, μηδὲ
tαύτης χάριν, ἀλλὰ τῆς όλης μορφῆς, οἶον καὶ περὶ

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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
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 χωριζόμενα ποτε τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῶν.
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.