



Animals: A History

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Reflection

Listening to Aesop's Animals

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Abstract and Keywords

The legendary Aesop, whom Herodotus (*Histories*, 2.134) places on Samos in the sixth century BCE, did not write a single fable with his own hand. The fables that have survived under his name were written in the centuries after his death, composed by a diverse set of writers who labeled their stories “Aesop’s” with little concern for historical accuracy. We are left with hundreds of tales and anecdotes scattered across the remains of classical literature, in both Greek and Latin, in prose and in verse, each one with murky origins and dubious links to the life of Aesop....

The legendary Aesop, whom Herodotus (*Histories*, 2.134) places on Samos in the sixth century BCE, did not write a single fable with his own hand. The fables that have survived under his name were written in the centuries after his death, composed by a diverse set of writers who labeled their stories “Aesop’s” with little concern for historical accuracy. We are left with hundreds of tales and anecdotes scattered across the remains of classical literature, in both Greek and Latin, in prose and in verse, each one with murky origins and dubious links to the life of Aesop.¹ While this state of affairs poses significant challenges for the philologist and the textual critic, the openness of the fable tradition, along with its simple style and moralizing tone, make Aesop a useful point of reference for investigations of early Greek thought.

The philosophical content of Aesop's fables is perhaps best described as "popular" or "applied" ethics.² Like other ancient satirical genres (e.g., iambography, Greek comedy, Roman satire), fables describe and condemn common varieties of misbehavior, especially greed, hypocrisy, vanity, and deceit.³ But two salient features set the fable apart from other forms of moralizing literature: (1) the drawing out of an explicit message in the form of a moral⁴ and (2) the use of talking animals as protagonists. The aim of this brief reflection is to explore the relationship between these **(p.58)** two aspects of the fable by looking at the role played by animals in the genre's moralizing program. Why do animals feature so prominently in Aesop's fables? And why do they talk?

According to our ancient sources, the fable's use of animals primarily serves to underscore the fictionality and lightness of the stories.⁵ The risibility of the humanized animal allows the fable to make its point without boring or insulting an addressee. So, it follows, while calling someone an ass might reasonably cause offense, fable tellers can be more effective and more politic by offering advice or criticism with a made-up story. Take, for example, this excerpt from "The Ass in the Lion's Skin" (Perry, 188):⁶

An ass put on a lion's skin and went around frightening the other animals (*ta aloga zoa*). He saw a fox and tried to terrify her, too. But she happened to have heard his voice and said to him, "I can assure you I would have been afraid of you, too, if I hadn't heard your braying." So it is that some ignorant men who create an impression of being someone by their outward elegance expose themselves by their own talkativeness (*glōssalgias*).⁷

By bringing to the fore the fictitious nature of the story, animal fables entertain and establish that the only possibility of serious meaning is the interpretation; the auditor must listen to the moral and decide if the fable applies.⁸

No ancient writers (and few modern critics) seem to think of Aesop's talking animals as having anything at all to do with real animals. But it is worthwhile to reflect on why fable, one of the world's earliest forms of ethical literature, turned to anthropomorphized animals for its chief protagonists.⁹ That is, we can think of the fable animal as a particularly early and dynamic instantiation of an ancient preoccupation with tracking the boundaries between human and animal. The polysemy of the well-known Greek conception of *logos* is essential here; it can **(p.59)** denote (among other things) "speech," "conversation," "reason," and (significantly) "story" or "fable."¹⁰ While the animal world was believed to be governed by appetite and self-interest, humans have the capacity to use reason (*logos*) and thus to settle conflicts with conversation (also *logos*) and mutual persuasion.¹¹ Aesopic fables (called *Aisopeioi logoi*) play with the multiple meanings of *logos* by having animals use human speech to appeal to the

laws and customs that govern human society. More often than not, however, the animals' attempts at persuasion fail and give way to natural instincts.

As a typical example, in the fable of the "Wolf and Lamb" from the *Collectio Augustana*,¹² the wolf's search for a just (*eulogos*) cause to devour the lamb is met with the lamb's readiness to defend itself with words (Perry, 155):

A wolf saw a lamb drinking from a river and decided to find a just cause for making a meal of him. So from where he stood upstream he began to complain that the lamb was muddying the water and not letting him get a drink. When the lamb said that he was no more than touching the water with his lips and that besides, from where he was standing downstream, he couldn't possibly disturb the water above him, the wolf, failing in this complaint, said, "But last year you made unpleasant remarks about my father." Then, when the lamb said he wasn't even a year old, the wolf said to him, "Am I to be cheated out of eating you just because you are so glib (*apologiōn*) with your excuses?"

The fable (*logos*) shows that those who are set on doing wrong are not to be deterred even by a legal argument (*dikaia apologia*).

According to the moral, the fable is about the futility of using words to persuade those who refuse to listen to legal (or just) arguments. Greek ideas about what separates the human from the animal map directly onto the narrative: Aesop's animals may **(p.60)** paradoxically have the power of speech (*logos*), but the fable's (human) addressee must use reason (*logos*) to recognize and learn from the wolf's refusal to listen.

Even when the issue does not arise so explicitly, the gap between talking animals and listening humans appears to be built into the very structure of Aesopic fable. Fable animals are usually motivated only by predatory or survival instincts; they constantly resort to violence despite their ability to converse with one another. The attached morals then deliver their messages by marking the transition from animal fiction to human lesson, as in the following examples:

So it is with men, too. Those who give up what they have in hope of greater things are ill-advised.

("Hawk and Nightingale," Perry, 4)

So it is with men, too. It behooves men of sense not to undertake anything until they have seen where it leads.

("Fox and Goat in the Well," Perry, 9)

So it is with men, too. Liars always show off most when there is no one to discredit them.

("The Fox, the Monkey, and His Ancestors," Perry, 14)

It is just the same with men: some of them pretend to be suffering while others are doing the work. ("The Oxen and Squeaky Axle," Perry, 45)

A number of different formulaic phrases introduce morals in our surviving collections (e.g., the common Latin phrase *fabula docet*, "The fable teaches"), but these above, attached to fables in the *Collectio Augustana*, begin with phrases (e.g., *houtōs kai tōn anthrōpōn*) that spell out how we humans are meant to learn from the fictionalized animals: sometimes we behave like animals, but we must use our more robust possession of *logos* to improve ourselves.

By toying with the conventional role played by *logos* in separating human from animal, fable implies that there are some humans who, **(p.61)** left to their own devices, would prefer to live like animals. This idea surfaces most explicitly in a pair of fables on the origin of humans:

"Zeus, the Animals, and Man"

(Perry, 311)

They say that creatures were first fashioned and that gifts were bestowed on them by god: strength to one, speed to another, wings to another; but man stood there naked and said, "I am the only one you have left without a gift." Zeus said, "You are ungrateful although you have been granted the greatest gift of all, for you have received reason (*logos*), which prevails among gods as it does among men, is more powerful than the powerful, and swifter than the swiftest." Then, recognizing his gift, man went his way in reverence and gratitude. That although all rational (*logō*) beings are honored by god, some men are unappreciative of this honor but are rather jealous of dumb and irrational (*aloga*) beasts.

"Prometheus and Men"

(Perry, 240)

At the direction of Zeus, Prometheus fashioned men and beasts. But when Zeus saw that there were more of the irrational (*aloga*) animals, he ordered him to destroy some of the beasts and make them over into men. When he did as he was told, it turned out that the ones who had not been fashioned as men from the start had human form but were bestial in spirit (*tas de psuchas thēriōdeis*). The fable has a lesson for men who are bestial (*thēriōdē*) and ill-tempered.

These fables on human origins shed light on some basic assumptions that seem to underwrite the use of talking animals throughout the tradition: animals are "irrational" (*aloga*) and "dumb"; humans, though "naked" when compared to the

physical gifts of the other creatures, have been given “reason” (*logos*) to compensate for their relative weakness; despite the gift of reason, certain humans nonetheless have “beastly souls” and are prone to imitating animal behavior.

(p.62) It is also tempting to read these tales as accounts of the origins of fable, which, after all, makes animals’ limited participation in *logos* into a tool for teaching right and wrong behavior. In granting animals a share of *logos*, Aesopic fable necessarily blurs the lines between human and animal and, however playfully, hints at a continuum of human-animal behavior. On some level every animal fable challenges us to confront our conceptions of what exactly separates humans from animals. As a *logos* meant to be spoken and heard, each fable insists that it is our responsibility to listen and learn from its funhouse version of animal behavior. But amusing or not, fable animals are inevitably implicated in broader commitments to the human-animal binary; our understanding of those commitments can be enriched if we listen carefully to Aesop’s talking animals.

Notes:

(1.) For an overview of our sources for Aesop’s fables in Greek and Latin, see Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable*; cf. Lefkowitz, “Aesop and Animal Fables.”

(2.) Zafiroopoulos, *Ethics in Aesop’s Fables*, 26–36, provides an excellent survey of scholarship on the Greek fable’s ethical content and function.

(3.) On the relationship between fable and satire, see Cozzoli, “Poesia satirica latina”; del Vecchio and Fiore, “Fabula in satira”; Cavarzere, “Ego Polivi Versibus Senariis”; cf. Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable*, 31–35.

(4.) Ancient writers use several different terms for the pithy messages attached to fables (e.g., *epimythion*, *promythion*, *epilogos*, *paramythion*, *perimythion*), though none of them carries the ethical connotations of “moral” in English. See Perry, “The Origin of the Epimythium”; Nøjgaard, *La fable antique*, 1:122–28.

(5.) On animal fables as a useful way to lighten the mood and provoke laughter, see, e.g., Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 566, 1256–61 (see Henderson trans.); Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.17.25 (see Hubbell trans.); Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.9.1–3; 6.3.44 (in Russell, *Quintilian: The Orator’s Education*); Plutarch, *Moralia*, 14e and 162bc (see Helmbold trans.).

(6.) Numbers refer to fables collected in Perry, *Aesopica*.

(7.) All translations are from Daly, *Aesop without Morals*.

(8.) Cf. Nøjgaard, *La fable antique*, 1:63. The treatment and distribution of speech (*logos*) is not straightforward here; the ass, for example, does not speak but is twice characterized as making animal sounds (*phthegxamenou*,

ogkōmenou). Moreover the other animals that his lion costume is meant to frighten are characterized as “speechless” (*aloga*).

(9.) The animal fable did not, of course, originate in Greece, nor did the Greeks think it did; Greek authors associated it with various exotic figures (e.g., Conis the Cilician, Thouros the Sybarite, and Cybissus the Libyan) and with locales that had reputations as sources of venerable wisdom (e.g., Libya, Phrygia, Cilicia, Caria, Egypt); cf. Lefkowitz, “Aesop and Animal Fables.”

(10.) A number of different terms could describe fable, including *logos*, *ainos*, and *muthos* in Greek, and *apologus*, *fabula*, and *fabella* in Latin; cf. van Dijk, *AINOI*, 79-111.

(11.) See the useful comments in Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, 74-75.

(12.) The *Collectio Augustana*, usually placed in the first or second century CE, is our earliest surviving Greek fable collection; the *Augustana* fables can be found in Perry, *Aesopica*, numbered 1-231.

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