

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Toivanen, Juhana

**Title:** “Like Ants in a Colony We Do Our Share” : Political Animals in Medieval Philosophy

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

**Copyright:** © De Gruyter, 2021

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Toivanen, J. (2021). “Like Ants in a Colony We Do Our Share” : Political Animals in Medieval Philosophy. In P. Adamson, & C. Rapp (Eds.), *State and Nature : Studies in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (pp. 365-392). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110730944-017>

# “Like ants in a colony we do our share”

---

Political Animals in Medieval Philosophy

Juhana Toivanen (University of Jyväskylä / University of Gothenburg)

## Abstract

This chapter discusses the reception of the Aristotelian concept of ‘political animal’ in thirteenth and fourteenth century Latin philosophy. Aristotle thought that there are other political animals besides human beings, and his idea of what it means to be a political animal was partially based on biological needs and desires that lead animals to live together. By analysing what medieval philosophers thought of other political animals—such as ants, bees, and cranes—and of the biological basis of the political nature of humans, the chapter elaborates on the precise meaning of the concept of political animal. It is argued that biological aspects play a significant role in medieval views, but at the same time medieval authors tend to distance human beings from other political animals by emphasising rationality, choice, and language as central factors for the social and political life. The focus will be on medieval commentaries on Aristotle’s *Politics* and his zoological works (the so-called *De animalibus*), written by authors such as Albert the Great, Peter of Spain, Peter of Auvergne, and Nicholas of Vaudémont.

## 1. Introduction

We know nowadays that social behaviour and even cultural learning are common in the animal kingdom (Laland and Galef 2009). Attributing culture to animals may be a more recent trend, but the idea that human beings are in a fundamental way similar to other social animals is an old one. As is well known, Aristotle claims that not only humans but also many other animal species—such as ants, bees, and cranes—can be considered as *political animals* by nature (see, e.g., Aristotle 1984, 487b33–488a14), and medieval philosophers follow suit. According to them, human beings have a lot in common with other animals (De Leemans and Klemm 2007, 153–77), and one of the most salient similarities is the tendency to form organised communities, live in close association with other members of their species, collaborate and, if all goes well, contribute to the common good of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Aristotle also suggests that humans are political animals in a stricter sense. Rationality, language, and the ability to consider the normative dimension of justice transform the communities of human beings into something quite unlike beehives and ant colonies. (See, e.g., Aristotle 1998, 1253a7–18; 1242a22–27; 1280a31–34.) Understood in this way, human beings are the only political animals there are, since no other animal forms organised communities that aim for *eudaimonia* and involve considerations of justice. Modern scholars have adopted different strategies to resolve this apparent

---

<sup>1</sup> This similarity is acknowledged also in the main title of the present chapter, which is a quotation from an influential American punk band Bad Religion. Unsurprisingly, the original song has a strong political message: we should *not* be like ants but change the system that prey on the weak and poor.

tension in Aristotle's view.<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that the concept of political animal does not have a fixed meaning: in a strict sense it excludes non-human animals, and when Aristotle applies it to them, he uses the term metaphorically (Mulgan 1974, 438–45; Cooper 1990, 222–25). Others have emphasised that Aristotle uses the concept in a biological sense and refers to activity and a way of life. According to them, the political life of humans is not different in kind but only an intensification and modification of the political life of ants, bees, and cranes. Understood in this way, being a political animal in the human way does not exclude all those traits that we find in other political animals, but only brings in an additional dimension of rationality. Political life admits of degrees, and therefore humans are political in the same way but to a higher degree than other animals. (Depew 1995, 156–81; Labarrière 2004, 61–127.)

Whatever Aristotle meant, his view is open to two radically different interpretations of the concept of political animal. It can be taken to mean either (1) an animal that is a part of a *polis*, a special kind of community that aims for a good life and is necessarily based on rational considerations of justice; or (2) an animal that collaborates with other members of its species in order to achieve a common goal. These two notions contributed to medieval discussions, but medieval authors usually did not explicitly address the tension between them. They were mixed together in complex ways, and it is not always clear how (and indeed, whether) they were supposed to form a unified conception of what does it mean to be a political animal.

The present chapter aims to shed light on medieval discussions that operate with this concept. The focus is on the period between 1260s and 1370s,<sup>3</sup> and the chapter consists of three sections. Section two concentrates on political animals other than humans especially in the context of commentaries on Aristotle's zoological works. Section three examines commentaries on the *Politics* from the point of view of those psychological and biological traits that humans have in common with other animals, and the final section shows how certain medieval authors explicitly reject the idea that non-human animals are political. It is hoped that by analysing medieval discussions of political *animals*, and those aspects of the political nature of humans that are related to their animality, we will be in a better position to understand what exactly makes humans similar to other political animals on the one hand, and special in relation to them on the other.

## 2. Ants, bees, and cranes as political animals

The idea that there is no radical difference between the political life of humans and certain other animal species is most clearly presented in Aristotle's *Historia animalium*, which circulated together with his other zoological works under the common title *De animalibus*. This collection was translated into Latin twice, and although it was not among the most popular Aristotelian treatises, it received some attention from medieval scholastic philosophers. (Asúa 1991, 5–189; van den Abeele 1999, 287–318.) One of the most ambitious adaptations of this work is Albert the Great's (c. 1200–1280)

---

<sup>2</sup> Instead of trying to resolve the tension, one may of course follow David Keyt (1987, 54), who claims that: "there is a blunder at the very root of Aristotle's political philosophy."

<sup>3</sup> The most important authors, in the order of appearance, are Albert the Great (c. 1200–1280), Peter of Spain (the Portuguese, who became the Pope John XXI and died in 1277), Peter of Auvergne (d. 1304), and Nicholas of Vaudémont (fl. 1370s). The Peter of Spain that figures in the present chapter is not the same as the author of the influential logical work *Summulae logicales* (Pasnau & van Dyke 2010, vol. 2, 945–46).

massive *De animalibus libri XXVI*, which is only partially a commentary on Aristotle, as it contains material from many other sources, as well as Albert's own explanations and original views.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of his discussion, Albert mentions the political nature of animals several times. One of the first observations that he makes is related to the ways of life that different species follow: "the manners of birds and other animals are differentiated in another way, according to their behaviour (*operationes*) and ordering of their life. For one genus is that, which is always political and gregarious with many companions."<sup>5</sup> This is an important passage because it tells us that the epithets 'political' and 'gregarious' refer to activities and ways of life rather than to any essential feature. Albert maintains that some animals are always political, and he continues by explaining that there are also animals that never live with other members of their kind. In between are those species that are political only occasionally, which means that they sometimes engage in activities that are counted as political, but not always. On this basis we may make a systematic division into three different ways of life that animals may lead:

1. Some animals live always together in groups (e.g., starlings).
2. Some animals live always alone, only meeting each other in order to mate (eagles, hawks).
3. Some animals "dualize": they live sometimes alone and sometimes together with others (geese and cranes).<sup>6</sup>

The birds that Albert mentions are just illustrative examples. In principle, every animal species can be placed into one of these three categories, even though individual differences may be found within each species. Humans belong to the third group, because they sometimes withdraw from their communities in order to contemplate divine matters although they are gregarious and political animals by nature (Albert the Great 1916, 16 [59]; see Aristotle 1984, 488a7). The difference between humans and other dualizing animals is that humans usually live together and retreat only occasionally, whereas for geese and cranes it is the other way around. The differences between animal species are a matter of degree and not of kind.

Another important idea that becomes clear from Albert's analysis is that 'political' and 'gregarious' are not mutually exclusive terms. Political animals form a subcategory of gregarious animals, which means that all political animals are gregarious, but not the other way around:

An animal is said to be political (*civitatense*<sup>7</sup>), if it (imitating cities) directs all its operations to one [aim] and performs an action that pertains to the common good. Not

---

<sup>4</sup> Albert left behind also a question-commentary *Quaestiones De animalibus*, which differs in certain respects from the more comprehensive *De animalibus*. Since the former is extant only as a *reportatio* made by Albert's student, it is bound to be less reliable. The relation between these two works is discussed in Asúa 1991, 180–87; Resnick and Kitchell 2008, 3–7.

<sup>5</sup> "Adhuc autem modi avium et aliorum animalium diversificantur aliter secundum operationes et regimen vitae. Quoddam enim genus est quod est civile et gregale semper cum multis sociorum." (Albert the Great 1916, 15 [58].) The translations of Albert's *De animalibus* are mine unless otherwise stated, but I have consulted Kenneth Kitchell's and Irvn Resnick's translation in Albert the Great 1999. The references are to the Latin edition but I give the page numbers of the translation in parenthesis.

<sup>6</sup> Albert does not use the term 'dualize', but it is clear that he is alluding to a passage in Aristotle (1984, 488a2–7), where a similar division is made. For discussion, see Depew 1995, 157–59.

<sup>7</sup> This rare term is sometimes translated as 'citizen' (*Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, s.v. *civitatensis*), or 'urban' (Albert the Great 1999, vol. 1, 59).

all gregarious animals, which stay with their companions, perform such a joint operation. Among those animals that collaborate (*in unum conferunt operationes*), are the human, the wasp, the bee, the ant, and the crane. But in cranes this is less obvious than in the others, because cranes do not collaborate in any other action, except in taking care of guarding and setting order to their flight. The other mentioned animals collaborate in many things in a community of affairs and sustenance, which serve the common utility. Moreover, some of those who are united in this way are governed by a king, which they obey. Such are the crane, the bee and the human being. For they have a king and a leader, who takes care of the common utility. Some of the gregarious animals do not have a king. Such are ants and locusts, which wander about harmoniously in herds, as if the common care and city life (*urbanitas*) were entrusted to each of them.<sup>8</sup>

The crucial factor that distinguishes political from gregarious animals is the ability to act together in order to promote the common good or to achieve a common goal (these two are not necessarily different things). Gregarious animals live together but unlike political ones, they do not aim at common good and they do not collaborate.<sup>9</sup>

The list of political animals includes at least ants, bees, cranes, wasps, locusts, and human beings. In addition to Aristotle's *Historia animalium*, medieval authors found information concerning the behaviour of these animals in Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* and various bestiaries. However, the idea that their behaviour makes them political is markedly an Aristotelian one, and in this respect, cranes are an illustrative borderline case. Most of the time they do not collaborate and they do not even live always together, but Albert counts them among political animals because they have two activities that require collaboration: when they gather somewhere to eat and sleep, one of them stands on guard for possible enemies; and they migrate in a V-formation where one of them acts as a leader, looking out for dangers and thus protecting the group (Albert the Great 1916, 7.1.6, 525 [616]). Albert says in another context that cranes *appoint* the guard and the leader (Albert the Great 1955, 1.8, 86; Albert the Great 2008, 28–29). Given that he demarcates between political and non-political animals by appealing to the way of life, cranes can be said to dualize. In other words, even though it may be correct to classify cranes among political animals, they do not always act accordingly—they are political animals only occasionally.

On the basis of the foregoing, we may enumerate three interconnected criteria, which can be applied to non-human animals and which distinguish political animals from non-political ones:

---

<sup>8</sup> "Civitate autem animal vocatur, quod ad imitationem civitatum omnia sua opera refert ad unum et agit unam actionem ad commune bonum pertinentem: nec tamen omne animal gregale cum sociis manens talem facit operationem in unum collatam. De hiis autem quae in unum conferunt operationes, est homo et vespa et apis et formica et grus. Sed in gruibus minus est manifestum quam in aliis, quia grues non conferunt in unum aliquam operationem, nisi curam vigiliae et ordinem volatus: alia autem animalia inducta conferunt multa in unum communitate negotiorum et ciborum, ex quibus communi consulitur utilitati. Horum autem quae sic communicant, quaedam regit rex, cui obediunt, sicut grues et apes et homines. Ista enim habent regem et principem sollicitum circa se de utilitate communi. Quaedam autem gregalium non habent regem, sicut formicae et locustae, quae per turmas egrediuntur concorditer, sicut unicuique eorum per se commissa sit cura communis et urbanitas." (Albert the Great 1916, 16 [59].)

<sup>9</sup> From an Aristotelian perspective, the only new element here is the hierarchical classification. Other aspects come directly from him.

1. Political animals collaborate in order to reach a common aim. This can be divided into:
  - a. Acquiring material necessities for living (food, shelter, etc.).
  - b. Achieving an end that is not related to daily needs (e.g., migration of cranes).
2. Political animals have a leader that promotes the common good.
3. Political animals have a division of labour.

The criteria (2) and (3) are not necessary for all political animals, but because they are often mentioned in discussions, and because they can be considered as indications of the political nature of a given species—having a leader or division of labour entails a common aim and shared action—let us consider them briefly before turning to the first criterion.

Many political animals were thought to have a leader or a king. A case in point is the bee. Medieval authors were commonly mistaken concerning the sex of the bee leader, but that does not alter the general philosophical point: having a leader marks certain species off from others.<sup>10</sup> Albert the Great draws the parallel between humans and bees to the extent that he mentions two types of problematic situations, which bees may face due to having a leader. The king of bees may turn out to be a tyrant, and there may be two or more leaders in one hive. The former case usually leads to a revolution, and the competition between several kings is resolved in a civil war. (Albert the Great 1916, 8.4.3, 637 [736].)<sup>11</sup> Whether or not these scenarios can be attested empirically, the fact that Albert elaborates on them shows how far he is willing to take the similarity between the political life of humans and bees.

Non-human animals were thought to be organised in many different ways, and not all of them have kings. An illustrative example can be found in Guy of Rimini's (d. after 1344) commentary on the *Politics*. He claims that conjugal and political types of rule can be distinguished on the basis of having a permanent or a changing ruler, respectively:

‘Conjugal’ and ‘political’ differ absolutely, because in a political rule the ruling persons and their subjects often change places. The reason for this is that this kind of rule belongs to equal persons, who are not different by nature from each other with respect to their freedom. One of them has been elected to rule the others for a certain predetermined time, and afterwards he becomes a subject, when another takes his place. And thus they alternate by succession after the manner of flying cranes, when one replaces another, who preceded him as a leader for a determinate time—this is said to be observed also in their night watch.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> “Etiam grues et apes eligunt sibi regem.” (Radulphus Brito (?), fol. 1vb.)

<sup>11</sup> The possibility of having several leaders is mentioned in Albert the Great 1916, 638 (737), 642 (742), and 652 (751). The last of these passages tells us that the community of bees resembles more an aristocracy than monarchy.

<sup>12</sup> “Differt tamen coniugalis a politico simpliciter, quia in politicis principatibus transmutantur frequenter homines principantes et subiecti. Cuius ratio est, quia talis principatus est personarum equalium et quantum ad libertatem nil differentium per naturam. Per electionem autem unus certo et determinato tempore principatur aliis et postea fit subiectus sibi alio succedente. Et sic successione ad modum gruarum volantium alternantur, cum una qui dux determinato tempore antecessit, succedit alia loco eius, quod etiam dicuntur in nocturnis excubiis observare.” (Guy of Rimini, fol. 67rb.)

Guy uses cranes in order to illustrate his understanding of the key element that distinguishes political from conjugal type of rule. Presumably political rule can also be distinguished from monarchical and aristocratic governments, in which the leaders remain the same (see, e.g., Aristotle 1998, 1259b5–8; Thomas Aquinas 1971, 1.10, 113b; Thomas Aquinas 2007, 69–70). Cranes change their leader every now and then, and this trait marks a difference between conjugal and political ways of life, which are actualised in households and political communities. The fact that cranes have a leader indicates that they are political animals, or at least (to use the Aristotelian expression) that they dualize between solitary and political life.

Already these examples show that medieval authors did not hesitate to apply criterion (2) and the concept of political rule to non-human animals. However, according to Albert the Great (1916, 627 [726–27]), there are animals that do not have a leader although they count as political. His examples of these include ants and locusts, which lead a political life although no-one among them holds any leading position. This means that this criterion is not necessary for being a political animal, even though it figures amply in medieval discussions.

What about criterion (3)? Some political animals have quite sophisticated division of labour, while others have none. Bees are the prime example of the former:

There is something which seems to be even more marvellous than all the things introduced so far. This is that bees have certain tasks that are assigned as if each went to certain of their craftsmen. Without these their society could not exist. It is just this way among people, where some are millers, some are cobblers or architects, and others are practitioners of various other crafts. The society of bees is based on the sharing of these tasks and thus some tasks are found to have been assigned to particular bees and others to others. Thus, the swarm is built up and held together by means of a sort of sharing among them.<sup>13</sup>

Division of labour is essential for the survival of the beehive. By contrast, ants and locusts (which do not have a leader) represent species of political animals that do not seem to have a division of labour either. They have shared activities that aim at the common good, but they do not specialise in different tasks as the bees do. Instead, each of them has exactly the same function in the community. The connection between having a leader and division of labour is understandable, because one of the most fundamental types of division of labour holds between the ruler and the subjects. This is why the two last criteria can be considered to be the same.

Unlike criteria (2) and (3) which are indicative but not necessary, the first criterion (collaborating in order to reach a common aim) is critical for distinguishing political from gregarious animals. Fulfilling it can be considered a necessary condition for being a political animal. It is not surprising that medieval authors emphasise it, given that it has a pivotal place in Aristotle's explanation for the

---

<sup>13</sup> "Quod autem omnibus quae inducta sunt mirabilius esse videtur, est quod quasdam habent operationes inter se appropriatas quasi quibusdam artificibus earum, sine quibus non potest subsistere civitas earum. Sicut enim in hominibus quidam sunt pistorum et quidam cerdones, quidam autem architecti et alii aliarum artium operatores, quorum communicatione subsistit civitas, ita inveniuntur quaedam operata appropriata quibusdam apibus et aliis alia quarum communicatione quadam construitur et continetur examen." (Albert the Great 1916, 646 [745].) Albert writes about bees that: "Sed non solum artificiose operantur, sed etiam distribuunt opera inter se, ut una faciat unum opus et alia aliud." (Albert the Great 1916, 639 [739].)

difference between political and gregarious animals. The former have a *koinon ergon*, a common work, while the latter only live together without any kind of collaboration (Aristotle 1984, 488a7–488a10). They behave in the flock just like they would do alone, and while they may benefit from living together, their way of life does not count as political in the proper sense of the word. There are radical differences in the way the communities of different political animals are organised, but ants, bees, and cranes all fulfil condition (1). Human beings are similar to them in this respect. Yet, Albert also mentions one central difference between humans and other political animals: he writes that animals *imitate* the political life of humans. I shall return to this below, but it is good to keep in mind that although he considers many non-human animals as political animals, he does not mean that their way of life is completely similar to that of humans. It is an approximation and falls short in certain relevant respects, as we shall soon see.

Medieval philosophers tended to read Aristotle's zoological works in light of Avicennian psychology (Harvey 1975, 31–60; di Martino 2008; Toivanen 2013, 225–45). They used the machinery of the internal senses to elaborate on Aristotelian views, and they accounted for the social behaviour of non-human animals by appealing to the estimative power of the soul. Animals are capable of recognising their own kin, apprehending the friendliness of other members of their species, and judging that life in a community is useful for them. All these abilities were usually attributed to the estimative power, as can be seen from the following passage by an anonymous author<sup>14</sup>:

Why a king is chosen only in the case of flying [animals], as is clear in the case of cranes? I answer that according to Avicenna, the estimative power is the highest power in animals, like the intellect in human beings. [...] For cranes make a leader and a ruler of the one who knows the routes better. And because they trust more those who are like them, they choose among [the members of] their own species. Or it can be said in another way, that animals choose a king on the basis of their aim: either against things that corrupt them from outside, like heat and cold (and in this way it is in the case of cranes, who migrate to warm regions in the beginning of the winter, and return in the beginning of the summer); or against things that corrupt them from within, like lack of food, and thus [they choose a leader who takes them] to eat leaves and herbs (and in this way cows and sheep choose their leaders); or [they choose a leader who guides them] in their proper actions (and in this way, bees choose a leader for themselves in order to construct a workshop, because one single bee does not know how to make honey).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The author may have been Peter of Spain or one of his students; at any rate, the work is based on Peter's *De animalibus* (Asúa 1991, 87–95).

<sup>15</sup> "Quare solum in volatilibus rex eligitur, ut in gruibus patet? Respondeo quod secundum Avicennam virtus estimativa in animalibus est suprema sicut in hominibus intellectus. [...] Illum autem ducem faciunt et rectorem qui melius vias novit. Et quia de suo simili magis confidunt, ideo de sua specie eligunt. Vel potest dici aliter ut a parte finis rex ab animalibus eligatur: aut contra corrumpens extra ut est calor et frigidus, et sic est in gruibus qui in principio yemis pergunt ad calidas regiones, in principio estatis redeunt; aut contra corrumpens intus ut est defectus nutrimenti, et sic ad comestionem foliorum et herbarum, et sic vacce et oves eligunt sibi ducem; aut ad actum proprium, et sic apes ad construendum fabricam eligunt sibi ducem, nam una sola apis mellificare nequit." (Anonymous [Peter of Spain?], 361–62; I have slightly amended the punctuation.) The same point is made in Albert the Great 1916, 496 [586].



The estimative power has an important role in accounting for the social behaviour of animals; a better estimative power means more complex social/political organisation (Toivanen, forthcoming). The author enumerates three functions that a leader may have in animal communities: warding off external threats, maintaining material self-sufficiency of the community, and enabling the proper activity of the species in question. The same functions were attributed to political communities of human beings—the community provides clothing, housing, and military power against external threats; various material goods that lead to internal self-sufficiency; and the opportunity to live in accordance with reason, which is the proper activity of human beings (see, e.g., Thomas Aquinas 1979, 449; Thomas Aquinas 1971, 77b–78a; Giles of Rome 1607, 226–28 and 541–43). Just like humans need the political community in order to live according to reason and thus become humans in the full sense, bees cannot actualise their own function of honey-making without other bees. Collaboration is the only way to secure these goods, and this applies to humans as well as to other social animals.

Overall, Albert and many other medieval authors embrace the idea that humans are in relevant ways similar to other animals. The criteria that they use to distinguish political from non-political animals can be applied equally to humans as they are applied to bees and the like.

### 3. Human beings as political *animals*

As one might expect, the idea that human beings are political in a similar way as certain other animals entails that animality figures in the explanations for human social life. Medieval philosophers accepted the other side of Aristotle's theory, which emphasises human rationality and the ability to use language (see the next section), but they also thought that humans are animals and have various biological needs and desires, which are relevant for sociability. Thus, it is no wonder that commentaries on the *Politics* often elaborate on the idea that human beings are political animals in the biological sense.

The biological basis of our political life is especially prominent when medieval authors discuss the idea that human beings live together in political communities in order to satisfy their material needs by collaboration (criterion 1a above). It has been pointed out that Avicenna's influence on this matter is significant (Avicenna 1980, 531–32; Avicenna 1968, 69–70; Rosier-Catach 2015, 232–36; Fioravanti 1999, 19; Lambertini 1990, 277–325; Toste 2014, 149), but we should not overlook the fact that Aristotle himself claims that the political community was originally established for the sake of the preservation of life (Aristotle 1998, 1252b29–30). For instance, an anonymous commentator of Aristotle's *Politics* (the so-called Anonymous of Vatican) writes that:

It must be said first that a human being is a political animal (*animal civile et politicum*) by nature. [...] Because that is natural, which enables human beings to have sufficiency for their existence and their nature; but human beings receive sufficiency for their existence by being political; therefore etc. The major premise is apparent, because every human being naturally desires his existence and desires to be conserved in his existence, and [they do] this in order to participate in divine being. The minor premise is apparent, because by being political, a human being acquires things that are sufficient for his life and existence: one human being is not sufficient for himself but acquires his sufficiency through communication with others, because one skill prevails in one

household and another skill in another household, and so forth, and by fitting these together they are rendered sufficient in their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Human beings would not survive alone, and since a single household cannot meet all material needs, a political community is necessary. The argument appeals also to the division of labour (criterion 3 above). Each separate household specialises in one product, and together they supply everything that is required for human life. From this perspective humans are political in the same way as ants and bees are: they collaborate in order to survive.

Human sociability is based also on another principle that we share with other animals: the desire to leave behind something similar to oneself. This desire or inclination aims at the preservation of the species, but it stems from the more basic desire for self-preservation. Animals do not live forever. They cannot continue their existence remaining numerically the same, and therefore their desire for self-preservation can be satisfied only in the formal sense by leaving behind an offspring. As Peter of Auvergne (d. 1304) puts it:

The continuation of the species takes place only through reproduction [...] And therefore they [who cannot continue existing numerically the same] necessarily have a most natural desire, which is related to existence, which everybody naturally desires: they have this desire to reproduce, without which existence cannot be continued. [...] And therefore, such animals [...] necessarily desire the combination of male and female, without which reproduction would not take place.<sup>17</sup>

A couple of lines further down the text, Peter refers to Aristotle's *De anima* and states that animals desire to generate so that "they might participate in divine and immortal existence as much as they can."<sup>18</sup> As the only way in which mortal animals can partake in what is eternal and divine is by leaving behind a similar to themselves, the desire to leave behind something similar to oneself turns out to be a desire for a qualified immortality—insofar as such can be achieved by mortal animals.

All living beings, including humans, have this natural desire. Since most animals breed by copulation, the union between the biological sexes is a necessary means for satisfying it, and the union is natural for them. Like all forms of self-preservation, the desire to leave behind something similar to oneself manifests itself in the form of emotions.<sup>19</sup> Given that medieval authors thought that human beings

---

<sup>16</sup> "Dicendum primo quod homo naturaliter est animal civile et politicum. Et hoc patet duobus vel tribus, quia id est a natura, per quod homo habet sufficientiam sui esse et sue nature; sed per esse civile vel politicum habet sufficientiam sui esse; ideo etc. Maior patet, quia homo quilibet appetit suum esse et conservari in esse suo naturaliter, et hoc ut participant esse divinum. Minor patet quia per esse politicum homo acquirit sufficientiam sue vite et sui esse, quia unus homo non est sibi sufficiens, sed per communicationem cum aliis acquirit suam sufficientiam, quia in una domo una ars regnat et in alia domo alia, et sic deinceps. Et per congruitatem illorum ad invicem redduntur sufficientes in vite eorum." (Anonymous of Vatican, fol. 15vb.)

<sup>17</sup> "Hec autem continuatio in specie non fit nisi per generationem [...] Et ideo illa necessario habent naturalissimum appetitum, qui scilicet est in ordine ad ipsum esse, quod naturalissime omnia appetunt. Hunc inquam habent ad generationem sine qua illud continuari non potest. [...] Et ideo talia animalia [...] necessario appetunt combinationem maris et femine, sine qua non fieret generatio." (Peter of Auvergne, fol. 276rb.)

<sup>18</sup> "ipso divino esse et immortalis participant quantum possunt." (Peter of Auvergne, fol. 276rb.) See Aristotle 1984, 415b3–8; Lennox 2001, 131–59.

<sup>19</sup> "Et ideo natura appetit semper esse. Hoc autem in rebus corruptilibus in uno individuo consequi non potest propter longe distantiam a primo principio et ideo ne omnino naturale desiderium esset frustra reliquo modo complevit Deus continuam faciens generationem ut sic esse quod non potest conservari semper in uno

can partake in the eternal and divine as individuals—due to the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body—their emphasis on this *animal*-desire as the basis of the union between man and woman is significant. Unlike other animals, humans could continue their individual existence without other people; but they could not continue their lives as human beings because their bodies are mortal like those of other animals. It is precisely due to this similarity that human sociability is accounted for by appealing to functions that we have due to our animality.

Also those animals that were considered unsocial and solitary (e.g., birds of prey) occasionally come together to mate, and thus having the desire to leave behind something similar to oneself does not alone make animals political or social. It does not even make them conjugal. Conjugal animals form more stable relationships and share their lives more than just to procreate—they feel companionship and raise and educate their offspring together. The development of a nestling into a bird is a natural process, but the nestling dies if it is left alone before it is capable of taking care of itself. Many young animals must be fed and kept warm and safe before they can survive on their own. Although there are species in which the mother can do all this alone, Peter points out that in many cases both parents are needed to raise the progeny:

Further, it must be noted that one who acts according to this natural desire, does not intend only to leave behind similar to itself, but also to leave it behind in a perfect state. This is because it is natural for everyone to leave behind something that is not only similar in species and substance, but also in an equally perfect state, as far as possible. [...] In certain other animals, nutrition is not covered by the female alone but requires also the male, as is evident. Therefore it is necessary that both live together until the offspring has been raised perfect, as is clear in the case of many birds. Human beings are similarly in this condition.<sup>20</sup>

Leaving behind something similar to oneself may require more than ensuring that one's child does not die. Peter claims that children need to be educated because otherwise they do not become rational animals in the full sense (Toste 2014, 129–33), and medieval authors hold that instruction plays a similar role in the development of other animals as well. For instance, Radulphus Brito (fol. 1b) claims that just as the development of rationality requires human contact, certain birds must teach singing to their nestlings.<sup>21</sup>

The desires for self-preservation and reproduction have an important role in medieval explanations for the sociability of humans and other animals. They are not social inclinations as such—they are ubiquitous in the animal kingdom but they entail social life only when they cannot be fulfilled

---

individuo perpetuetur in suo simili. Et ideo omne generans naturale generat suum simile. Sic igitur in hominibus sicut in aliis animalibus et plantis inest naturalis appetitus relinquendi sibi similem in natura. Unde prima communicatio naturalis et principalis est communicatio viri et mulieris.” (Guy of Rimini, fol. 57vb–58ra.)

<sup>20</sup> “Sed ulterius advertendum est quod agens secundum talem naturalem appetitum non solum intendit aliud derelinquere simile sibi, sed etiam derelinquere illud perfectum, quia naturale est unicuique non solum derelinquere simile specie et substantia, sed etiam aequale in statu perfectionis quantum potest. [...] In aliis autem animalibus nutritio non complectitur a femella sola, sed exigitur ulterius masculus, ut patebit. Et ideo necesse est ut commaneant ambo usque ad perfectionem [nutritionem] foetus [MS: fatus], sicut patet in pluribus avibus, et similiter homo est huius conditionis.” (Peter of Auvergne, fol. 276va.)

<sup>21</sup> The idea that birds teach singing to their chicks is mentioned in Aristotle 1984, 536b17–19. See Fögen 2014, 225.

without collaboration and sharing. Yet, without these desires social forms of behaviour would not emerge. In this way, sociability is not a distinct psychological or biological trait but a feature that builds on such traits.

These traits are crucial for the emergence of conjugal life, but they are relevant also for political life. According to Aristotle's so-called genetic argument, the political community is the final outcome of a natural process that begins with the association of man and woman. Since this association has a biological origin, the political community has biological roots as well. Moreover, human beings can satisfy their material needs only within a political community. Even though providing the material necessities for life, and thus enabling the full satisfaction of the desire for self-preservation, may not be the main function of the political community—good life, which can be acquired only through moral education and good laws, has a claim to that—it is clear that political life is at least indirectly a result of desires and inclinations that have biological origins. Although they do not constitute the whole explanation that medieval authors gave for the political nature of humans, they are a part of that explanation. Humans are political *animals*, and their political life stems partially from their biological needs.

Perhaps the most striking example of the role that animality plays in medieval conceptions of sociability comes from Peter of Auvergne's analysis of the Aristotelian dictum that human beings are political animals by nature. His argument leans heavily on the fact that humans are animals. As Marco Toste (2014, 125–43; 2012, 401–2) has shown, Peter qualifies his claim about the political nature of humans by making a distinction between two senses of nature:

But what is this nature? It must be said that a human being can be considered in two ways: either according to the nature of the species, or according to the nature of the individual, which is a certain material disposition—for we say that both of these are the nature of man. But a human being is not naturally political according to the first nature, I mean, primarily, in itself and absolutely, because a human being, according to what he is and insofar as he is a human being, is an animal and a body, and so forth, and rational. But he is imperfect or insufficient, not insofar as he is a human being or because of the nature of the species absolutely and in itself, but because that nature is considered according to its being in relation to matter. The reason for this is that a form is always continuous and perpetual by itself [...] But in relation to matter, with which it constitutes one being, it cannot continue in its being remaining numerically the same [...] Therefore, as all things desire naturally to exist (at least insofar as they can) and they desire also their continuation [...] they necessarily and naturally desire that by which they can better maintain and continue in that being. But this is a political community (*civitas*).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> "Sed que est ista natura? Dicendum quod homo potest considerari dupliciter: vel secundum speciei naturam vel secundum naturam individui, que est aliqua dispositio materialis. Utrumque enim dicimus esse naturam hominis. Sed secundum primam naturam homo non est civilis a natura, dico primo et secundum se et absolute, quia homo, secundum id quod est et in quantum homo, habet quod sit animal et corpus et cetera, et quod sit rationalis. Quod autem sit imperfectus vel insufficientis, hoc non habet in quantum est homo et ex natura speciei absolute et secundum se, sed habet hoc ex natura illa considerata secundum esse suum respectu materie. Cuius ratio est quia forma de se est continuabilis semper et perpetua [...] Sed in respectu ad materiam, cum qua consuit unum esse, non potest continuari in esse suo idem manens in numero [...] Ergo

The argument is rather complicated, and we cannot go to the details here, but the main idea is to distinguish the nature of the species and the nature of an individual. The former refers to the common and essential features that are shared by all human beings, while the latter refers to individual properties that stem from different bodily complexions. Note that the individual bodily disposition does not figure in the quoted passage, which deals only with various aspects of the nature of the species. Peter argues that human beings are *not* political according to the nature of the species in itself, because the rational soul is immortal and does not need anything to remain in existence. By contrast, when the common human nature is considered in relation to matter, humans are political beings. The combination of the immortal soul and the mortal body needs material goods in order to remain in existence, and therefore it also needs other people.

The quality of the body becomes central when Peter turns to the individual nature, the bodily disposition that each individual human being has. He argues that only certain kind of body inclines to a social life. Some individuals have so poor disposition that they are incapable of living with others, while others have so well-disposed bodies that they can live virtuously even in poor conditions of a solitary life. Most people fall in between these two extremes. (Peter of Auvergne, 1.9, fol. 277rb.) Peter obviously has in mind Aristotle's division between beasts, human beings, and gods (Toste 2014, 135–36), but he also reveals his neoplatonic tendencies when he argues that the virtuous solitary person despises his body: "He would be disposed towards the body as towards an enemy, like Eustratius says, and he would have a heroic virtue, and he would choose a solitary life in order to speculate the highest things."<sup>23</sup> This heroic individual is able to concentrate on philosophical and religious speculation without other people, and although he is not self-sufficient in the material sense, he is able to distance himself psychologically from his body and cease caring for it. He overcomes his animality and ceases to be a political animal.

Peter's position was not mainstream in all respects, but he establishes a strong connection between political nature and animality. Humans are social and political beings precisely because they are mortal *animals*. The animal body accounts for the inclination to lead a social life, and that kind of life is necessary for most of us, because otherwise we could not survive as bodily beings who have bodily needs—as biological beings, as animals.

#### 4. More than the bee: language and rationality

All of the above goes nicely together with Aristotle's genetic argument for the naturalness of the political community: households, villages, and political communities appear in order to enable a self-sufficient life where no material needs go unfulfilled. But there is another side to Aristotle's theory. Especially his so-called linguistic argument suggests that the political nature of humans is not grounded solely on biological traits, but it involves rationality, language, justice, and moral virtue

---

cum omnia esse appetant naturaliter, saltim eo modo quo possunt, et etiam continuationem [...], necessario et naturaliter appetent id, per quod magis salvari et continuari possunt in illo esse. Hoc autem est civitas." (Peter of Auvergne, fol. 277ra–b, ed. M. Toste, in Toste 2014, 134, n52.)

<sup>23</sup> "Et ille tunc disponitur ad corpus sicut ad inimicum, ut dicit Eustratius, et habebit virtutem heroicam et eliget vitam solitariam ad speculandum altissima." (Peter of Auvergne, fol. 277rb, ed. M. Toste, in Toste 2014, 139, n59.) The connection to book ten of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* cannot be overlooked, but at the same time it should be remembered that Aristotle does not recommend a solitary life for theoretically happy persons. Instead, they live in a political community and spend their time with their friends. For a discussion on medieval conceptions of the relevance of friendship for a philosopher, see Toste 2008, 173–95.

(1998, 1253a5–18). Aristotle begins his argument by arguing that human beings are *more political* than other animals. Although it is far from clear how the comparison should be understood, modern scholars have pointed out that it resonates with the discussion of political animals in the *Historia animalium* (Depew 1995, 162–70; Labarrière 2004, 99–127), and therefore Aristotle can be taken to suggest that the difference between humans and other political animals is a matter of degree. Our political life is not different in kind but only an intensification and modification of the way of life that we share with other political animals. Humans have a more complex but not essentially different organisation.<sup>24</sup>

However, Aristotle continues his linguistic argument by explaining *why* humans are more political than other animals: humans can use language and speak about what is just and what is unjust. Language, and by implication rationality, makes a difference. Due to this emphasis on rationality, the linguistic argument is easy to read in such a way that humans are the only political animals in the proper sense of the term, and that there is a qualitative difference or even a radical gap between the political life of humans and other animals. Depending on how the argument is interpreted, it entails either that non-human animals are political in a proper sense or that they are political only metaphorically.

These different viewpoints are reflected in medieval discussions. Albert the Great, who was one of the first Latin commentators on Aristotle's *Politics*, explains the linguistic argument without focusing on other animals. He only states tersely that the human being is a political animal: “more than the bee and any gregarious animal—that is, a kind of animal which sets up one ruler, like cranes follow one [leader] in a shape of a letter,”<sup>25</sup> and clarifies that the difference is due to language, which enables humans to form real political communities. Only human communities are arranged according to justice and laws.

The same normative dimension is central also in Albert the Great's discussion of pygmies in his *De animalibus*. He notoriously argues that pygmies are not human beings, because they lack true rationality. They speak a language of a kind, but they are unable to talk about what is just and what unjust. (Albert the Great 1916, 21.1.2, 1327–29 [1417]; Köhler 2008, 419–43; Resnick and Kitchell 1996, 41–61.)<sup>26</sup> By consequence, they do not have real political community and laws but one that is based on instinct:

[...] the pygmy does not watch over a perfect political system (*civilitas*) or laws but rather follows the impulse of nature in such things, just as do other brute animals. [...] it has better apprehension than the other brute beasts, but it does not pay attention to the shame that results from disgraceful actions or the glory that results from that which is virtuous. And this is a sign that it has no judgment of reason, which is why it uses neither rhetorical nor poetical devices when speaking, which, nevertheless, are the least

---

<sup>24</sup> Depew (1995, 167) warns that Aristotle is not discussing desires or tendencies but about what animals in fact *do*. Yet, it is clear that their ways of life are based on their psychological capacities, which include habituation, desire, and cognition (see Aristotle 1984, 588a16–b3; Miller 1997, 30–32).

<sup>25</sup> “[...] plus omni ape et omni animali gregali, id est, in cuius genere principans constituitur unum, sicut grues unam sequuntur ordine litterato [...]” (Albert the Great 1891, 1.1, 14a.)

<sup>26</sup> In a medieval context, language was considered to have two functions: it enables collaboration and makes normative discussions possible (Rosier-Catach 2015, 225–43).

perfect of all arguments. For this reason it always dwells in the forests, presiding over, actually, no political system.<sup>27</sup>

Albert establishes a connection between rationality, speech, and political life also elsewhere in the *De animalibus*. For instance, he argues that human beings are conjugal and political all the time when they participate in reason perfectly, but wild humans (*silvestres*) and pygmies lack rationality and therefore they are not humans (Albert the Great 1916, 1.1.3, 17–18 [61]). He also claims that humans are the only political animals without qualification (Albert the Great 1916, 22.1.5, 1354 [1446–47]). It seems therefore clear that when he claims that pygmies are wild and suggests that rationality, language, and laws are necessary for a perfect political community, he means to contrast pygmies (and consequently other political animals) with humans, who lead a political life in the strict sense—a *perfect* political life, which is based on laws and transformed by the ability to speak about justice (Albert the Great 1916, 8.6.1, 671 [771]).

These claims are difficult to harmonise with what Albert writes elsewhere about the political life of non-human animals, unless we suppose that he uses the concept of ‘political’ in two different senses in his works. Both humans and other animals (including pygmies) can be said to be political, but not in the same way, and human communities are different in kind in comparison to communities of animals. According to this interpretation, Albert’s rejection of the political nature of pygmies and his recurrent claim that other political animals only *imitate* the political life of humans (see, e.g., Albert the Great 1916, 1.1.4, 21 [65]) could be taken to mean that they are political only in a metaphorical sense. When ants, bees, cranes, and the like are compared to gregarious animals, the ability to collaborate is a significant trait that allows classifying them as political animals, but in comparison to humans their lives lack the crucial normative dimension. Their behaviour is in many ways comparable to the political life of humans, but nonetheless their communities are but imitations of the real political community of humans. The central functions are there, but in a truncated way.

And yet, the central functions *are* there. Pygmies and non-human animals have political communities, albeit not perfect ones. Humans may be the only political animals in the strict sense, but their political life is at least partially based on collaboration and other functions that Albert attributes to animals (criteria 1–3 in section two above). Within each of these functions, the difference between humans and other political animals is a matter of degree. Bees collaborate more than cranes; pygmies surpass bees; and rationality and language give humans the ability to collaborate in ways that are too complex for irrational animals. The perfect political community requires laws and reason, but imperfect imitations are not *altogether* different.

Albert (1916, 7.1.1, 498 [588]) hints in this direction when he writes that plants imitate the perfect reproductive action of animals by begetting something similar to themselves without intercourse—they have exactly the same function, only in a different way. Likewise, other political animals can be considered to be different since they lack the means for establishing a perfect political community,

---

<sup>27</sup> “[...] pigmeus civilitatem perfectam et leges non custodit, sed potius in talibus sequitur naturae impetum sicut et alia bruta animalia. [...] et ideo melioris apprehensionis est inter cetera bruta sed verecundiam de turpi, et gloriam de honesto non attendit. Et hoc signum est quod nichil habet de iudicio rationis: propter quod etiam rethoricis persuasionibus in loquendo non utitur neque poeticis quae tamen imperfectiores sunt omnium rationum: et ideo semper silvestris manet nullam prorsus civilitatem custodiens.” (Albert the Great 1916, 21.1.2, 1328–29 [1417], trans. Kitchell and Resnick, slightly emended.)

and since their communities stem from a partially different set of psychological abilities. Yet it seems possible to hold that political life is a matter of degree, even though absolutely speaking only humans are political animals who have perfect political communities. After all, the existence of a *perfect* community entails the existence of less-than-perfect communities, which suggests that they form a scale and admits of degrees.

Albert’s view is a combination of two different conceptions of what it means to be a political animal. Biological and rational functions intermingle in a complex way. If we focus on the biological functions, the social and political life of human beings appears as an intensification of the political life of bees and other such animals: bees work together towards a common aim, and humans simply have a more sophisticated ability to collaborate due to language and rationality. By contrast, if we lay emphasis on the rational functions and abilities, the behaviour of other animals appears so different in comparison to humans, that their political life must be deemed to be nothing but an imitation of humans. The exact relation between these perspectives remains somewhat unclear in the case of Albert.<sup>28</sup>

Traces of a more definite distinction between humans and other political animals can be found in another discussion in the context of the commentaries on the *Politics*. Especially in the fourteenth century, philosophers begin to question the idea that human communities are completely natural. Take, for example, Nicholas of Vaudémont (fl. 1370s),<sup>29</sup> a Parisian master of arts who distinguishes different kinds of things on the basis of the process that makes them come about (Nicholas of Vaudémont 1969, fol. 4ra; see table [\*number]).

Table [\*number]: Classification of natural and artificial things according to Nicholas of Vaudémont

	Completed by nature	Completed by art
Initiated by nature	Plants	Wine, bread
Initiated by art	Grain	–

Wild plants are completely natural, because they do not require any human intervention in order to grow from seed to full blossom. Grain, by contrast, is sewn by farmers, but afterwards nature takes over the process. And finally, wine and bread are made of natural ingredients, but they are artificial in the sense that the final product is made by humans.

Nicholas argues that the political community belongs to the same category as wine and bread. It is initiated by nature but established freely by human beings:

Although the political community is initially from nature, it nevertheless is completed by art and choice. The first part is proved, because human beings are inclined to live in a political community. And the second part is proved, because it is completed by art and choice. Therefore etc.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Also Rosier-Catach (2015, 233) points out that Albert speaks about the political nature of animals both as a matter of degree, and as qualitatively different from that of humans.

<sup>29</sup> For biographical information, see Flüeler (1992), vol. 1, 132–68; Courtenay (2004, 163–68).

<sup>30</sup> “Quinta conclusio: licet civitas sit a natura iniciative, tamen ab arte et electione est complete. Probatur prima pars, quia homines iniciative se habent ad civitatem. Et patet secunda pars, quia ab arte est completa et



The key idea in this somewhat deficient argument is that the political community is natural only in the sense that humans have an inclination for it.<sup>31</sup> It must be brought about by human action, and although this requirement does not make it unnatural, Nicholas argues that its naturalness must be understood in a special sense: it is natural in the same way as wine is—which means that it is also artificial in the same way as wine is. The idea that natural causes and human action jointly produce human communities was applied also to the association between man and woman, which forms the core of household.<sup>32</sup>

Nicholas' view entails, among other things, a radical difference between animal and human communities. Beehives, ant colonies, and the temporal associations of cranes are completely natural. None of these animals has the ability to establish a political community such as we find among humans, for the simple reason that they act instinctually and cannot make anything that involves art, skill, or conscious decision. Nicholas' analysis shows that medieval authors have moved away from the biological understanding of what political life means—or at least they have started to emphasise those aspects in Aristotle's view that differentiate us from other animals.

The same development can be seen in the interpretations of Aristotle's linguistic argument. Several authors either simplify it by omitting the comparison to non-human animals altogether, or make a terminological move and claim that humans are more *social* than other animals. Thus, Walter Burley declares that: "Not only it follows that human beings are naturally political and social, but that humans are more social than any other animal."<sup>33</sup> As a result, humans are not depicted as being more political in comparison to the bee, which tacitly suggests that non-human animals are not political at all.

This trend reaches one culmination point when certain late fourteenth century commentators explicitly reject the political nature of non-human animals. Nicholas of Vaudémont provides a hierarchical taxonomy of the terms that refer to various ways of being social:

These terms—social, gregarious, and political—are related to each other in such a way that 'social' is an umbrella term (*superius*) for the other two. Wherefore every gregarious or political animal is social but not vice versa, because it loves the company of its own species. This is clear also because there is a kind of natural friendship among those who belong to the same species. 'Gregarious' applies properly only to other

---

ab electione. Igitur etc." (Nicholas of Vaudémont 1969, fol. 4rb.) I have corrected the 1513 edition on the basis of two manuscripts (see bibliography), but I refer only to the edition, which is more readily available.

<sup>31</sup> The idea that the political nature of humans is nothing but an inclination was the mainstream view already in the latter half of the thirteenth century, and also the discussion concerning different senses of 'natural' (*iniciative* and *completive*) goes back to thirteenth century commentaries (Blažek, 2007, 315–32; Toste 2014, 121–56).

<sup>32</sup> "[...] communicatio maris et femellae non est naturalis primo modo, quia non fit a principiis intrinsecis naturalibus. Secunda conclusio: quod talis communicatio seu coniugatio maris et femellae est naturalis secundo modo. Patet conclusio, quia iniciative est a natura et completive a voluntate, quia ibi oportet esse consensum et assensum utriusque." (Nicholas of Vaudémont 1969, fol. 5ra; here the Vatican MS has a radically different text, although the philosophical point is the same.)

<sup>33</sup> "Non solum sequitur quod homo sit naturaliter civilis et socialis, sed quod homo [*om. V*] est magis socialis quam aliquod aliud animal." (Walter Burley, fol. 5rb (V), 2va–b (CG).) The comparison is omitted by Anonymous of Vatican, fol. 16ra (Toste 2014, 175); Radulphus Brito(?), fol. 1rb (Toste 2014, 178); Anonymous of Milan (Toste 2014, 182); Anonymous of Oxford, fol. 181ra; and Raimundus Acgerii, fol. 49rb.

animals which roam in groups, as is clear from cranes and other birds. ‘Political’ applies properly only to human beings because political life aims at some virtue.<sup>34</sup>

The criteria that Nicholas uses to sort different animal species into these categories are not very clear, but by making ‘gregarious’ and ‘political’ two distinct species in the genus of ‘social’, he rules out the possibility that there could be a smooth transition from one to the other. Only human beings count as political animals because political life is necessarily related to practical and theoretical virtues. As we have seen, already Albert the Great had these ideas in embryo, but Nicholas articulates them more sharply and definitely.

A similar approach is adopted by an anonymous fourteenth century author, who begins his answer to the traditional question concerning the political nature of humans with a terminological clarification that resembles the one made by Nicholas. However, there are significant differences in detail:

[E]very perfect animal is social with someone from its own species, as a male with a female. However, ‘social’ implies friendship, and therefore it is said that everything naturally comes together with (*applaudit*) and loves that which is similar to it. Therefore, every animal is social. ‘Gregarious’ is said only of those animals, which move about in herds, such as bees, ants, birds, and so forth. [...] ‘Political’ is said only of human beings, because the political community arises from participation of those who discuss with each other and are just, which takes place only among human beings.<sup>35</sup>

There are certain problems in the manuscript, and the taxonomy could be spelled out more systematically, but there remains little doubt that the author suggests the following: (1) all animals are social and have social emotions towards at least some members of their own species; (2) animals that live together in larger groups, including the traditionally political ones such as ants, bees, and cranes, are gregarious; and (3) only human beings are political animals. Further down the text, the author provides his interpretation of Aristotle’s linguistic argument which is consistent with this taxonomy. He emphasises once more that only humans can be considered political animals: “Because other animals are not political, they do not need language. Therefore, they have only voice

---

<sup>34</sup> “Ista nomina—sociale, gregale et civile—sic se habent, quod sociale est superius ad illa duo. Unde omne gregale aut civile est sociale sed non econtra, quia diligit societatem suae speciei. Etiam patet quia quaedam est amicitia naturalis inter illa, quae sunt eiusdem speciei. Sed gregale proprie convenit animalibus aliis incedentibus per turmas, ut patet de gruibus <et aliis> ovibus. Civile proprie solum convenit hominibus, quia civilitas ordinatur ad aliquam virtutem.” (Nicholas of Vaudémont 1969, fol. 5rb.)

<sup>35</sup> “[...] omne animal perfectum est sociale cum aliquo de sua specie, sicut masculus cum femella. Verumtamen sociale denotat amicitiam, igitur dicitur <quod> ‘omne simile applaudit et diligit naturaliter sibi simile.’ Igitur omne animal sociale <est>. Gregale dicitur solum de hiis, quae incedunt per turmas, ut apes, formicae, oves, et cetera. [...] Civile [non] solum dicitur de hominibus, quia civilis communicatio fit <per> participationem conferentis et iusti, quae [MS: quia] solum habet locum in hominibus.” (Anonymous Brussels, fol. 406va.) The manuscript states that: “Political is *not* said only of human beings”, but this must be a scribal error, as the continuation of the argument shows. A further justification for the omission of *non* is provided later in the same question. “Omne simile etc.”: *Ecclesiasticus* 13:19; cf. Aristotle 1984, 1155b7; Thomas Aquinas 1969, 444a124–30.

by which they signal to each other what is pleasurable or sorrowful, and [they signal] nothing about political justice.”<sup>36</sup>

Both Nicholas and the anonymous author explicitly reject the Aristotelian idea that there are many animal species that count as political. Moreover, the anonymous author turns the linguistic argument on its head. The version handed down by Albert the Great and other thirteenth century philosophers states that humans are more political than other animals due to the ability to speak about what is just and unjust; the anonymous author, by contrast, suggests that humans need language because they are political. At least on the surface, he seems to think that language is an instrument that is needed in order to live a properly political life; if one is not political, there is no need for language.

Finally, the author puts forth an argument that draws from Cassiodorus’ *Variarum* 9.2. The ancient senator had mentioned the abilities of cranes—living in harmonious groups, taking turns in guarding, and alternating as the leader of the wedge—and concluded that they have a political community without kings. On the basis of this remark, the anonymous author suggests, someone might think that animals are capable of a political life and justice. Indeed, Albert and many other medieval philosophers used these abilities as criteria for establishing that cranes are political animals by nature, as we have seen. But the anonymous author claims that they are wrong: “I answer that such animals do not have a proper political government (*non politizant*), and they do not deliberate mutually about justice and injustice, but only by solicitude and certain natural instinct.”<sup>37</sup> The actions of animals may appear similar to the forms of political life that are proper to human beings, but in reality they are based on a different set of psychological abilities and therefore radically different.

The idea that the political life of non-human animals is based on a natural instinct was not original, to be sure, but the way Nicholas and the anonymous commentator use it to reject their political nature reveals an important trend of narrowing down the scope of the concept of political animal. Neither of these authors breaks ground with the traditional observations concerning the behaviour of animals. They just do not think that collaborating and living together with other members of the species in an organised group, which may even have a leader, suffices to make an animal a political one. Being political becomes a necessary concomitant of the specific difference that sets humans apart from other animals; it turns into a trait that is as unique as rationality is in the animal kingdom.

Nevertheless, the emphasis that these authors place on rationality and language does not mean that they would lose sight of the more basic functions of the political community. They acknowledge that it exists partially because it provides the material necessities for life (Anonymous of Brussels, fol. 405vb; Nicholas of Vaudémont, fol. 4ra). In other words, they do not forget Aristotle’s idea that political community comes to be for the sake of living, although it remains in existence for the sake of living well. Political life may require rationality, but it still serves the function of keeping us alive, much in the same way as the (non-political) communities of animals.

---

<sup>36</sup> “Cetera enim animalia, quia non sunt civilia, non egent sermone. Ideo solum habent vocem qua invicem significant quid delectabile aut tristabile, et nihil de iusto civili.” (Anonymous Brussels, fol. 407ra.) Nicholas preserves the comparison to other animals, but claims that cognising the normative element of justice belongs only to political animals (Nicholas of Vaudémont, fol. 6rb.)

<sup>37</sup> “Etiam quedam videntur politicare et iustitiam exercere. [...] dico quod talia animalia non politizant proprie nec invicem conferunt de iusto et iniusto, sed solum sollicitudine et quodam naturali instinctu.” (Anonymous Brussels, fol. 407ra–b.)

## 5. Conclusion

Medieval views concerning political animals are complex because they oscillate between the ideas that (1) there are many political animals that are not humans and (2) humans are the only political animals in the proper sense of the word. The concept ‘political animal’ refers sometimes to biological and psychological traits that humans share with other social animals. Collaboration in order to reach a common goal, hierarchical structure within the community, and the inclination for the biological survival of the individuals and the species—all these are counted as traits that distinguish political animals from those that lead a solitary or gregarious way of life. By contrast, in some cases the concept of political animal is used in a stricter sense to denote a complex social life that is regulated by laws and related to justice, rationality, language, and moral virtue. Non-human animals are political in the former but not in the latter sense.

Whether this division between different ways to understand the meaning of the concept of political animal entails that non-human animals are less political than humans, or that they are only metaphorically political, is likely to vary from author to author. However, even when medieval authors end up rejecting the political nature of non-human animals, they do not discard the biological aspect of the concept altogether. They accept the behavioural similarity between humans and other social animals but question whether social behaviour counts as political when it does not involve rationality. In effect, they radicalise the difference between humans and other political animals without discarding the idea that humans are political due to their animality. The biological needs and desires that explain the behaviour of ants, bees, and cranes remain central for the political life of human beings. Rationality enables more complex forms of collaboration and social organisation, and it brings in the normative dimension of justice, but the political nature of humans is partially explained by appealing to the same factors that figure in the social life of animals.

In this way, medieval philosophers preserve the biological conception of what it means to be a political animal, but they tend to think that it is transformed by human rationality. Already Albert the Great defends this view, but he does not hesitate to call many non-human animals political. By contrast, certain fourteenth century authors presuppose that collaboration for the sake of the common good does not count as political unless it is coupled with rationality—even when it is done under a leader and with a division of labour. These later thinkers remove the ambiguity within Aristotle’s view by explicitly denying the existence of non-human political animals. We are not like ants in a colony even when we do our share.<sup>38</sup>

## Bibliography

Albert the Great. 2008. *Questions Concerning Aristotle’s On Animals*. Translated by Irwin Resnick and Kenneth Kitchell. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.

Albert the Great. 1999. *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, 2 vols. Translated by K.F. Kitchell Jr. & I.M. Resnick. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Albert the Great. 1955. *Quaestiones Super De Animalibus*. Edited by E. Filthaut. Alberti Magni Opera Omnia, vol. 12. Münster: Aschendorff.

---

<sup>38</sup> This research has been funded by the Academy of Finland and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

- Albert the Great. 1916. *De animalibus libri XXVI*. Edited by H. Stadler. Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung. [= *De animalibus*]
- Albert the Great. 1891. *Commentarii in octo libros Politicorum Aristotelis*. Edited by A. Borgnet. B. Alberti Magni Opera omnia 8. Paris: Vivès.
- Anonymous of Brussels. *Quaestiones in librum Politicorum Aristotelis*. Brussels, Bibl. royale 863-69 (2916), fol. 402ra–436ra.
- Anonymous of Milan. *Quaestiones super I-VII libros Politicorum*, quaestio 1.6. Edited by M. Toste, in Toste 2014, 181–186.
- Anonymous of Oxford. *Extractio compendiosa dictorum in Politica Aristotelis*. Oxford, Bodl. Library 292, fol. 180ra–219ra.
- Anonymous of Vatican. *Quaestiones super I Librum Politicorum*. Vatican, BAV Pal. lat. 1030, fol. 14ra–19rb. (Partially edited by M. Toste, in Toste 2014, 174–76.)
- Anonymous (Peter of Spain?). *Problemata*. Edited by M. Asúa, in Asúa 1991, 359–403.
- Aristotle. 1984. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. 2 vols. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Aristotle. 1998. *Politics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company. [= *Pol.*]
- Asúa, Miguel. 1991. *The Organization of Discourse on Animals in the Thirteenth Century: Peter of Spain, Albert the Great, and the Commentaries on “De Animalibus”*. PhD diss., University of Notre Dame. Ann Arbor: U.M.I.
- Avicenna. 1980. *Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina*. Vol. V-X, edited by S. Van Riet. Louvain/Leiden: E. Peeters/E.J. Brill.
- Avicenna. 1968. *Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus*. Vol. IV–V, ed. S. Van Riet, Louvain/Leiden: Éditions Orientalistes/E.J. Brill.
- Barnes, Jonathan, ed. 1984. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Blažek, Pavel. 2007. *Die Mittelalterliche Rezeption Der Aristotelischen Philosophie Der Ehe von Robert Grosseteste Bis Bartholomäus von Brügge (1246/1247–1309)*. Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill.
- Cooper, John. 1990. “Political Animals and Civic Friendship.” In *Aristoteles’ “Politik”*: Akten des XI. Symposium Aristotelicum, edited by Günther Patzig, 220–248. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Courtenay, William. 2004. “A Note on Nicolaus Girardi de Waudemonte, Pseudo-Johannes Buridanus.” *SIEPM Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 46: 163–68.

- De Leemans, Pieter, and Matthew Klemm. 2007. "Animals and Anthropology in Medieval Philosophy." In *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, edited by Brigitte Resl, 153–77. Oxford/New York: Berg.
- Depew, David. 1995. "Humans and Other Political Animals in Aristotle's History of Animals." *Phronesis* 40/1: 156–181.
- Di Martino, Carla. 2008. *Ratio Particularis. Doctrines des Senses Internes d'Avicenne à Thomas d'Aquin*. Études de Philosophie Médiévale 94. Paris: Vrin.
- Fioravanti, Gianfranco. 1999. "La Réception de la Politique d'Aristote au Moyen Âge Tardif." In *Aspects de la Pensée Médiévale dans la Philosophie Politique Moderne*, edited by Y.C. Zarka, 7–24. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Flüeler, Christoph. 1992. *Rezeption und Interpretation der Aristotelischen Politica im späten Mittelalter*. 2 vols. Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner.
- Fögen, Thorsten. 2014. "Animal Communication." In *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, edited by G.L. Campbell, 216–232. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014.
- Giles of Rome. 1607. *De Regimine Principum*. Edited by H. Samaritanum. Rome : B. Zanetti.
- Guy of Rimini. *Super Politicam*. Venice, BMarc. Lat. VI 92 (2492), fol. 57rb–142vb.
- Harvey, Ruth. 1975. *The Inward Wits. Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. London: The Warburg Institute.
- Keyt, David. 1987. "Three Fundamental Theorems in Aristotle's Politics." *Phronesis* 32/1: 54–79.
- Köhler, Theodor W. 2008. *Homo animal nobilissimum. Konturen des spezifisch Menschlichen in der naturphilosophischen Aristoteleskommentierung des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts*. Vol 1. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Labarrière, Jean-Louis. 2004. *Langage, vie politique et mouvement des animaux: Études aristotéliennes*. Paris: Vrin.
- Laland, Kevin N., and Bennet G. Galef, eds. 2009. *The Question of Animal Culture*. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press.
- Lambertini, Roberto. 1990. "Philosophus Videtur Tangere Tres Rationes: Edigio Romano Lettore ed Interprete della Politica nel Terzo Libro del De regimine Principum." *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 1/1: 277–325.
- Lennox, James G. 2001. "Are Aristotelian Species Eternal?" In *Aristotle's Philosophy of Biology: Studies in the Origins of Life Science*, 131–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, Fred. 1997. *Justice, Nature, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mulgan, Richard G. 1974. "Aristotle's Doctrine that Man is a Political Animal." *Hermes* 102: 438–445.

Nicholas of Vaudémont (ps.-John Buridan). 1969. *Quaestiones super octo libros Politicorum Aristotelis*. Frankfurt: Minerva. (Reprint of Paris 1513 edition.)

Nicholas of Vaudémont. *Quaestiones super octo libros Politicorum Aristotelis*. Paris, BNF NaI. 1130, fol. 2r–219r.

Nicholas of Vaudémont. *Quaestiones super octo libros Politicorum Aristotelis*. Vatican, BAV Vat. lat. 2167, f. 1ra–139vb.

Pasnau, Robert, and van Dyke, Christina, eds. 2010. *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peter of Auvergne. *Quaestiones super I-VII libros Politicorum*. Paris, BNF Lat. 16089, fol. 274r–319r.

Radulphus Brito (pseudo?). *Quaestiones super librum Politicorum*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University cod. 9, fol.1ra–4rb. (Partially edited by M. Toste, in Toste 2014, 177–181.)

Raimundus Acgerii. *Sententia libri Politicorum Aristotelis*. Florence, BLaur. S. Marco 452 (20), fol. 49ra–75vb.

Resnick, Irven, and Kenneth Kitchell, 2008. “Introduction.” In *Albert the Great, Questions Concerning Aristotle’s On Animals*, translated by Irwin Resnick and Kenneth Kitchell, 3–9. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.

Resnick, Irven M., and Kenneth F. Jr. Kitchell. 1996. “Albert the Great on the ‘Language’ of Animals.” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70/1: 41–61.

Rosier-Catach, Irène. 2015. “Communauté politique et communauté linguistique.” In *La Légitimité Implicite*, vol. 1, edited by J-F. Genet, 225–243. Paris/Rome: Éditions de la Sorbonne/École Française de Rome.

Thomas Aquinas. 2007. *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*. Translated by R.J. Regan. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Thomas Aquinas. 1979. *De regno ad regem Cypri*. Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia, vol. 42, 417-471. Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1979.

Thomas Aquinas. 1971. *Sententia libri Politicorum*. Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia, vol. 48. Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae.

Thomas Aquinas. 1969. *Sententia libri Ethicorum*. Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia, vol. 47. Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae.

Toivanen, Juhana. 2013. *Perception and the Internal Senses. Peter of John Olivi on the Cognitive Functions of the Sensitive Soul*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Toivanen, Juhana (forthcoming). “Estimative Power as a Social Sense.”

Toste, Marco. 2014. "The Naturalness of Human Association in Medieval Political Thought Revisited." In *La Nature Comme Source de la Morale au Moyen Âge*, edited by M. van der Lugt, 113–188. Florence: SISMEL–Edizioni del Galluzzo.

Toste, Marco. 2012. "Pro Patria Mori. The Debate in the Medieval Aristotelian Commentary Tradition." In *Il Bene Comune: Forme di Governo e Gerarchie Sociali nel Basso Medioevo*. Spoleto: Fondazione CISAM.

Toste, Marco. 2008. "Utrum felix indigeat amicis: the reception of the Aristotelian theory of friendship at the arts faculty in Paris." In *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, 1200-1500*, edited by I.P. Bejczy, 173–195. Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill.

Van den Abeele, Baudouin. 1999. "Le 'De Animalibus' d'Aristote Dans Le Monde Latin: Modalités de Sa Réception Médiévale." *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 33: 287–318.

Walter Burley. *Expositio in Aristotelis Politicorum libros*. Vatican, MS Borgh. 129, fol. 1r–148v (= V); Cambridge, Gonville and Caius Coll. 490/486, fol. 1ra–74va (= GC).