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Political animality

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Abstract

This essay contributes to contemporary discussions concerning so-called animal politics by drawing from the history of the notion of political animal. Two different historical meanings of the notion are identified: (1) normative political animality that is intrinsically linked with rationality, language, and justice; (2) biological political animality that focuses on collaboration for the sake of a common aim. The former is applicable only to human beings, while the latter can also be used in relation to other animals. After briefly discussing the Aristotelian background of the notion, the essay argues that in medieval Aristotelian tradition, the normative meaning prevailed and the biological one was set aside. However, it is precisely the biological notion that appears useful today. The essay suggests several ways in which it might benefit contemporary theoretical discussions concerning animals, thus laying ground for further developments in animal politics.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade or so, animal politics has turned into a vibrant field that focuses on human–animal relations from the perspective of political rather than moral philosophy.¹ The present essay contributes to this discussion by examining the historical notion of the “political animal” and by suggesting ways in which it could be used today.

In ancient and medieval philosophy, the social and political behavior of human beings was analyzed using the notion of the political animal (*ζῷον πολιτικόν*, *animal civile*). However, its popularity later waned, not least due to the influential critique by Hobbes (1997, pp. 21–22), and it rarely plays any significant role in contemporary theoretical discussions. It is sometimes mentioned as a historically influential way of emphasizing human exceptionality (humans are

¹The foundational work is Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011). Arias-Maldonado (2014) emphasizes the primacy of a political perspective that is compatible with but does not presuppose any particular view of the moral status of nonhuman animals. On the distinction between animal politics and more traditional animal ethics, see Cochrane et al. (2018).

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the only political animals and thus special²), or when asking whether nonhuman animals could be counted as political animals because they are members of, and agents within, our human communities.³ Any detailed analysis of the meaning of the concept itself is usually omitted. This is where the present essay steps in.

My aim is to elaborate on the notion of the political animal by drawing from its history, which is remarkably complex, and to suggest ways in which it can be applied to nonhuman animals, especially in the context of animal politics. The main argument of the essay can be summarized as follows. The notion of the political animal that medieval authors inherited from ancient sources was ambiguous. On the one hand, it could refer inclusively to several species of animals that exhibit certain similarities in their natural behavior; on the other hand, it was used in a narrower sense and applied exclusively to human beings. This ambiguity was reflected in the views of medieval philosophers. They emphasized the “animality” of human beings, explained the social/political life of human beings in terms of their biological needs and desires, and in many cases were ready to accept that some nonhuman animal species (hereafter “animals”) can be called political. Yet, they also argued against the view that animals are political. They did not question the social dimension of animal behavior, but instead their arguments can be interpreted as embodying a change in the meaning of the term “political”: it was narrowed down so that it applied only to the *homo sapiens*.

My approach is based on the observation that concepts such as “politics,” “political,” and “political animal” are not timeless and universal but historically contingent. Nowadays there are several ways to understand what the core of politics is. It can be viewed within the framework of so-called political realism, which emphasizes practical means for seizing and consolidating power, conflicts of interest, partiality, struggle for recognition, and so forth. Alternatively, it can be seen more positively (and somewhat naïvely) as the administration of common affairs, which involves normative decision-making. Finally, the Anglo-American liberal tradition typically emphasizes the connection between politics and justice, especially distributive justice.⁴ All these perspectives emphasize the *human* aspect of politics and exclude other animals from the outset (with the potential exception of the first⁵). However, we should not read historical texts through these modern notions carelessly. Instead, we should be sensitive to the subtle differences and changes in the meaning of the concept of “political”—which is precisely what the present essay aims to do.

The essay consists of four sections. The next section lays out the theoretical foundation that is needed for understanding medieval discussions by examining the notion of the political animal in Aristotle's works. Sections three and four focus on the use of this notion in medieval political philosophy and show that medieval philosophers resolved the mentioned ambiguity by adopting a narrow interpretation of the “political animal” that applies exclusively to human social life. The analysis of historical sources follows a method typical in the field of the history of philosophy and aims to provide conceptual tools for developing an interpretation of political animality that can be applied to animal politics and ethology today.⁶

Finally, the fifth section articulates how the broader understanding of political animality—which emphasizes human animality and the political nature of nonhuman animals—can offer novel perspectives on contemporary discussions. Namely, it can be used to place human social/political life into a continuum with many other animal species, to broaden

²See esp., Wadiwel (2002), but also Wissenburg and Schlosberg (2014, p. 2), and Wissenburg (2014, p. 30).

³See, e.g., Driessen (2014, pp. 95–96).

⁴For a formulation and criticism of this view, see Wissenburg (2014).

⁵The possibility to apply the first interpretation of politics to animals depends on how we understand the key notions, such as “power” and “recognition.” Arguably, they make sense only within a normative framework. However, even though this notion of politics is sometimes applied to animals (see below), my aim is to show that historical texts provide yet another conception that applies to them and focuses less on competition, bargaining, and the struggle for power.

⁶The discussion concerning the historical picture owes much to my recent publications (esp. Toivanen, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

our understanding of the political life of human beings, and to offer new perspectives on animal politics.⁷

2 | BIOLOGICAL AND NORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL ANIMALITY

As is well-known, the origins of the idea that human beings are political animals by nature is in Aristotle's practical philosophy. Yet, Aristotle never gives an explicit definition for the term “political animal” (ζῷον πολιτικόν), and it has been argued that it does not have a single meaning in the works where it is put to theoretical use, that is, in *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Historia animalium* (Mulgan, 1974). A particular puzzle concerns the scope of the term. On the one hand, Aristotle seems to suggest that the human being is the only political animal there is. He argues in several places that the political community is not established only for the sake of life but for the sake of the good life, and in *Politics* 3.9 he emphasizes that the communities of slaves or any non-human living beings—that is, animals—are not real political communities precisely because they lack the normative dimension that enables good, that is, virtuous life. Likewise, when he makes a distinction between the communal life of humans and that of cattle in *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.9, he draws from his notions of the good life, rationality, and the ability to use language as necessary conditions for a human political life (see Aristotle, *Pol.* 3.9, 1280a31–37; *EN* 9.9, 1170b13–14⁸).

Aristotle, however, never explicitly rejects the possibility that animals could be considered political; by contrast, in *Historia animalium* 1.1 he explicitly states that some nonhuman species are political animals. He distinguishes different ways of life that can be observed in animals—scattered, solitary, gregarious, and political—and suggests that the political way of life differs from others because it involves collaboration for the sake of reaching a common aim (κοινόν ἔργον) with other members of the same species. As examples of political animals, he lists “the human, the bee, the wasp, the ant, and the crane” (Aristotle, *HA* 1.1, 487b32–488a14).

Against this background, one of the four arguments that Aristotle presents in *Politics* 1.2 for the naturalness of the political community and/or the political nature of humans is particularly interesting. The argument, which I shall call “the argument from language,” is worth quoting in the full:

The reason why man is more of a political animal than any bee or any gregarious animal is obvious. Nature, as we say, does nothing in vain, and man alone among the animals possesses speech. Now the voice is an indication of pleasure and pain, which is why it is possessed by the other animals also; for their nature does extend this far, to having the sensations of pleasure and pain, and to indicating them to each other. Speech, on the other hand, serves to make clear what is beneficial and what is harmful, and so what is just and what is unjust. For by contrast with the other animals, man has this peculiarity: he alone has sense of good and evil, just and unjust, and so forth. An association in these matters makes a household and a state. (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a7–18; translation modified)⁹

⁷I will mostly leave aside questions that the application of the notion of the political animal raises in relation to the moral status of nonhuman animals. For moral implications of animal politics, see Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) and the contributions in Wissenburg and Schlosberg (2014).

⁸Aristotle's (1984, 1957, 1995, 2009) works will follow standard citations. See references for editions used.

⁹διότι δὲ πολιτικόν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῷον πάσης μελίτης καὶ παντὸς ἀγελαίου ζῷου μᾶλλον, ἤλιον. οὐθὲν γάρ, ὡς φαμέν, μάτην ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ λόγον δὲ μόνου ἀνθρώπου ἔχει τῶν ζῷων· ἢ μὲν οὖν φωνὴ τοῦ λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος ἐστὶ σημεῖον, διὸ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὑπάρχει ζῷους (μέχρι γὰρ τούτου ἢ φύσις αὐτῶν ἐλήλυθε, τοῦ ἔχειν αἰσθησὶν λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος καὶ ταῦτα σημαίνειν ἀλλήλοις), ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερόν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἀδίκον· τοῦτο γὰρ πρὸς τὰ ἄλλα ζῷα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἴδιον, τὸ μόνου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ κακοῦ καὶ δίκαιου καὶ ἀδίκου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων αἰσθησὶν ἔχειν· ἢ δὲ τούτων κοινῶν ποιεῖ οἰκίαν καὶ πόλιν (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a718).

Animals play an important role in the argument. They function as the point of comparison, as “the other” that allows Aristotle to illustrate his view of the special character of human political life. However, the precise argumentative strategy that Aristotle employs is less obvious. In particular, it is unclear if the bees, mentioned at the beginning of the argument, are political animals or bundled together with gregarious animals.

Scholars have suggested at least two possible general directions of interpretation, which stem from the aforementioned ways in which Aristotle seems to use the notion of the political animal. I shall call them *normative* and *biological* interpretations. According to the normative interpretation, only humans count as political animals. No other animal species is, properly speaking, political because animals lack reason and cannot participate in a community that aims for the flourishing of rational beings and is based on deliberation concerning what is just and unjust. The juxtaposition of the political nature of humans and the social behavior of animals is an analogy, and the difference between humans and other social animals is a qualitative one, that is, not a matter of degree but of kind (see Cooper, 1990, pp. 222–225; Morel, 2017; Mulgan, 1974).¹⁰

By contrast, according to the biological interpretation, Aristotle uses the notion of the political animal in a broader sense, which is familiar from his zoological works (esp. *HA* 1.1, 488a7–10). According to this view, human beings are in relevant ways similar and comparable to other political animals. Ants, bees, cranes, and humans are political because the members of these species collaborate among themselves for the sake of a common aim. Rationality and the ability to speak increases the complexity of human collaboration and political life but the difference is only a matter of degree. Thus, when Aristotle begins the argument by stating that humans are political *more than the bee*, he seems to think that bees are political too, but to a lesser degree than humans (see Depew, 1995; Labarrière, 2004, pp. 61–127; Lloyd, 2013, pp. 288–289).

I emphasize that I am not defending either of these interpretations in the present context.¹¹ The crucial point is that they both presuppose some kind of similarity between the social/political behavior of humans and the social/political behavior of animals. Whether real or analogous, this similarity is a precondition for the usefulness of the comparison and a central presupposition in the argument. It would undoubtedly be true to say that humans are more political than any inanimate object or plant, but this comparison would do little to our understanding of what the political nature of humans means. The similarity is taken for granted—and that is what is important for the purposes of the present essay and for medieval interpretations of Aristotle. However, before turning to them, let me briefly elaborate on the precise meaning of the normative and biological interpretations.

The normative interpretation stems from Aristotle's view that only those human individuals are political who are parts of an organized political community, that is, a city-state (*polis*, πόλις). The city-state is a special type of community that differs from communities of animals precisely because it is centered on justice, virtue, and laws. Aristotle states that only a community that aims at the good life counts as a true *polis* (*Pol.* 3.9, 1280a31–35), and in his view, the good life consists of activity in accordance with virtue in the context of a city-state governed by good laws.

When the normative reading is applied to the argument from language, the focus is on the rational capacity to consider various things from a normative perspective and to talk about

¹⁰Aristotle's puzzling claims about practical rationality in nonhuman animals (esp. in *HA* 611a15–21) have been explained by appealing to an analogy between *phronēsis* (φρόνησις) in the proper sense and animal capacity that is analogous (but not similar) to it; the same strategy can be applied to the issue at hand. See Lloyd (2013).

¹¹The two interpretations do not necessarily rule each other out: it is possible to hold that the political nature of humans is fundamentally biological but has a normative “superstructure” to it (see, e.g., Kullmann, 1991, pp. 174–175).

them by using symbolic language. Arguably, speaking about what is just and unjust does not refer to philosophical reflection but to concrete questions such as “How is power distributed justly?,” “What is the just price of a pair of boots?,” and “Was that action just or unjust?” Rational beings can discuss these kinds of normative questions, and they can organize their social life in various ways, depending on the outcome of their discussions. The normative interpretation of political animality emphasizes this aspect: political life consists of this kind of normative decision-making, and only those beings who can take part in this kind of activity form city-states and count as political animals.¹²

The biological interpretation, by contrast, is based on the view that a broader set of behavior counts as political. All living beings naturally strive to remain alive and procreate—this also applies to plants—and some living beings need to collaborate so as to reach these aims. A bee separated from the hive dies soon, and a human infant cannot survive, or at least grow up to be a flourishing individual, without contact with other humans. According to the biological reading, animals that need a community and collaborate with their peers are political animals. The sheer survival is not the only relevant consideration, however. At least equally central is the ability to lead a life that is typical of the species: even if an individual animal could *survive* alone, political animals cannot develop their full potential and behave in ways that are natural to them without their community.¹³

A central feature of the biological interpretation is that it focuses on observable behavior. The internal mental states of individuals are not relevant when deciding whether a species is political. This means, among other things, that animals do not need to *know* that collaboration enables life and the preservation of the species over time; it suffices that they have psychological mechanisms that make them behave in ways that individuals and the species survive. An illustrative example is procreation: many animals have a (perhaps instinctual) desire to mate, but we do not need to presume they know that mating results in offspring, let alone that they realize that their breeding contributes to the vitality of the species. The desire to mate causes behavior that realizes these aims. Collaboration and communal life may function through a similar mechanism, and it seems likely that the social behavior of ants, bees, and the like is not based on any higher-order consideration of the usefulness of the community. But since “political animal” is primarily a descriptive notion, the lack of this type of consciousness does not prevent applying it to them. For this reason, it is also possible that the behavior of political animals stems from an instinctual striving for self-preservation without any altruistic considerations; the dichotomy between egoistic and altruistic behavior is not relevant for the social/political behavior of animals, because communal life can emerge from self-preservation.¹⁴

Aristotle claims that the political community “comes into existence for the sake of life, [but] it exists for the sake of the good life” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b29–30). This claim can be understood in such a way that *polis* has two distinct but interconnected functions. First, it enables the division of labor and thus the production and exchange of food, clothing, and other material necessities for life. Indeed, Aristotle defines *polis* as a self-sufficient community that provides everything that is necessary for life: it fulfills material and biological conditions

¹²Discussion concerning what is just and what is unjust can thus be understood in relation to public reason and deliberative rationality that are more recently emphasized by, for example, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. As Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, pp. 55–61) argue, this is an important but limited perspective in respect to the notion of the citizen; I suggest that it is equally limited when it comes to the notion of the political animal.

¹³In the case of Aristotle, this idea is, of course, related to his essentialism: there is a natural way of life for a certain species. This is not the place to elaborate on whether it is possible to talk about behavior and life that is peculiar to a species without presuming some sort of essentialism, although I find it a question worth asking.

¹⁴Contemporary researchers tend to be suspicious of the presence of altruistic motives in nonhuman animals. Instead, seemingly altruistic behavior is viewed as a complex form of egoism (Koenig & Dickinson, 2018, sec. “General characteristics”).

that make human life possible (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b29). Second, *polis* is a normative community that is necessary for a good life, which means lifelong activity in accordance with virtue. It is not possible to lead a good life outside the political community (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a18–29; *EN* 1.7, 2.1, and 10.9). This normative dimension makes human communities special and attaches them to the ability to use language and to the notion of justice, which have a prominent role in the argument from language.

Due to these two functions, the political community enables both human *life*, and *human* life. The biological version of the political animal goes together with the function of preserving life, while the function of enabling the good life is easy to relate to the normative version. The significance of this distinction becomes clear when we turn to medieval views concerning the reasons why humans lead a political life. However, it should be noted that the mechanism that makes the good life possible can also be understood in terms of the biological notion that focuses on collaboration and common aim: we need other human beings not only in order to become moral agents, who have the capacity to take part in discussions concerning what is just, but also to act in accordance with moral virtue (see, e.g., Morel, 2017, pp. 117–119; *EN* 10.7 and 10.9).¹⁵ Thus, emphasizing the normative dimension does not necessarily entail that the explanation for the political life of humans would be radically different from that of animals. Both can be understood in terms of collaboration, which only assumes different forms among us and other animals.

3 | MEDIEVAL VIEWS ON THE POLITICAL ANIMAL

The notion of the political animal was not a subject of philosophical inquiry in the Middle Ages. It was abundantly used in philosophical arguments, but because medieval authors usually did not give a precise definition of it, understanding its meaning requires a careful analysis of how it was used. Consequently, it is necessary to pay attention to the contexts and keep in mind that there may be subtle differences between various medieval authors. The following discussion should not, therefore, be taken as an exhaustive investigation of medieval views.

Instead, I focus on two central themes. First, I examine human beings as political *animals*, that is, the biological aspect of the political life of humans. Second, I discuss the idea that animals other than humans count as political, especially in relation to the argument from language. As I already mentioned, my main claim is that medieval philosophers ended up rejecting the view that animals are truly political, but even so, they did not change their views concerning the actual behavior of animals or the psychological explanations behind this behavior. Instead, they narrowed the scope of “political” in conformity to the normative interpretation and resolved the ambiguity within the notion of the political animal in favor of the exclusive interpretation of the term.

Medieval authors generally accepted the idea that human beings live a political life partially because of their animality. The ultimate background for this view comes from Aristotle's view that the *polis* is a self-sufficient community, which “comes into existence for the sake of life” (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b29; 1995, p. 3). Only a full-fledged political community can satisfy all material needs of individual human beings, who need food, clothing, and other material goods for their sustenance.¹⁶ Although the household can meet the immediate and daily needs, it cannot offer

¹⁵It should be noted that “morality” and “moral virtue” are anachronistic terms in the case of Aristotle: he speaks of virtues of character and does not have a distinct category of moral good. See, e.g., Annas (1993).

¹⁶The political community also supports the preservation of life by providing protection from external threats (see, e.g., Giles of Rome, 1607, bk. 2.1.2, p. 220; Ptolemy of Lucca, 1997, bk. 4.2, pp. 219–222).

everything humans need in the long run. Thus, for instance, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) writes in his commentary on *Politics*:

Every association of human beings collectively is directed to something necessary for life, and so that association will be perfect, which is directed to human beings having enough necessities of life. But the political community is such an association. (2007, p. 15; translation modified)¹⁷

This idea resonated with medieval authors because they were familiar with several post-Aristotelian sources, which emphasized: (1) the helplessness and dependency of human beings and (2) the need for acquiring material goods for the sustenance of life as an explanation for the emergence of the political community. Cicero, Augustine, Nemesius of Emesa, Avicenna, and others suggested that political communities are established, at least partially, because otherwise individual human beings and the human species could not survive (Toivanen, 2021c, pp. 64–65). Thus, the view that humans are rather helpless creatures, who need to collaborate to meet their animal needs was commonly accepted. One of the most famous passages to incorporate this view is in Thomas Aquinas's *De regno* (the translation of this work is published in Ptolemy of Lucca's *On the Government*):

It is natural for the human being, more than for any other animal, to be a social and political animal who lives in a multitude. This can be seen from natural needs. Nature has prepared food for all other animals, hair to cover them, and means for defence (such as teeth, horns, claws) or at least swiftness in flight. However, nature made human beings without any of these. Instead of them, humans were endowed with reason, by which they can procure all these things for themselves, with the help of hands. But one human alone is not able to procure all these things, because one human alone cannot provide sufficiently for life. It is therefore natural for human beings to live in the company of many. (Thomas Aquinas, in Ptolemy of Lucca, 1997, p. 61; translation modified)¹⁸

The argument clearly draws on the biological dimension of the notion of the political animal (although Thomas later emphasizes also the normative side). All living creatures need material goods to stay alive, but human beings differ from many other animals because we lack the natural means for acquiring these resources alone. We need to use our collective reason to come up with means to meet our needs (Aquinas, 1979, bk. 1.1, 450a; Ptolemy of Lucca, 1997, p. 61), and even after inventing all the necessary arts and crafts, the community is needed for the division of labor and exchange. Mutual dependency and the ability to collaborate makes the human being more social and political than other animal species, but our social/political life ultimately stems from a fundamental metaphysical similarity between us and other natural substances, that is, plants and animals. Like them, we are biological, mortal, and finite creatures that are driven by an inclination for self-preservation

¹⁷“Civitas est communitas perfecta. Quod ex hoc probat quia, cum omnis communicatio omnium hominum ordinetur ad aliquid necessarium vitae, illa erit perfecta communitas quae ordinatur ad hoc quod homo habeat sufficienter quicquid est necessarium ad vitam. Talis autem est communitas civitatis” (Aquinas, 1971, bk. 1.1b, 77a13–b19).

¹⁸“Naturale autem est homini ut sit animal sociale et politicum, in multitudine vivens, magis etiam quam omnia alia animalia; quod quidem naturalis necessitas declarat. Aliis enim animalibus natura praeparavit cibum, tegumenta pilorum, defensionem, ut dentes, cornua, ungues, vel saltem velocitatem ad fugam; homo autem institutus est nullo horum sibi a natura praeparato, sed loco omnium data est ei ratio per quam sibi haec omnia officio manuum posset praeparare. Ad quae omnia praeparanda unus homo non sufficit, nam unus homo per se sufficienter vitam transigere non posset; est igitur homini naturale ut in societate multorum vivat” (Aquinas, 1979, bk. 1.1, 449b25–38).

and the preservation of the species (which manifests itself as a desire to leave behind something similar to us, i.e., children). These drives are natural, and thus humans have a natural inclination to form various types of communities that enable fulfilling them (Aquinas, 1971, bk. 1.1a, 73b173–187; 2007, p. 10).

Although Aquinas emphasizes that the human species is unique in many ways, he also acknowledges the similarity of humans and other animals and thinks that some of our abilities that make collaboration necessary and possible can be found in other animals as well (Aquinas, 1948, bk. 1.96.1ad4; 1971, bk. 1.1, 73b and 75b-76a; 2007, pp. 10 and 13; Toivanen, 2021c, pp. 58–76). Ultimately he seems to think that other animals are not political in the proper sense of the word (Aquinas, 1979, art. 1.1, 449b25–450a64; Ptolemy of Lucca, 1997, pp. 61–62), and it is clear that the political life of humans includes features that are lacking in the communities of other animals: the normative dimension of the good life—a life that is proper to rational animals—becomes possible only with human politics (Aquinas, 1971, pp. 77b–78a; 2007, p. 15). As Aquinas writes in the quoted passage, setting up a community that meets our biological needs requires reasoning. However, this normative and rational dimension can be considered an additional layer that comes on top of the biological explanation for the existence and purpose of the political life of humans, or as a modification of the way in which the “biological community” comes about. The fact remains that the political nature of human beings is strongly connected to the biological level, and it can be partially accounted for by appealing to the biological notion of the political animal that is present in Aristotle's *Historia animalium*. Rationality modifies the way in which humans are political but does not necessarily exclude the validity of the biological notion.

4 | NO ANIMAL IS POLITICAL (EXCEPT THE HUMAN BEING)

Aquinas's analysis shows that both the biological and the normative aspects of the notion of the political animal are present in medieval discussions. The political nature of certain nonhuman animals is also repeatedly mentioned, and although I focus here more on cases where it is taken up as somehow problematic, let me begin with a quotation from Albert the Great (c. 1200–1280):

An animal is said to be political, if it (imitating cities) directs all its operations to one [aim] and performs an action that pertains to the common good. Not all gregarious animals, which stay with their companions, perform such a joint operation. Among those animals that collaborate, are the human, the wasp, the bee, the ant, and the crane. (Albertus Magnus, 1999, p. 16; translation modified)¹⁹

The distinction that Albert makes between gregarious and political animals is familiar from Aristotle's zoological works. The former live together but there is no collaboration between the members of the group. By contrast, political animals collaborate for the sake of their common good—which in a medieval context means, roughly, the good of the group as a whole (Haara & Toivanen, Forthcoming 2024; Kempshall, 1999). Human beings belong to the category of political animals, together with other collaborating animals (wasps, bees, ants, cranes).

¹⁹“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 his autem quae in unum conferunt operationes, est homo et vespa et apis et formica et grus” (Magnus, 1916, bk. 1.1.3).

It should be mentioned that Albert sometimes rejects the similarity between human political life and the political life of animals, and states that even bees are not properly speaking political (Magnus, 1916, bk. 22.1.5, p. 1354; 1999, pp. 1446–1447). Thus, the quote does not give a complete picture of Albert's rather complex and somewhat ambiguous view. However, it indicates that, like many other medieval authors, in certain contexts he had no problem in accepting the biological version of the political animal: if members of a species engage in common activities that help them to survive and exercise their way of life, they can be called “political.” This applies to human beings as well.

The argument from language is relevant for understanding medieval views precisely because it is one of the places where the human/animal boundary was taken up and occasionally discussed at some length (never very much, though). Many medieval versions of the argument from language are equally ambiguous as Aristotle's original version was when it comes to the precise status of bees. Bees can be taken to be: (1) gregarious animals that are not political; but the comparison can also be interpreted as showing that (2) humans are not only (a) more political than gregarious animals, such as sheep, but also (b) more political than bees that *are* political animals.

There are various reasons to think that medieval authors generally felt somewhat uneasy in attributing the epithet “political” to other animals without some kind of qualification. Yet, direct rejections of the political nature of animals are surprisingly rare in the context of the argument from language, especially as it seems to address this issue explicitly. Some historically influential authors, such as Giles of Rome (d. 1316) and Peter of Auvergne (d. 1304) exclude altogether the comparison to other animals from their versions of the argument from language. They argue that humans have speech and other animals only voices, as well as that speech allows more complex social life than voices do. Thus, the argument was not taken to be mainly about the comparison between the social/political nature of humans and other animals, but as a way to prove either the fact that humans are political animals by nature, or that the political community is natural. This applies, for instance, to Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great. (Toivanen, 2021c, pp. 223–229).

To trace the origins of the rejection of the political nature to animals, let us focus on a couple of medieval authors who are poorly known today outside the circles of specialists in medieval philosophy, but who were very influential in their own time. The first of them is Walter Burley (d. c. 1344), who deviates from the approach adopted by the aforementioned thirteenth-century authors. His version of the argument from language is one of the most extensive ones presented in medieval commentaries, and it focuses precisely on the comparison between humans and other animals. Walter writes:

Not only does it follow that human beings are political and social by nature, but also that humans are more social than any other animal. The Philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] declares this, and it can be posited as the sixth conclusion, namely that “The human being is more social or gregarious by nature than any other animal.” This conclusion can be proved as follows. An animal, to which nature has provided more of those things that concern association and communication, is more social or gregarious; but nature has provided those things that concern association or communication to humans more than to any other animal; therefore, human beings are more social or gregarious or communicative by nature than any other animal. (Burley, n.d., fol. 5rb-va)²⁰

²⁰“Non solum sequitur quod homo sit naturaliter civilis et socialis, sed quod homo [om. V] est magis socialis quam aliquod aliud animal. Et hoc declarat Philosophus, et potest poni conclusio sexta, scilicet quod homo est naturaliter magis socialis seu gregalis quam aliquod aliud animal. Probatu sic: Illud animal est magis sociale seu gregale, cui natura plus dedit de hiis, que pertinent ad associationem vel communicationem; sed natura dedit homini plus de hiis, que pertinent ad associationem seu communicationem quam alicui alii animali; ergo homo est naturaliter magis socialis seu gregalis sive communicativus quam aliquod aliud animal.”

Instead of interpreting the argument from language as a proof for the political nature of human beings or the naturalness of the political community—as Albert, Thomas, Giles, and Peter had done—Walter thinks that its main purpose is to prove that human beings are more *social* than nonhuman animals (I will come back to this term soon).²¹ For him the comparison between humans and animals is not just an aside, as it was for most medieval authors. The core of Walter's argument is that the degree of sociability in two animal species can be compared by investigating which of the two has more abilities or traits that make social behavior possible. Walter goes on to prove the minor premise—that humans have these abilities more than other animals—by appealing to the ability to use language. Animals are social and can communicate with their voices, but human beings are more social because human language enables more complex communication.

It is significant that Walter replaces the term “political” with “social” when he focuses on nonhuman animals. The former term is mentioned at the beginning of the argument from language, but animals are not said to be less political than humans. Instead, they are less social. This shows that Walter accepts the comparison and does not mean to downplay the abilities of animals, but at the same time it strongly suggests that only human beings can be called political in the proper sense of the term (see Toivanen, 2021c, pp. 270–272).

A more explicit formulation of the same view can be found in Nicholas of Vaudémont's (fl. 1370s in Paris) commentary on *Politics*, which circulated under the name of John Buridan and enjoyed popularity, possibly due to the false attribution (Courtenay, 2004; Flüeler, 1992, pp. 132–168). Nicholas writes:

Properly speaking, “gregarious” applies only to animals which roam in groups, as is clear from cranes and [other] birds. And properly speaking, “political” applies only to human beings because political life aims at some virtue. (Nicholas of Vaudémont, 1969, fol. 5rb)²²

Several authors, Aristotle included, considered cranes to be political animals, but Nicholas firmly places them in the category of gregarious animals. What is rather striking in his claim is that the usual criteria for distinguishing cranes and other political animals from gregarious animals—collaboration and the common aim—does not play any role. Nicholas's version of the argument from language confirms this picture, as it is very similar to Walter Burley's interpretation: the ability to use language entails knowledge of good and evil, justice and injustice, truth and falsity, and all these are necessary for being a political animal.

On the basis of these examples, it seems clear that the ambiguity concerning the political nature of animals was resolved in the fourteenth century simply by rejecting the application of “political” to nonhuman animals. However, this may be an overstatement because the historical picture is messy. The rejection was not systematic and universal, and the ambiguity did not disappear completely, at once, and in all contexts.²³ Some kind of trend can still be distinguished, because Nicholas is not an isolated case in his explicit rejection of nonhuman politics. For instance, Nicole Oresme's (d. 1382) interpretation of the argument from language leaves no room for doubt about the status of bees: they are gregarious animals (Oresme, 1970, bk. 1.2, 49a).

²¹Strikingly, Walter thinks that *Aristotle's* intention was to show here that human beings are more social or gregarious by nature than any other animal.

²²“Sed gregale proprie convenit animalibus incedentibus per turmas, ut patet de gruibus et <aliis> ovibus. Et civile solum convenit hominibus, quia civilitas ordinatur ad aliquam virtutem.” The reference is to the reprint of 1513 edition, but I have corrected the text on basis of manuscript evidence.

²³In particular, more research is needed on fourteenth century zoological works, which may further complicate the historical picture.

Finally, although Aristotle's *Politics* was never a part of the core curriculum of the medieval university (Lohr, 2002, pp. 16–17), scholars continued producing commentaries on it for a long time. About two hundred years after Walter and Nicholas, a professor of natural philosophy at the University of Ferrara, Antonio Montecatini (1537–1599) offered an interpretation of the argument from language that again preserves the similarity of humans and animals but explicitly rejects the political nature of the latter (the following discussion is based on Toivanen, 2021a):

These terms [“political” and “apolitical”] are taken in two ways: in the first way, properly, and in this way they refer to a certain association of life between human beings, which is properly and truthfully called a political association and a political community; in the second way, metaphorically and due to a similarity to the first way, and in this way they refer to the whole community and society of human beings or of other animals, which belong to one species and which nature has instructed to pursue the necessities of life together. Only human beings are called political, that is, suitable for real political communities, in the first way; not only human beings but also bees, ants, cranes, and many other animals are called political, that is, social and gregarious, in the second way. (Montecatini, 1587, bk. 5.2, pp. 59–60)

Other animals can be called political, but that is only a metaphorical way of speaking. In reality, they are social and gregarious, while only humans are political in the proper sense that requires participation in a political community that is ordered according to human laws (Montecatini, 1587, bk. 4.16, pp. 46–50). Montecatini thus provides an explicit statement that the term “political” is equivocal and applies to animals only metaphorically.²⁴

The full meaning of the notion of the political animal would require a more detailed analysis of its normative dimension in medieval and renaissance philosophical works. However, already the preceding brief examination suggests that instead of revising their views concerning the actual behavior of animals, scholastic authors narrowed down (or specified further) the meaning of the notion of the political animal. They did not see any reason to question the received view of the observable behavior of social animals, even when they denied political life to them. By contrast, they articulated the difference between humans and animals in such a way that the normative dimension of justice and laws turned out to be necessary for being political. Instead of emphasizing fundamental similarity and continuity, they rejected the biological model that is based on collaboration and common aim and that allows putting nonhuman animals in the same category with humans.

This development can be seen as a version of a distinction that is more familiar to us today: other animals can be *social* but only humans are *political*. Whether this idea is a medieval innovation or just a more specific formulation of Aristotle's original view is a question that can be solved only by finding out what Aristotle's original view was, but that question goes beyond my aims in the present context. What is clear is the medieval authors clarified the ambiguity present in Aristotle's works and gave a more explicit meaning to the notion of “political.”

5 | CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF POLITICAL ANIMALITY

In this final section of the essay, I elaborate on certain consequences that applying the notion of the political animal to contemporary theoretical discussions may have. I mainly

²⁴Note that my intention is not to claim that Montecatini would be the first to defend this interpretation.

focus on the biological aspect of political animality, which, it seems to me, has been neglected in the literature but proves to be useful. My first suggestion is related to the social and political nature of nonhuman animals. Modern ethology confirms that the communities of animals that were historically called political are based on complex forms of common activity. Ants and bees need their communities to stay alive and behave in ways that are typical for the species. Moreover, we now know that there are more political animals (in the biological sense of the word) than the Aristotelian list suggests.²⁵ Complex social behavior can be found in various species, such as wolves and rats, and the social behavior and social intelligence of primates, dolphins, and crows (*corvi* in general) has been studied much (see Byrne & Whiten, 1988; Clayton & Emery, 2007; Pryor & Norris, 1998; Watts, 2010).

In particular, primates comprehend, construct, and maintain sophisticated social networks. They have been shown to strive for power, manipulate social relations, form alliances, and they also have rather complex means of communication (Byrne & Whiten, 1988; Watts, 2010). The social life of primates has affinities to the normative dimension of human politics, and Watts (2010), among others, has suggested that the mentioned behavioral patterns and social abilities can be called political. This suggestion is controversial, however. The social behavior of primates lacks some of the normative aspects of human social life, and some contemporary researchers think, in the same vein as Montecatini, that animals are political only metaphorically (Schubert, 1991). Social norms as such exist in primate communities, but the human ability to give normative and political significance to concrete and abstract symbols, as well as the centrality of rhetoric (that is, language) in human politics emphasizes the differences between us and them (Watts, 2010, pp. 130–133). These are the reasons why Watts (2010, p. 133) also qualifies his view by stating that the political behavior of primates “is not politics as we know it in humans, but it is politics of a kind.”

The contemporary notion of “political” can thus be used as a subcategory of “social,” thereby distinguishing a limited set of species—possibly only humans—that are capable of rather complex social behavior. The term “social behavior” as such refers nowadays to an extremely broad variety of actions. For instance, *Encyclopedia Britannica* illustrates the social behavior of animals with an example: “When a lone female moth emits a bouquet of pheromones to attract male potential mates, she is engaging in social behavior” (Koenig & Dickinson, 2018). Notably, this type of behavior is placed in the same category as, say, the manipulation of social relations that an individual primate exercises to establish a position of power within the group. The approach, adopted by Watts and other researchers who apply the notion of politics to animals, allows more nuanced distinctions to be made.

Relating these contemporary views to the historical background is illustrative. The centrality of the ability to use language in distinguishing humans and other animals, accepting the idea that some animals can be called political, and emphasizing the similarities between humans and animals are themes that appear repeatedly in the Aristotelian tradition. Contemporary discussions resemble the medieval demarcation lines to a surprising degree. At the same time, it is noteworthy that even those contemporary authors, who accept the idea that primates can be called political, use the notion in such a way that it is strongly associated with the Hobbesian and Weberian tradition, which emphasizes power struggle (Watts, 2010, pp. 119–126).²⁶ Politics is about individuals trying to realize their intentions

²⁵To be fair, historical authors (presumably including Aristotle) did not mean to present exhaustive lists but rather some illustrative examples.

²⁶In particular, Byrne and Whiten (1988)—whose work is revealingly titled *Machiavellian Intelligence*—discuss the so-called “social intelligence hypothesis,” according to which intelligence developed primarily to handle social information. Although they do not claim that “Machiavellian intelligence” would cover the whole gamut of social intelligence, it is considered central for the evolution of intelligence in primates, as well as for understanding their social life. One of the chapters explicitly compares power struggles among chimpanzees to Machiavelli’s *Prince* (de Waal, 1988, pp. 129–131).

against the wills of others, and politics refers to the means they have at their disposal in this pursuit—including violence.

Thus, while the contemporary notion of “politics” can be used to demarcate political animals (e.g., primates) from a broader set of social animals, the criteria used today are different from those we find in historical sources. In particular, the biological version of the notion of the political animal, which takes its cue from collaboration, extends the scope of politics beyond the narrow boundaries of power struggle without equating it with all social behavior. A female moth that emits pheromones is not political, while rather simple gregarious animals (such as ants and bees) can be political, if they collaborate—even when individuals do not try to raise their position in the social hierarchy of the group by manipulating others. The historical notion sets the borderline between political and social animals to a different place and is more inclusive than the contemporary understanding of politics.²⁷

Calling animal behavior “political” highlights the continuity and similarity between humans and other animals more strongly than the broader term “social” does.²⁸ Of course, this is true both when it is understood in the narrow sense of power struggle and furthering an individual's own goals and when it is used in the historical sense that focuses on collaboration. But in light of the historical sense, the similarity is more extensive, as it places the political life of humans on the same continuum not only with primates but also with many species that have less developed cognitive capacities: there is a meaningful difference between political and apolitical (but still social) animal species, but the borderline is not in primates. Insofar as concepts influence thinking, adopting the broader biological version of the concept of the political animal may affect our views concerning the social/political behavior of humans and animals in a significant way.

However, even if we accept the view that being political requires normativity and language, taking the historical notion and its biological aspect seriously may give important insights in relation to our understanding of the political dimension of human life and animal political theory. We have seen above that historical discussions revolve around the two dimensions, normative and biological, which both are necessary for understanding what political animality is. Following medieval lines of interpretation, we may think that being a political animal in the proper sense entails the normative dimension: without it, shared life is only metaphorically political (as Montecatini, 1587; and Schubert, 1991 suggest), or perhaps similar to human politics in some respects but nevertheless qualitatively different from it (as Magnus, 1916, 1999; and Watts, 2010 claim).

Accepting the centrality of the normative dimension easily leads to a complete rejection of the significance of the biological aspect. But we may ask: Does the notion lose something essential, if it is completely separated from its biological foundation and taken exclusively in its normative sense? Can politics be understood at all without appealing to collaboration, division of labor, common aims, and mutual dependency? The answer to these questions is obvious if we accept that politics and political animality are grounded on two equally important foundations—the normative *and* the biological. Setting the normative dimension aside eliminates the connection of politics to justice, rationality, virtue, and language; but setting the biological dimension aside loses sight of mutual dependency and the necessity of collaboration. These elements are central to the forms of life, behavioral patterns, and activities that the notion of the political animal was intended to describe. Emphasizing normativity at the expense of the

²⁷Animals are often divided into domesticated and wild kinds, but as Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, pp. 62–65) argue, this division simplifies the complexity of the relation between human beings and various animal species. Medieval philosophers used this distinction, but they sometimes noted that it is distinct from the more fundamental division into social, political, and gregarious animals (see, e.g., Nicholas of Vaudémont, 1969, bk. 1.4, fol. 5rb).

²⁸Indeed, contemporary animal politics often endeavors to broaden our understanding of politics, so that it can be applied to animals (see, e.g., Driessen, 2014, pp. 99–101).

biological dimension dilutes the concept, and in a way cripples it, because it hides from view the biological foundation of political life.

Normativity presupposes a community, in which collaboration, shared aims, and mutual dependency play a central role. Humans can enter a debate about what is just in each situation only if they already belong to a community that ultimately aims to make human life possible and achieves this through collaboration. Calling a species “political” based on normativity alone simplifies and leads astray even if we take it as a necessary feature of political life.

Understood in this way, the notion of the political animal does not need to be naïve. Taking the biological dimension seriously does not mean depicting political life as a harmonious and amicable utopia of like-minded individuals. The shared aim does not have to be given, and sharing a notion of justice does not mean that humans simply agree on what is just and what is unjust. Argument, debate, and disagreement can be a part of normative discussion, but if normative discussion is seen *only* in terms of power struggle between individuals, the crucial aspect of collaboration and mutual dependency disappears. Taken to the extreme, this approach leads to a position where the struggle for power (including the power to decide what decision is just in any given situation) appears as political even when the confrontation is so extreme that collaboration becomes impossible. Polarization does not necessarily lead to this kind of situation, but in extreme cases it may do so. And if it does, the biological version of the notion of the political animal and politics can be used to question the view that this is still a political situation. If there are no shared aims and collaboration is impossible, there is no political community, no political action, and no political animals.

In reality, collaboration and mutual dependency cannot completely disappear—at least not as long as we inhabit the same planet and breathe common air. We depend on other people and more generally on our environment: we are both political and ecological animals.²⁹ Arguably, theories that analyze the political behavior of human beings should take this perspective into account; and the historical notion of political animality may be a handy device to seamlessly connect it to the normative aspects of human politics.

Finally, approaching the political animal and politics from this angle opens new perspectives on animal political theory. Marcel Wissenburg (2014) has criticized contemporary theories of animal politics for relying too strongly on the liberal tradition, which views politics in terms of distributive justice and individualism. Crucially, the biological interpretation of the notion of the political animal enables viewing politics without a strong connection between politics and justice. Although the ramifications of this approach cannot be thoroughly dealt with in the present context, it may be useful to briefly discuss the application of political animality to relations and collaboration between different species (instead of intraspecies relations that have been the focus above).³⁰

Interspecies collaboration is a central theme in contemporary discussions concerning the moral and political status of animals. In particular, attention has been given to the status of animals within human political communities. Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka suggest, in their groundbreaking work *Zoopolis* (2011), that we should consider animals in terms of political categories such as citizen, denizen, member of another sovereign state, and so forth. Members of these groups have different political rights (and we have different corresponding duties towards them), and applying these categories to animals would not only allow us to

²⁹For the notion of the “ecological animal” that corresponds to the “political animal”, see, e.g., Cafaro (2015, pp. 440–441).

³⁰As far as I know, no historical author ever suggests that the concept may be applied to communities that consist of different species, but it is a theoretical possibility that arises from the historical theories.

become aware of the complexity of human–animal relations but also to place animals in a normative framework of rights and duties in a more nuanced manner.

From this perspective, there is a clear difference between the notions of citizen and the biological version of the political animal: the former concerns rights, duties, and normative status, while the latter refers to abilities, behavior, and ways of life. Citizenship and the accompanying rights depend on existing laws and are thus a result of normative decision-making. A political community may grant these rights also to nonhuman animals, but this decision takes place on the normative level, which builds on the biological political animality. It is also possible to give citizen rights to animals that are not political, and the fact that a certain species is political does not automatically entail that its members have a different normative status—at least there is no conceptual necessity to make this conclusion.

The biological notion of the political animal may, however, offer an independent justification for extending rights to certain animals. Insofar as living together, collaboration, and common aim are taken to be crucial, there is no theoretical barrier for interspecies political animality. The crucial question concerns the borderline between collaboration and exploitation. It is clear that intensive factory farming falls under the latter category, but service dogs, police dogs, and emotional support animals can perhaps be placed under the former. They live and work together with their humans, and they have common aims with us, at least in some sense of the term.³¹ If we think that we can form these kinds of (political) communities with animals—and the biological notion of the political animal gives us theoretical tools for understanding how this might be possible—we need only to accept that shared political animality entails shared political rights. In this manner, we would have a way to overcome the species barrier between humans and some other animals, without necessarily attributing citizenship to the latter.

6 | CONCLUSION

A philosophical examination of the history of the notion of the political animal may shed light on complex developments that have, for their part, influenced the way we nowadays think of politics and political action. Historical discussions also contain elements that are somewhat alien to us. In addition to their historical interest, these elements are significant due to their ability to open new perspectives on our ways of thinking. To be sure, the ideas brought up by considering the historical sources could also be discussed without using the notion of the political animal. The similarity between human beings and other social (or political) animals has been acknowledged in many contexts, and analyzing political theories from the perspective of power struggle vs. mutual dependency is an integral part of contemporary political philosophy. For this reason, the novel ideas that the history of the notion of the political animal may bring to our discussions are not that radical.

And yet, we should not downplay the importance of a notion that manages to shed light on complex issues from a fresh perspective. The present essay has defended an interpretation of the notion of the political animal that brings together three themes: (1) the similarity of the social life of human beings and other animals; (2) the distinctiveness of certain patterns of social behavior and the ensuing possibility to divide animals into social and political types; and (3) portraying sociability, mutual dependency, and collaboration along with the normative dimension of human politics as two sides of the same coin. This

³¹What counts as a common aim is by no means an easy question, but as with the biological notion of the political animal, I do not think the participants need to understand the aim (in the same way or at all). It suffices that collaboration in fact benefits both parties.

interpretation draws from the historical material but does not claim to be identical with any single historical view.

The notion of the political animal may guide our thinking by focusing on features of social and political life that otherwise risk remaining in the margins. It also places human beings into same continuum with other animals, highlights our fundamental dependency on other people and nature, and reminds us of the importance of life and the good life (in its eudaemonist sense). By taking these perspectives seriously, we may encourage a more peaceful coexistence between human beings, a more nuanced relationship with nature, where nature and other animals are not seen only as resources or objects of politics but as something that enables, embodies, and takes part in political life.

It should be noted that considering a certain animal species as political does not necessarily entail any change in its normative status. The political animality that has been the focus of the present essay is primarily descriptive and does not directly affect animal rights or our view of their social status in relation to humans. Likewise, applying the notion of the political animal to nonhuman animals does not presuppose any particular theory of the moral status of animals; it is equally compatible with utilitarianism, the capabilities approach (which derives from virtue ethics), and animal rights theories. It opens, however, a new perspective on normative issues: if we accept any one of these normative theories and apply the biological notion of the political animal to some nonhuman animals, providing them with a possibility to lead a kind of political life that is proper to them becomes a normative question. The descriptive model alone entails no such conclusions.³²

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