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Plato on the Souls of Beasts

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What, according to Plato, are the most significant differences between human beings and non-human animals? Among ancient Greek thinkers who devoted themselves to the project of explaining human nature and reflecting on the peculiarities of human existence, Plato would seem to have been particularly well-placed to render a clear and decisive distinction between humans and beasts. For his emphasis on the centrality of reason in human life, and his repeatedly articulated faith in the immortality of the human soul, would appear to mark humans off from other animals once and for all. And there are certainly passages within the dialogues which seem to imply that Plato is secure in such distinctions. For example, in the etymology of ἄνθρωπος in Cratylus, we find the following:

The name "human being" (ἄνθρωπος) means this: the other animals (τὰ μὲν ἄλλα θηρία) do not reflect on or analyze or look up to (ἀναθρεί) that which they see; but a human being no sooner sees something - that is, observes it (διωπε), than he looks up at and reflects on that which he has seen. Thus the human being alone is rightly called ἄνθρωπος, looking up at what is seen (ἀναθρών & διωπε). (Crat. 399c1-6)

Beneath the befuddling glitziness of this etymology there lies a substantive philosophical claim: that for humans, perception is an occasion for reflection and further inquiry, "looking up" from the perceived object to the conceptual framework into which it will fit; for "the other animals", however, the mere seeing is the end
of the mental process. On such a foundation, a clear distinction between humans and non-human animals based on their cognitive capacities could be readily constructed.

However, a survey of the Platonic texts which deal directly with the "soul of the beast" yields some material which may complicate the clarity of this bifurcation. This potentially complicating material is of several different varieties: (1) Some passages seem to ascribe to non-human animals cognitive and moral capabilities which are human-like; (2) In discussing the transmigration of the soul, Plato seems ready to countenance human-to-animal and animal-to-human transits; and (3) Plato repeatedly states that certain human lives are beast-like or (worse still) are actually beast's lives (whatever this may mean). In this paper I will explore the complicating text-groups of types (1) and (3) above, hoping to achieve some clarity on Plato's general position regarding the affinities and distances between the human and the beast.¹ The value of such a project lies ultimately in its potential for illuminating Plato's view of human nature itself, and of our place in the natural world at large.

Section I: Courageous and Clever Beasts?

In the Laches, no finally satisfactory definition of courage is found. But the most promising candidate provokes a brief controversy regarding the moral horizons of beasts, and so deserves our attention. The promising candidate definition is offered by Nicias, according to whom "courage is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of what
is to be dreaded and dared" (Lach. 196d). Socrates immediately points out that if this is true, then either (a) no non-human animal can have courage; or (b) non-human animals can be wise to a degree rare even in human beings (since true courage has been admitted to be rare). The counter-intuitive aspect of (a) is brought out by Socrates at 196e: If Nicias is correct, then "...necessarily the lion and the deer and the bull and the monkey seem to have an equal share of inborn natural courage" (i.e., none at all). And Laches, at this point in the dialogue disgruntled and apparently tired, chimes in to stress the improbability of conceding (a); he claims that "everybody agrees" (πάντες ομολογοῦν, 197a) certain animals are courageous. The universality of this agreement is reiterated at 197c.

Nicias embraces option (a), and states that while true courage is indeed rare, many beings display a thoughtless lack of fear which might be confused with courage; "...rashness, boldness, and fearlessness, with no forethought to guide it, are found in a great number of men, women, children, and animals" (197b). He suggests that this heedless boldness be called θρασεία and thus distinguished from proper courage (ἀνδρεία). Significantly, he makes no move to distinguish this thoughtless boldness as it is displayed by humans from the ways it is displayed by the animals. Thus the implication of his claim is to establish a form of courage-like behavior which links humans and non-human animals.

The subsequent stages of the argument, in which Nicias' definition of courage is shown to entail the whole of virtue and
perhaps even omniscience, need not concern us here. It is important to note, however, that both Socrates and Laches appear to be somewhat surprised that Nicias is willing to so summarily dismiss the idea of a courageous beast, and to accept the implication that all animals are thus alike in courage (i.e., utterly lacking in it). The association of the lion with courage, and the deer with timorousness, is firm in Greek literature from Homer on, and Laches' emphatic and repeated assertion that courage is universally granted to (some) animals is testimony to significant popular sentiment in this direction.²

In Republic, the kind of courage required of the citizens in the ideal city is denied to slaves (or slave-like natures) and to beasts (or beast-like natures; I will explain this ambiguity below), on the grounds that this courage requires firm right opinion (όρθδόξα, 430b) produced by education. A looser and more precarious form of right opinion can be found in "the nature of a beast and a slave" (θηρίωδη καὶ ἀνθρώπωδη...), but will not enable them to display courage.

Numerous translators, including Shorey, Cornford, Grube, Stirling & Scott, and Larson, render the ambiguous phrase "the nature of a beast and a slave" more simply as "a beast or a slave". They thus embrace the implication that beasts and slaves can have right opinion of the looser and more precarious form. This would be a rather startling concession to the non-human animal's cognitive capabilities, though far less odd for the slave. Fortenbaugh has argued against the majority translation,
maintaining that the looser right opinion in question is restricted to humans only, that we should translate the key phrase "slavish and bestial", and that "'Bestial' is used as a pejorative label and nothing more". Here I am inclined to agree with Fortenbaugh, given Plato's normal usage of the term θηριώδης (of which more below in section II). Thus this Republic passage gives us no reason to suppose that Plato and Nicias were in disagreement concerning animal courage.

A passage from Laws, however, does. At Laws 963a, the Athenian Stranger refers to a form of courage in which both beasts and children participate. For "...a courageous soul comes into being without reasoning and by nature (ἀνευ... λόγου καὶ φύσει). This aspect of courage is to be contrasted with intelligence and practical wisdom, which do not appear in the absence of reasoning. Elsewhere in Laws (710a-b), we find reference to a kind of natural temperance (σωφροσύνη) which also is said to occur naturally in beasts and children. This virtue if it exists in isolation from other virtues is said to be of little worth. However, if beasts are naturally courageous and naturally temperate, their moral profile is not negligibly low. To add one more element to this profile, we should note that, also in Laws, animals who mate for life are praised for leading lives which are "holy and just, remaining faithful to their first contracts of friendship" (840d-e). And, here as elsewhere in Laws, a moral lesson for humans is drawn from this observation about animal behavior. The citizens must be able to be at least as chaste as such beasts.
As to the cognitive capacities of non-human animals, though Plato nowhere explores them systematically, we can again locate passages which speak to the ascription of certain human-like cognitive traits to animals. Thus a possibly humorous comment by the Eleatic Stranger in the Politicus hesitantly ascribes φρόνιμος to the crane, in order to make the critical comment that cranes would probably divide the life-world into cranes and everyone else, just as the Stranger and Young Socrates have just divided it into humans and everyone else (263c-d). And in Republic, we find an undoubtedly humorous reference to the philosophical nature of the dog; insofar as dogs are unfriendly to strangers but fawn on those they are familiar with, their "criterion of the friendly and the alien is intelligence and ignorance" (376b-c). For this they deserve to be considered philosophical and lovers of learning!

In spite of the fact that this appears to be whimsical, the comparison of the guardians to dogs in Republic is sustained and striking.

Thus we see that, while Laches remains rather ambiguous as to animal courage, and Republic demonstrates pretty flat opposition to the idea with only humorous intimations of animal intelligence, Laws evidences definite sympathy toward the beast as a moral being of courage and temperance, with perhaps even some lessons to teach humans about living good lives. We could explain this in a variety of ways. First, one might suggest that the Athenian Stranger of Laws is not to be identified with Plato's own philosophical outlook even as closely as we tend to identify the Socrates of Republic
with that outlook (however closely that should ideally be). Thus, the mellower picture of the non-human animal glimpsed in *Laws* might just be a dramatic feature of the Stranger's *persona*, rather than a departure by Plato from a former mindset about animals. Alternatively, we might note the fact that other shifts of emphasis are represented in *Laws*, with its apparently greater interest in the non-rational aspects of human nature (the drinking education, the motions for infants, etc.); perhaps Plato is here relaxing somewhat his strictures on the close connection between virtue and reason. And finally, it is tempting to speculate about an Aristotelian influence on Plato's view of animals, at this late stage of Plato's philosophical career.

But also, it is important to note that Plato's earlier negativity about animals may have been in part a product of a polemical situation in the Athenian philosophical scene. For positive references to animal behavior in nature were a feature of certain sophists' agendas. The views which Callicles advances in *Gorgias* (481c ff.), according to which "natural" goodness (the exercise of strength and force to obtain what one desires) is explicitly modelled on animal analogies, are importantly representative. This sort of view is parodied by Aristophanes in *Clouds*, when Pheidippides justifies beating his father by reference to the "chickens and other animals" who fight with their parents (1427-1429). He concludes his argument, "And what difference is there between them and us, except that they don't move resolutions?"
I believe that Plato's earlier disinclination to credit animals with moral attributes or cognitive abilities may well be in part a reaction to what he viewed as the excesses of the "Nature School" in his intellectual milieu. He distances himself from this school, and from its understanding of the relation between nature and human life, even more decisively when he describes the bestialization of the human soul, a topic to which we now turn.

Section II: The Beast in Human Shape

To counterbalance the above hints at animal cognition and virtue there are many fiercely negative comments about beasts in the Platonic corpus, and the very phrase ὃσπερ θηρίον functions as a scathing insult. Beasts are repeatedly characterized as the grossest of hedonists, who would vote unanimously for pleasure as the highest good (Philebus 67b), and who live to stuff themselves with food and drink (Laws 831e). The susceptibility of "snakes, tarantulas, scorpions, and other beasts" to magic spells or charms is used in a complex way at Euthydemus 290a to insult speech-writers. A human soul which is aware of its ignorance and not disturbed by it is "indifferently wallows in the mire of ignorance like a pig" (Rep. 535e). The person who pursues physical training to the exclusion of intellectual development becomes a "hater of arguments", or "misologist", who then abjures persuasion and lives "by force and in wildness like a beast" (Rep. 411d). And Thrasymachus, in his famous initial outburst at 336b, is of course described as ὅσπερ θηρίον.
The effect of this use of animals to deprecate certain forms of human behavior and character is twofold: first, certain aspects of the nature of the beast are highlighted for scorn (pig's wallowing, snakes' susceptibility to charmers, many animals' evident enjoyment of their meals, etc.); but secondly, the scorned behaviors are located within the human domain, which moves the human and the non-human animal into closer relationship. As they are, so are some of us. Paradoxically, Plato's minatory use of animal analogies to deplore certain human tendencies brings the beast nearer our doorstep, as it were. But at times Plato goes further than this, and actually moves the beast indoors.

Plato makes a more elaborate use of the moral charge of "beastliness" (θηριώδης) than any other ancient Greek writer. This is perhaps in part due to the fact that the term seems to have become adaptable for this sort of semantic work only around the third quarter of the fifth century. However this may be, Plato's interest in beastliness as a human condition is notable. We should not make light of the fact that, of Plato's mythic depictions of the human soul, the two most powerful and sustained intimately involve non-human animals: Phaedrus with its charioteer and mixed equine team, and Republic with its psychic menagerie of "many-headed beast", lion, and tiny inner person. And while Platonic myths cannot be treated as literal descriptions, neither of course can they be dismissed as poetic fancies.

The human condition at its best, according to Plato, is to be envisioned as the successful domestication of an inner beast or
group of them. This domestication is at times described as a difficult and violent process; thus in Phaedrus it involves bloodshed and pain, in Republic aggression and danger. The human condition at its worst entails the triumph of the inner beast over the element which should be in control, and is thus a bestialization of the person.

Plato describes this bestialization in a variety of ways. In Politicus, it is said that a courageous soul in the absence of the truth is inclined towards beastliness (ἀποκλίνει...πρὸς θηριῶδη, 309e2-3). In Laws, a poor or defective education is said to make a person into the wildest of animals.

The human being is, as we say, tame; and just as when he gets a correct education and has a fortunate nature he becomes the divinest and tamest of animals, if he is not sufficiently or not well trained he becomes the wildest of all things that live on the earth. (766a)

Later in Laws, while discussing legislation against verbal abuse the Stranger states that such language has a bestializing effect on its user. The part of the soul which was "tamed by education, is once again made wild", and the verbal abuser "having been bestialized (θηριούμενος) lives in ill-temper" (935a).

From both these passages we can see that the tameness or gentleness of the human being is an achievement, a result of education; and it is eminently reversible. The human, unlike the beast, achieves its true nature only at great expense of effort; also unlike the beast, whose nature is diachronically stable, the human can lose the most valuable portion of its nature, its highest humanity, through weakness, settled vice, or even just a
prematurely terminated education.

In the Republic's interior zoo, even the individual beasts can become further bestialized; thus the interior lion can become a monkey under the influence of a disposition to flattery and slavishness (590b; cf. Phaedrus 240b on the flatterer as a terrible beast and great harm). This reminds us that the beasts within do not function simply as negative elements to be suppressed as far as possible. The best human life will first domesticate, then nourish these beasts in the best way possible; the small interior person in Republic is described as caring for his beasts like a farmer tends his plants (ἐπιμελήσεται ὡσπερ γεωργός, 589b). Thus their animality is part of the whole creature's full humanity.

What actually is the difference between a depraved, ill-educated, verbally abusive, rancorous, greedy, and incontinent human being, on the one hand, and a wild animal, on the other? One is first tempted to say that the wild animal is much to be preferred, aesthetically and morally; and it can hardly be denied that in some of Plato's comparisons between depraved humans and beasts, the latter suffer an injustice. But the question requires a more serious consideration. Plato's conception of the human soul sharpens the question to a definite intensity, for he is both uniquely liberal in his use of animal-analogies for parts of the human soul and uniquely intense in his commitment to the essential importance of παιδεία in constructing and maintaining a properly human, non-bestial character.

It is tempting to answer that, no matter how depraved the
life, in a human soul there remain the uniquely human elements (tiny person, charioteer) which are in principle capable of resuscitation and restoration to power. However, the force of Plato’s language in describing the struggle by which their hegemony is achieved in the virtuous soul leads us to countenance the possibility, even the probability, of their indefinitely enduring defeat in at least some lives. In case of defeat, the human is the moral equivalent of the beast and perhaps even wilder (Laws 766a, 808d-e, 874e-875a).

Conclusions:

We have seen that although Plato’s emphasis on rationality and calculative reason, along with his faith in the soul’s immortality, place him well to mark a clear-cut distinction between the human and the beast, that clear distinction is somewhat difficult to locate. While there is no strong evidence that Plato was inclined to attribute human-like cognitive capabilities to animals, the absence of extended textual engagements with animal cognition make this an uncertain issue. And in the moral domain, there do seem to be texts which suggest that a kind of natural virtue may be found among animals. These appear in the Laws, and are counterbalanced by earlier denials of those same virtues to the non-human soul. But most interestingly, Plato’s descriptions of the inner dynamics and characteristic moral failures of the human soul bring humans and beasts into affinity. Plato’s emphasis on the precariousness of the genuinely human condition, on its artifactual nature and the
necessity of constant vigilance lest the beast within break its 
bonds and run to supremacy, have the implication that the clear 
distinction between human and beast which the Cratylus etymology 
signals is itself a result, an achievement, and an ideal. It is in 
effect a difficult process, rather than a naturally given 
condition. For Plato, human nature must be won, and won again.
Notes:
1. I postpone dealing with the doctrine(s) of transmigration for the present.

2. See Urs Dierauer, *Tier und Mensch im Denken der Antike*; Amsterdam: Grüner, 1977; for Homer, see especially pp.6-15.


4. At *Laws* 814a-b, the Stranger states that citizen women will need some physical and military training, so that they can defend their children if attacked during wartime when the male military forces are absent; they must be "like those birds who will fight the most powerful of beasts in defense of their children", and not just run straight to the temples for refuge.


6. For a discussion of this passage see T.A.Sinclair, "Plato's Philosophic Dog"; *Classical Review* 62 (1948) 61-2. Sinclair takes the joke to be at the expense of the "Nature School" of sophists who drew recommendations for human behavior and social policy from the domain of non-human animals. I think this line of interpretation is correct here and will also apply it below to Plato's more scathing comments about the souls of beasts and their defects.


9. This philological point is compellingly argued by Michael J. O'Brien in "Xenophanes, Aeschylus, and the Doctrine of Primeval Brutishness"; *Classical Quarterly* 35 (1985), 264-277; see especially pp.266-8.

10. The contrast between "tame" or "gentle" (ήμερος) and "wild" (άγριος) runs throughout the *Republic's* description of the soul's three components (588b ff.); virtue consists in the domination and taming of the beasts by the little person. They are to become friendly one another and subordinate to him - 589b. Phaedrus tells of the "humbling" of the unruly horse (it is ταπεινωθείς by the harsh reining of the charioteer, 254e7), and of its "enslavement",..."
11. Phaedrus: the unruly horse is repeatedly brought to his knees, tongue and jaws bloodied by the bit; 254e. Republic: the beasts within fight one another, bite and eat one another; 589a. The lowest one, with its many heads, is "terrible, huge, and multiform"; 590e.

12. The description of the soul at Rep.588c ff. prompts Shorey to one of his more delightfully unrestrained footnotes, in which a quantity of poetry about inner beasts is collected, culminating in Carl Sandburg: "O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie inside my ribs!". Shorey charges Sandburg with "nimeity" even while illustrating it himself!