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A Question of Life and Death: The Aesopic Animal Fables on Why Not to Kill

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Abstract: This article deals with Greek animal fables, traditionally attributed to a former slave, Aesop, who lived during the sixth century BCE. As a genre, the Aesopic fables, or the *Aesopica*, has had a significant impact on the Western fable tradition and modern Western children's literature. The *Aesopica* owes much to the Mesopotamian fables and has parallels in other Near Eastern cultures. Modern research has concentrated on tracing the oriental roots of the fable tradition and the dating of the different parts of the *Aesopica*, as well as defining the fable as a genre. The traditional reading of fables has, however, excluded animals *qua* animals, supposing that fables are mainly allegories of the human condition. The moral of the story (included in the *epimythia* or *promythia*) certainly guides one to read the stories anthropocentrically, but the original fables did not necessarily include this positioning element. Many fables address the situation when a prey animal, like a lamb, negotiates with a predator animal, like a wolf, by giving reasons why she should not be killed. In this article, I will concentrate on these fables and analyse them from the point of view of their structure and content. Comparing these fables with some animal similes in Homer's *Iliad*, I suggest that these fables deal not only with the ethical problem of 'might makes right' as a human condition, but also the broader philosophical question of killing other living creatures and the problem of cruelty.

Keywords: fable; Aesopic fables; Greek fable; antagonistic fables

The so-called animal turn has encouraged classicists to read Graeco-Roman literature from the point of view of Human-Animal Studies, that is, to focus on human-animal interactions and the agency of animals.¹ However, although animals have many eminent functions in ancient literature—as symbols and as metaphors and similes—animals figured very seldom as protagonists or proper characters. There are no stories in which a non-human animal is depicted as voicing its (imagined) experience, perceptions, and life—like animals do in modern animal 'biographies', such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877). Yet, there seems to be one well-known exception: in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, which had a shorter Greek equivalent mistakenly attributed to the satirist Lucian (both versions are based on a Greek story), the protagonist is a donkey, which experiences various adventures and abuse by different owners.² However, the donkey is, in fact, a human named Lucius, who has been transformed into a donkey by the agency of a Thessalian witch. The aim of the story is not to make the audience feel sympathy for the ill-treated donkey, but to identify with the human, Lucius, whose body has been metamorphosed into that of a donkey. The reader is constantly reminded that the donkey is, in fact, a human being.

¹ On Human-Animal Studies, see, for example, (Marvin and McHugh 2014).

² Stefan Tilg argues that the original Greek story of this metamorphosis into a donkey is from the first century CE (Tilg 2014, pp. 2–3). However, the story itself could be earlier.

Besides the minor genre of the parodic animal epic,³ only animal fables used animals as prominent characters in antiquity. However, animals in animal fables are depicted as humanised, that is, they talk, reason, and act like humans—although they are seldom so humanised as in the fable where a dog wishes to sue a sheep for stealing a loaf of bread (Phaedrus 1.17). The main function of different species of animals in fables seems to be to mirror fixed human character types—foxes are cunning and sheep represent timidity. Animal fables are read as reflecting human experience, presenting it in an allegorical way by projecting human relations onto an artificially created animal world, often with fake interspecies relationships. In other words, fables picture social relationships and interactions between diverse species in an unnatural realm—the animal kingdom—which mirrors the human world, as well as its social structures and hierarchies. Like nowadays, the Aesopic fables were sometimes interpreted to especially represent the voice of the oppressed (human) classes, like slaves, in antiquity. Both the legendary Aesop and the Roman fable writer Phaedrus were former slaves.⁴

Animal characters in animal fables are thus thought to be easily substituted by humans and their situation can be smoothly transferred to the human world. This kind of allegorised reading of fables was already dominant in antiquity.⁵ Consequently, it is no wonder that modern animal sensitive⁶ scholars have lately criticised the Aesopic animal fables because ancient fables (in their view) seem to guide the reader to interpret the story *only* as an allegory. Fables are not supposed to convey animal life, with the result that the animals themselves—as animals—are erased.⁷ Therefore, although animal fables are nearly the only literary genre in antiquity where animals are the protagonists, actual ‘real’ animals seem to be absent.

However, some classicists, like Jeremy B. Lefkowitz (2014), have recently at least posed the question of the possible ‘animality’ (animals *qua* animals, not substitutes for humans) of the Aesopic animal fables. By seeing affinities with stories in ancient natural histories, Lefkowitz argues that fables sometimes depict animals not merely symbolically, but also reveal a zoological interest in animal behaviour.⁸

The first fable in Greek literature is from the eighth-century BCE, namely ‘The Hawk and the Nightingale’, which Hesiod included in his *Works and Days* (lines 202–12). The fable is told to a specific addressee, Hesiod’s brother Perses, as a moral lesson. A hawk has caught a nightingale and answers its cries of distress:

And now I will tell a fable (*ainos*) to kings who themselves too have understanding. This is how the hawk addressed the colourful-necked nightingale, carrying her high up among the clouds, grasping her with its claws, while she wept piteously, pierced by the curved claws; he said to her forcefully, ‘Silly bird, why are you crying out? One far superior to you is holding you. You are going wherever I shall carry you, even if you are a singer; I shall make you my dinner if I wish, or I shall let you go. Stupid he who would wish to contend against those stronger than he is: for he is deprived of the victory, and suffers pains in addition to his humiliations.’ So spoke the swift-flying hawk, the long-winged bird. As for you, Perses [. . .] (Trans. Glenn W. Most, see (Hesiod 2007)).

Usually, this fable has been interpreted simply to expose the ideology of ‘might makes right’. In Lefkowitz’s view, the fable also functions to show that animals ‘behave in a way which is not

³ The only extant animal epic from antiquity is *The Battle of Frogs and Mice* (*Batrachomyomachia*). On animal and bird epics, see (West 2003, pp. 229–37).

⁴ (Lefkowitz 2014, pp. 18–20).

⁵ On ancient theories of fable and its functions, see (Dijk 1997, pp. 38–78). Dijk mentions persuasive, didactic, comical, and aetiological functions of fables (Dijk 1997, pp. 38–78).

⁶ By the notion of ‘animal sensitive’, I mean not only an awareness of ethical issues concerning animals, but simply the awareness of animals, in addition to their function and role in human cultures.

⁷ (Simons 2002, p. 119; Teittinen 2015, pp. 152–53).

⁸ Naama Harel discusses the Aesopic fables in her essay as translations and also deals with such classic modern fables as George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (Harel 2009).

appropriate to humans'. Lefkowitz combines this fable with the famous passage in the same work, *Works and Days*, in which Zeus is said to have only given justice (*dikē*) to humans and not to birds, fish and land animals, and this is shown by the fact that animals eat each other (*Works and Days* 274–80).⁹ The moral of the story is thus that decent human beings are not allowed to behave like the hawk in this fable. However, there are many unsolved problems with the interpretation of this fable. One way of explaining is that the nightingale as a singer possibly represents the epic poet Hesiod himself, so that the fable is an affirmation of the power of song that triumphs despite all. Be this as it may, 'The Hawk and the Nightingale' was well known in antiquity and functioned as a model for later fabulists with different emphases.¹⁰

What is notable about this fable is that the predator would seem to be justifying his behaviour to his helpless prey. Why would this be necessary if 'might is right'? There are similar fables in which the victim begs for mercy, even giving reasons why (s)he should *not* be killed. Animal fables often depict conflict or antagonistic situations between species, a motif – as well as a dialogic form – that goes back to Mesopotamian fables, to which the Graeco-Roman tradition owed a great deal.¹¹ Additionally, Homeric, especially Iliadic, animal similes depict conflict situations.¹² Therefore, it might be fruitful to compare antagonistic (or agonistic) animal fables with antagonistic Homeric similes – without, however, making any suggestions about the mutual influence between these two genres. In this paper, by comparing the Aesopic antagonistic fables with some animal similes in Homer's *Iliad*, I suggest that agonistic fables deal not only with ethical problems concerning the human condition ('might makes right'), but also the broader philosophical question of killing other living creatures, as well as the idea of the 'war' between different species. I will argue that although the 'animality' of the animals in fables is reduced in many ways, the philosophical problem of killing can be seen as an 'animal' topic in fables. I will start, however, with the problems of the interpretation of ancient fables, as well as their narrativity.

1. Animal Fables as Stories

David Herman defines *zoonarratology* as 'an approach to narrative study that explores how storytelling practices (and strategies for narrative interpretation) relate to broader assumptions concerning the nature, experiences, and status of animals'.¹³ Animal fables are narratives—even the Greek terms for fable (*ainos*, *mythos*, *logos*) semantically refer to stories¹⁴—in which animals are the characters of stories, but which seem, as mentioned before, to tell little about the animals themselves. Ancient critics noted that fables were 'false' (*pseudos*), that is, fictive, not historical or natural historical stories.¹⁵ Reading ancient animal fables as textual sources for a discussion on 'broader assumptions concerning the nature, experiences and status of animals' (Herman's wording) in antiquity poses some basic difficulties, like the dating of fables and their elements. The development of this genre is difficult to figure out in general. The problems for discussing how animal fables relate to assumptions

⁹ (Lefkowitz 2014, p. 2). Others, like Edward Clayton and C. Michael Sampson have introduced the same kind of interpretation. See (Clayton 2008, pp. 180, 196; Sampson 2012, pp. 473–74).

¹⁰ Deborah Steiner interprets 'The Hawk and The Nightingale' as an expression of rivalry between different kinds of poetics, see (Steiner 2010, p. 107). The hawk has also been interpreted to represent a divine instrument. On the different interpretations of this fable see (Dijk 1997, pp. 127–34). The antagonism between hawk and nightingale is the topic in two other Aesopic fables, Perry 4 and 567.

¹¹ On the Mesopotamian fable and its influence on Greek fable, see (Adrados 1999, pp. 287–306); on the agonistic ethos in the Aesopic fables, see (Zafiroopoulos 2001).

¹² On fables and Homeric similes, see (Dijk 1997, p. 125). According to Rodriguez Adrados, who has compared the fable with many other genres of archaic Greek literature, the typical situation of agonistic confrontation in the Iliadic similes, like a lion attacking a herd of cattle or a fold of sheep, 'provide the basis for fables from the Classical Age and collections'. Adrados does not, however, clarify what he means by 'the basis' (Adrados 1999, p. 198).

¹³ (Herman 2012, p. 95).

¹⁴ On the terminology of the Greek fable, see (Adrados 1999, pp. 3–16; Dijk 1997, pp. 79–89).

¹⁵ The grammarian Theon of Alexandria, who lived in the first century CE, defined a fable as 'a fictitious story picturing or reminding one of (*eikonizein*) reality' (Dijk 1997, pp. 47–48, 408; Adrados 1999, p. 23).

concerning the status and experiences of animals are problems of interpreting a genre which had a wide audience in antiquity, but no original authors. Fables were the product of oral literature, and literary fables were usually the author's reimagination of oral fables, although later, there were certainly some genuine literary (invented) fables. Besides the numerous references and retellings of fables by Greek and Roman authors, what we have—what the ancient fables have preserved for us—are mostly prose fable collections. The most important collection is the so-called Augustana, which consists of several anonymous collections first assembled around the third century CE (numbers 1–231 in the Perry index).¹⁶ Roughly contemporary, or even a little later, is the lyric fable collection produced by the Roman-Syrian Babrius, who wrote in Greek. Another Roman, Phaedrus, versified fables into iambic metre in Latin a few centuries earlier, in the first century CE. All these fables fall under the general term of 'the Aesopic fables'.¹⁷ The simple style of fables was noted by ancient critics and to versify a fable or amplify its prose was a rhetorical exercise for schoolboys, at least since Phaedrus' time or earlier.¹⁸

As narratives, fables recount some event, and they have a temporal dimension—one event follows another; events are structured in some order and they are told from a specific point of view or by a certain voice.¹⁹ From the formal point of view, fables are varied, but as Gert-Jan van Dijk notices, fables often have 'a tripartite narrative structure (introductory sketch of the situation—action—concluding action or comment)'.²⁰ This is evident, for instance, in a fable from the above-mentioned Augustana collection, 'The Donkey, The Raven, and The Passing Wolf' (Perry 190):

A donkey who had a sore on his back was grazing in a meadow. A raven alighted on his back and began to peck at the wound, while the donkey brayed and reared up on his hind legs in pain (*algein*). The donkey's driver, meanwhile, stood off at a distance and laughed. A wolf who was passing by saw the whole thing and said to himself, 'How unfairly we wolves are treated! When people so much as catch a glimpse of us, they drive us away, but when someone like that raven makes his move, everyone just looks at him and laughs.'

The fable shows that even before they act, dangerous people can be recognized at a distance.
(Trans. Laura Gibbs)

The fable starts with an introductory sketch of the situation, which has two actors: a donkey is grazing in a meadow and a raven pecks at its wound on his back. The 'action' simply consists of the owner of the donkey laughing at what he sees. The concluding action brings forth the fourth actor, the wolf, who is passing by and observes the situation. Although dialogues are common in fables, it is typical, too, that there is only one speaker, such as in this fable the wolf, who comments on the situation in the end.²¹ From this wolf's point of view, wolves suffer unjust treatment from humans. Thus, the wolf criticises humans. As the wolf sees it, the driver's laughter is the opposite reaction to the usual or normal one by humans concerning predators, namely anger and fear. The driver does not drive the raven away but lets him continue pecking at the donkey's wound. If the wolf had approached the donkey, the enraged (and perhaps frightened) driver would have immediately driven it away.

¹⁶ I am using the index system of Ben Perry's (Perry 1952). On fable collections, see (Adrados 1999, pp. 48–136).

¹⁷ One of the first collections was composed during the third century BCE in Alexandria by Demetrius of Phalerum, the one-time student of Aristotle's philosophical school. Demetrius' (now lost) collection could have been in use until late antiquity. On Demetrius' collection, see (Dijk 1997, pp. 410–97, 540; Adrados 1999, p. 23).

¹⁸ On writing fables as part of the rhetorical exercises (Progymnasmata), see (Kennedy 2003).

¹⁹ These four features of narratives—time, structure, voice, and point of view—are listed by Peter Lamarque. See (Lamarque 1990, p. 131).

²⁰ (Dijk 1997, p. 114); On different kinds of narrator–character combinations in fables, see (Dijk 1997, pp. 373–74) and on different formal schemes, see (Adrados 1999, pp. 35–36).

²¹ This kind of character is called *survenant* by the fable scholar M. Nøjgaard (1964–7). See (Dijk 1997, pp. 9, 373).

The *epimythium*,²² the moral of the story (italicised in the excerpt above), explains that the point of the story here is to tell us that dangerous people ('wolves') can be recognised. One raven can usually cause no serious harm to a donkey, whereas one wolf may. So, the driver laughs because he is not scared by the raven.

A modern, animal-sympathetic reader may still ask why the donkey's driver laughed. The donkey is described as rearing up on his hind legs, apparently in order to get rid of—at least momentarily—the pecking raven. Was it the two-footed stance which appeared so funny to the driver? The raven is, however, physically harming the donkey and thus affecting its ability to be a good draft animal. That the raven was causing *pain* to the donkey is clearly stated by the verb *algein*, 'to be in pain'. Modern critics often point to the different attitudes to laughter in antiquity (including open expressions of *Schadenfreude* and the acknowledged comicality of slaves and other underdogs).²³ Yet, one might ask in this particular case whether there is a somewhat sympathetic attitude to the donkey in pain and a critique of the laughing driver—that laughing at someone clearly in pain is an example of uncivilised behaviour. Or, to put it another way, if the donkey is thought of as simply a commodity, then it is stupid not to prevent the raven pecking at the wound. The implied critique, if there were any, is then directed towards the human in the fable, not towards predators harming or possibly killing domestic animals.²⁴

One may, of course, ask whether this is an anachronistic way of reading a Greek fable. These kinds of doubts are natural when reading succinct Aesopic fables because they are often enigmatic and the moral of the story frequently seems to point in puzzling, albeit not altogether incomprehensible (for the modern reader), directions—often simply because *epimythia* and *promythia* were late additions.²⁵ Written fables were stories told in a specific context which guided the interpretation. When fables were assembled together in collections, the contexts were lost. However, in their oral form, fables were originally quite flexible stories, so they fitted many situations and could be adjusted by storytellers. When ancient rhetoricians or other prose writers cited a fable, they used it for their own purposes, often as clarifications.²⁶

Ancient fables thus have common features with riddles and proverbs: they are enigmatic, and in this respect, they are part of the gnomic tradition. However, a fable can be differentiated from other gnomic forms in the sense that it is a narrative genre. Like fairy tales, fables are stories which are usually vague about the time and place. Moreover, the actors in fables are not described in detail. Although gods are specified by name (Hermes, Zeus), and there are some mythical persons (Teiresias) and fictionalised historical persons (Socrates and Aesop himself), humans are usually only characterised by their occupation or class (a shepherd, a donkey-driver, a sacrificer, a slave). For their part, animals represent their species, which accounts for their stereotyped descriptions. However, the events are depicted as unique and specific: they happen to that donkey, to that driver, and to that raven and wolf.²⁷

²² The term *epimythium* (plural: *epimythia*) denotes that the moral of the story is given at the end. The moral can also be given at the beginning, when it is called *promythium*. The latter case was probably the earlier practice, originating in the days when fables were collected and when the moral functioned as a kind of title for the fable (Perry 1965).

²³ (Halliwell 2008, pp. 38–50, 69–76, 301).

²⁴ A similar but much later fable in Latin is 'The Wolf, The Crow and the Sheep' (Perry 670). See also 'The Well-meaning Wolves' (Perry 676). Both are from the codex Bruxellenses 536 from the 14th century, including fables from late antiquity.

²⁵ (Adrados 1999, p. 29).

²⁶ Aristotle was the first to discuss fables theoretically in his *Rhetoric* (2.20.1393b8–94a9). In Aristotle's view, the fable (*mythos*) is a good instrument of persuasion and he tells two animal fables ('The Stag, the Horse and the Man' and 'The Fox and the Lice') to prove their usability in political speeches, especially in those directed towards the common people.

²⁷ Sometimes fables remind one of *mirabilia*, stories of the strange ways of animals, a genre which Aristotle made good use of in his zoological works, and later writers like Plinius, Plutarch, Aelian, and Athenaeus developed them as an ingredient in their works on animals. Miraculous stories of animals were part of natural histories depicting the wonders of nature, but they also included stories of unique incidences and individual animals. The Aristotelean corpus included falsely attributed work belonging to the *mirabilia* genre: *On Marvellous Things Heard*. On this genre and the paradoxographers, see, e.g., (French 1994, pp. 299–303).

In short, ancient animal fables are stylistically simple, fictitious narratives, which have animal characters. However, despite their simplicity, they are not non-reflective. Animals' reflections can be funny or satirical, often pointing to overly narrow, or too self-centred points of view. The wolf's speech in the above-cited fable is a reflective speech or self-reflective thought. The wolf is not communicating with other actors in the fable, but reflecting on the situation by himself (and in his own distorting way). In all, the wolf is a focalised character. Before considering focalisation, it is worthwhile to discuss one common topic in all kinds of animal stories, including the Homeric animal similes, namely antagonism, a conflict situation between different species.

2. Animal Antagonism and Focalisation in the Homeric Similes

The epic genre developed the effective literary device of an epic (also known as Homeric) simile. Animal similes in Homeric epics compare the human situation with that of animals. As, for instance, Helmut Rahn has pointed out, at the very core of the idea of animal similes, there is the supposition of the possible continuation between the qualities of human and non-human animals, which is what makes it possible to compare them in the first place. The comparison is not only with the animal's movement (body), but also its emotions and moods, representing its current situation in life.²⁸ The Iliadic warriors are compared not only with predators (like lions, wolves, boars, hounds), but also with a donkey (Ajax) and with a just-mothered cow (Menelaus): the donkey's steadfastness suggests the same quality in Ajax, and the anxiety of the cow for her calf describes how Menelaus protects Patroclus' body (*Iliad* 11.558–562 and 17.4–6).

Although the human situation is most central, similes can provide a glimpse into some aspects of the active life of an animal. Animals in similes can, as Steven Lonsdale has put it, often be viewed as 'actors in their own right'.²⁹ The vivid descriptions of a lion's corporeality and movements in the lengthiest of the lion similes (*Iliad* 20.164–75), for instance, almost turns the simile into an animal poem, one that praises the solemn existence of this predator. Here, Peleus' son Achilles runs to engage with Aeneas, the Trojan warrior, who was, like Achilles, of divine descent:

On the other side Peleus' son ran to meet him, like a lion / bent on slaughter that a whole village's resolute men have / gathered together to kill; at first it pays them no attention and / continues on its way, but when some war-swift young man / hits it with his spear it crouches, jaws gaping, and foam / gathers around its teeth, and the brave spirit in its heart / groans, and with its tail it lashes its ribs and flanks on / both sides, and drives itself on to fight; staring-eyed, / its fury carries it straight at the men, hoping either to kill / one of them or to die itself in the forefront of the conflict. / In just this way his fury and noble spirit drove Achilles on / to come face to face with great-hearted Aeneas. (*Iliad* 20.164–75)
(Trans. Anthony Verity)

Fables do not have these kinds of forceful descriptions, which are like eulogies to animals as embodied beings with specific bodies.³⁰ Although humans are compared with some animals in similes—like Achilles with the lion in this simile—animals do not act as substitutes for humans in similes. Instead, there is an imaginative assimilation of Achilles with a lion, despite their dissimilar bodies (the hero, of course, has no tail with which to lash his flanks). In the Aesopic fables, although there are some references to the bodies of animals, the human *words* uttered by the animal characters are usually more important than their non-human *bodies*. Although their speeches may, however, be

²⁸ (Rahn 1953, p. 288; Rahn 1954, pp. 452, 466–67). According to Rahn, human beings are not seen as 'rein menschlich'.

²⁹ (Lonsdale 1990, p. 1).

³⁰ The famous stallion simile, which occurs twice in the *Iliad* (6.506–14 and 15.263–268), depicts the stallion's exultant gallop. All translations of Homer's *Iliad* in this paper are by Anthony Verity. See (Verity 2011).

uttered from the (imagined) point of view of the animal, animals' bodies are not utilised to any great extent as a narrative element in animal fables.³¹

Thus, the emphasis on animals *qua* animals in fables is slight, if not altogether missing when compared with such expressive animal similes as the lion simile above. Furthermore, fables may mention the emotions of animals, but usually only by naming an emotional state. Instead, the Iliadic animal similes depict emotions, like anger and fear, quite lengthily, in order to simulate the emotional state of the warriors in the battlefield. One of the best examples of the depiction of fear or panic is the simile where a mother hind loses her fawns. The object of comparison in this simile is that Agamemnon kills two young Trojan princes, which causes fear in the Trojan troops (*Iliad*, 11.113–21):

As a lion easily crushes the bones of a swift hind's / young fawns, when it came upon their lair and seized / them in its mighty teeth, and rips out their tender hearts; and the mother, even if she chances to be nearby, cannot / help them, because fearful trembling overcomes her limbs, / and at once she darts away through dense thickets and woodland, / in a sweating fervour to escape the powerful beast's attack; / so no one of the Trojans could keep death from these two, / but were themselves driven in panic before Argives. (Trans. Anthony Verity)³²

This simile contains elements of a story by telling what 'happens' to the mother hind. Lonsdale observes that the scene is seen 'both from the point of view of the aggressor and the victim'.³³ Irene De Jong has compared the Iliadic narrator to a war reporter: the narrator is an external narrator-focaliser.³⁴ In this simile, it is as if the narrator is accompanying the mother hind and her sweating dart through woodland.

It is often noted that the Homeric equality of vision is rare in war literature in general. In the *Iliad*, a tale of war, the rapid focalisation from one side to the other (from the Achaeans to the Trojans or between the different factions inside each camp) is a token of the general Homeric narrative technique, which is then reflected in the similes. The agonistic animal simile thus depicts the situation with different focalisation—sometimes giving only the predator's point of view, sometimes the victim's point of view, and sometimes both the predator's and victim's viewpoints. Only very rarely does the animal victim in the Homeric similes manage to win, that is, to escape. One example is that where the goddess Artemis' fear is compared to that of a pigeon:

The goddess Artemis fled cowering and weeping, like a pigeon / that flies from a hawk's pursuit into the hollow of a rock, a / deep cleft, because it was not its destiny to be caught; just so / Artemis fled weeping, leaving her bow and arrow where they were. (*Iliad* 21.493–496) (Trans. Anthony Verity)

In Hesiod's fable, the hawk has already captured the nightingale. Here, the pigeon manages to flee from the pursuing hawk and the emotional focus is on the prey animal. However, in another Homeric simile concerning the hawk and the pigeon, which characterises Achilles' pursuit of Hector, the emotional focus is on the frustration of the *hawk*, which does not manage to catch the pigeon (22.138–44).

The focus of the Homeric animal simile can thus vary from predator to prey animal. Along with focalisation, the Homeric narrative in similes is 'objective'; it observes the situation as a detached

³¹ Fables can play with the differences in animal bodies, like in the fable 'The Fox and the Stork', where one animal cannot enjoy the food served by the other—the stork cannot lick the broth from the low bowl or the fox eat from the narrow-mouthed jug (Phaedrus 1.26).

³² The frame of the simile is the following: Achilles formerly captured two sons of King Priam, Isos, and Antiphon, when they were herding the king's cattle on Mount Ida, but then he gave them up as a ransom. In this scene, Agamemnon kills these warrior princes like the lion kills the fawns. Hector is not there to rescue his young brothers. The absence of Hector is compared with the *absence* of the mother hind, but the *fear* of the mother hind simulates the fear of the Trojans.

³³ (Lonsdale 1990, pp. 58–60).

³⁴ (De Jong 2014, p. 69, 61).

onlooker, in the sense that it does not condemn the predator's behaviour as cruel. The reason for this is that the Iliadic heroes are compared with predators on account of their courage and skill as warriors.³⁵ For their part, the Aesopic fables may express the imagined animal point of view of both prey and predator animals in the speeches by their humanised animal characters. Often, it is expressed with comical and satirical twists, but nevertheless, animals are pictured as genuine narrators of their own stories.

3. Begging for Mercy

In the Homeric similes, the emotional and narrative focus on the victim may sometimes be elaborated, as in the above-mentioned mother hind simile. In the Aesopic fables, however, the victim also has the opportunity to clearly voice its (imagined) situation. This is along the general lines that fables tell the other side of the story, the view of common people, the underprivileged, or the underclass.

Even the predator himself may be pictured as considering the situation from the point of view of his victim. In Babrius' fable 'The Hare and the Hound', a hound starts a hare from her lair. The hare runs away, and after a long chase, the dog gives up. A goatherd observes the situation and mockingly addresses the dog: 'The little one proved to be faster than you.' The dog replies that the goatherd does not see the different purposes of their running: the dog runs for his dinner, the hare for her life (Babrius 69). Thus, for the outside human observer (who is not a hunter, the owner of the hound, but a goatherd), the chase is like a running contest. The dog for his part—as though giving an excuse for his frustrated failure to catch the hare—knows the difference between running for one's life and running in order to fulfil one's transitory needs. The hare's speed allows her to survive.

In 'The Wolf and the Lamb', a lamb negotiates for her life. This fable is included in the Augustana collection (Perry 155), but also the Roman fable writers, Phaedrus (1.1) and Babrius (89), both retold this fable in verse. In Phaedrus' Latin version, the wolf and the lamb have come to drink from the same brook. The wolf is hungry ('prompted by his wicked gullet', *improba latro incitatus*) and therefore begins a 'quarrel' (*iurgium*) with the lamb. He accuses the lamb of spoiling the water. The lamb, however, is able to deny this accusation because it stands much lower down the river than the wolf. The wolf then states that the lamb has cursed him six months ago. The lamb is able to reject this too because she was not even born then. Eventually, the wolf accuses the lamb's father of cursing him. Using this as a reason for killing the lamb, the wolf pounces upon her and tears her to pieces (the verb *lacerare*). Phaedrus ends the fable with the statement that the lamb died because of unjust killing (*iniusta nex*).

The reasons given by the wolf for killing the lamb are like playing with one's prey: they are pretexts. It is as if it is part of the predatory disposition to tease or bully one's prey. However, the fable also seems to record the common demonising stereotype that wolves are insatiable and unnecessarily cruel.³⁶ Wolves occur in some Homeric animal similes, too, as paragons of predators, and their 'predatory' ways of eating are depicted graphically (cf. *Iliad*, 16.156–163).³⁷ According to the modern zoologists, wolves sometimes attack their prey without eating them at all or only partially eating them.³⁸ This so-called 'surplus killing' was surely an observed fact in antiquity, too (for ancient shepherds at least), although it is rarely mentioned in ancient texts. In a probably late fable, preserved only in the so-called Syntipas collection, a hunter (not a shepherd) encounters a wolf tearing to pieces (*diasparattein*) as many sheep as he can. The hunter with his hounds defeats the wolf and says: 'Where

³⁵ (Clarke 1995, p. 137).

³⁶ On wolves in ancient Greek iconography and literature, see (Calder 2011, pp. 67–69). Aelian states that wolves are extremely fierce and they might even eat one another (*On the Characteristics of Animals* 7.20).

³⁷ In this simile, Achilles' men, the Myrmidons, are compared to wolves, which are depicted as 'eaters of raw flesh, whose hearts are full of unbelievable strength'. They have killed a stag and tear it apart, their muzzles are gory. After that, they go in a pack to the river to drink and have eaten so much that they 'belch forth clots of blood' (*Iliad*, 16.162).

³⁸ Wolves may cache food for times when prey are scarce, but 'surplus killing' may happen when prey is abundant. See, for example, (Peterson and Ciucci 2003, p. 144).

now is the might that you formerly had? Against the dogs you can't make any stand at all.' The hunter's question echoes the ancient ideas of hunting as a noble sport, where two mighty and/or cunning antagonists confront each other.³⁹ The wolf was only successful in attacking the weaker and more helpless creatures. Thus, the hunter is rebuking the wolf for bad 'sportsmanship'.

In the Augustana version of 'The Wolf and the Lamb' (Perry 155), the wolf accuses the lamb of drinking from his spring and insulting his father. In vain, the lamb denies these accusations, followed by the wolf killing and eating her. The *epimythium* states that when rulers commit crimes, they do not listen to the reasoning of their subordinates.⁴⁰ In Babrius' version of 'The Wolf and the Lamb' (Babrius 89), the lamb has gone astray and the protagonists do not meet beside a river:

Once a wolf saw a lamb that had gone astray from the flock, but instead of rushing upon him to seize him by force, he tried to find a plausible complaint by which to justify his hostility (*egklēma ekhthrēs euprosōpon*). 'Last year, small though you were, you slandered me.' 'How could I last year? It's not yet a year since I was born.' 'Well, then, aren't you cropping this field, which is mine?' 'No, for I've not eaten any grass nor have I begun to graze.' 'And haven't you drunk from the fountain which is mine to drink from?' 'No, even yet my mother's breast provides my nourishment.' Thereupon the wolf seized the lamb and while eating him remarked: 'You're not going to rob the wolf of his dinner even though you do find it easy to refute all my charges.' (Trans. Ben Perry)

Babrius begins the fable by asserting that the wolf resolved not to kill and eat the lamb immediately, for the wolf wants to find a plausible complaint by which to justify his hostility (*egklēma ekhthrēs euprosōpon*). The above-mentioned Augustana version (Perry 155)—which in its written form could be earlier than Babrius' version—has the expression *met' eulogou aitias katathoinēsasthai*, to feast with good reason or pretext. Precisely the same phrase is used in a similar fable in the Augustana collection, 'The Cat and the Cock' (Perry 16):

A cat had seized a rooster and wanted to find a reasonable pretext for devouring him (*met' eulogou aitias katathoinēsasthai*). He began by accusing the rooster of bothering people by crowing at night, making it impossible for them to sleep. The rooster said that this was actually an act of kindness on his part, since people needed to be woken up in order to begin their day's work. The cat then made a second accusation, 'But you are also a sinner who violates nature's own laws when you mount your sisters and your mother.' The rooster said that this also was something he did for his masters' benefit, since this resulted in a large supply of eggs. The cat found himself at a loss and said, 'Even if you have an endless supply of arguments, do you think that I am not going to eat you?' (Trans. Laura (Gibbs 2002) slightly modified)⁴¹

The fable may remind one of the hunting practice of cats, in which they 'play' with their prey—not killing it immediately.⁴² In any case, like the lamb, the rooster wins the argument, but is still going to be killed. However, the cat accuses the rooster not only of minor misdemeanours, but of unnatural or criminally taboo behaviour. The cat's second accusation deals namely with inbreeding, which as such, can easily be observed in domestic animals (whereas in wild species, there are many means to

³⁹ Syntipas 6 (404), see (Perry 1952, p. 531). On the ideology behind hunting in antiquity, see (Barringer 2001).

⁴⁰ On the Augustana version of this fable, see (Clayton 2008, pp. 179–80). Clayton interprets this fable to point to the difference between humans and other animals: justice does not matter to animals and the wolf enacts here 'a parody of justice' (Clayton 2008, p. 195).

⁴¹ Gibbs translates the last line as 'Well, even if you have an endless supply of arguments, I am still going to eat you anyway!' The elaborate *epimythium* of this fable states: 'The fable shows that when someone with a wicked nature has set his mind on committing some offence, he will carry out his evil acts openly even if he cannot come up with a reasonable excuse.' See also Perry 122, in which a cock tries to persuade humans (thieves) not to kill him.

⁴² One reason for this behaviour is that it ensures that the prey is weak enough to be killed (Fraser 2012, pp. 35–36, 57–58).

avoid breeding among close relatives, for instance, by dispersal).⁴³ Here, the cat accuses the rooster of violating ‘nature’s own laws’ (or, literally, that the rooster is impious or unholy towards nature, *asebēs eis tēn phusin*). Thus, if the ‘reason’ for the wolf’s predatory behaviour is ‘personal’, that this lamb has caused *him* harm once, the cat finds more general charges against the rooster.

Sometimes, the prey animal manages to convince the predator not to kill and eat it. However, the result of the convincing is not always clear. In Babrius’ fable, a fox begs a wolf to spare her life (*zōgrein*) because she is so old. The wolf promises not to kill her if she can produce three true statements. The fox pronounces three clever platitudes and the fable ends there (Babrius 53). The fox may have managed to persuade the wolf or maybe she didn’t. In another fable told by Babrius (107), a lion catches a mouse, and the latter remarks that it is suitable for lions to hunt down stags and bulls and ‘with their flesh make fat your belly’, but a little mouse is not a sufficient meal for a big lion. The lion releases the mouse, which later, when a hunter has captured the lion in a net, releases him by gnawing through the ropes. The fable may also begin with a predator in trouble, which causes it to ask for help from other animals, including its prey. However, the difficulties or dangers are sometimes fake and the weaker ones either decline the request because they know that after being rescued the predators will attack them, or the prey animal assists the deceptive predator, to its own ruin. The replies of the weaker ones are often sarcastic—they know the ulterior motive of the predators.⁴⁴

There are thus various fables where a powerful animal is defeated by a weaker one. In an Augustana fable, a bat begs for mercy from some weasels (*galai*) (Perry 172). A weasel has managed to catch a bat, which has fallen to the ground. After the bat has begged for mercy, the weasel argues that weasels are at war (*polemein*) with all birds. The bat then assures the weasel that she is not a bird but a mouse, so the weasel must let her go. The fable thus plays with the uncommon nature of bats, a mammal which is able to fly. The second part of the fable recounts that the bat is in danger of being killed by another weasel. This time, the other weasel states that there are constant hostilities (the verb *diechthrainein*) between weasels and mice.⁴⁵ The bat assures the weasel that she is not a mouse at all, but a bat. It is noteworthy that the fable calls the prey-predator relationship ‘a war’ between species. This was, however, a common idiom, and was also used by Aristotle.

4. ‘A War against Each Other Among All Animals’

In the eighth Book of his *Study of Animals* (8.609a4–610a36), Aristotle lists pairs of animal species which are each other’s enemies (*polemios*), that is, at war (*polemos*) with each other, like the eagle with the snake, the crow with the owl, the gecko with the spider, and the horse with the heron. The reason for ‘war’ or enmities between different (non-carnivorous) species can be the harm which they cause – such as some species of birds stealing other species’ eggs. In Aristotle’s view, the most obvious reason for the enmities is the scarcity of food for animals which occupy the same place and obtain their sustenance from the same things. However, Aristotle begins this passage by assuring that even the ‘wildest’ or ‘cruellest’ (*agrios* means both ‘wild’ and ‘cruel’) animals can live with each other if there is enough food (8.608b32–3). Yet, as Aristotle puts it, some animals are at war with *many* animals: for example, the wolf with the ass, the bull, and the fox. The wolf is likely the most dangerous predator in some areas, but for Aristotle, the simple reason for this expansive enmity of wolves is that the wolf is *ōmophagos* (literally ‘an eater of raw meat’), that is, carnivorous (8.609b1–3). Besides, all animals are at war (the verb *polemein*) with carnivores, which feed on other ‘animals’ (*apo tōn zōōn*).⁴⁶ The Greek

⁴³ On the so-called inbreeding avoidance hypothesis, see, for instance, (Pusey and Wolf 1996, p. 202).

⁴⁴ (Adrados 1999, pp. 174–75; Zafiroopoulos 2001, pp. 125–26). Examples of these kinds of fables are ‘The Kid and the Wolf’, in which a kid asks a wolf to play the flute in order that she can dance her death dance before the wolf kills her. The piping sends hounds to the spot and the kid is rescued (Perry 97).

⁴⁵ The war between mice and weasels was the topic of animal epics and fables. See Perry 165, Syntipas 51 (see Perry 1952, p. 546) and Phaedrus 4.6.

⁴⁶ Aristotle discusses flesh-eaters in the seventh Book of the *Study of Animals* using the usual word *sarkophaga* (*zōa*)—not the word *zōophaga*. See, for instance, 7.594b18 (lion).

word for ‘animal’, used and generalised by Aristotle, is *zōon*, which refers to a living being, especially sentient living beings. In his *Politics*, Aristotle discusses different kinds of human lifestyles (nomadic, hunting, and agriculture) and prefaces this by speaking of different kinds of food, which different kinds of ‘animals’ (*zōa*), sentient living beings, use: some eat plants, some eat other (sentient) living beings (*zōophaga*), and some are omnivorous. Aristotle concludes that it is the liking for different kinds of food that makes the lives of living beings different. Nature (*phusis*) has made different modes of life to suit different kinds of natural abilities and preferences for food, so that each lifestyle facilitates the acquisition of suitable food (*Politics* 1.8.1256a26–28).

Aristotle has, apparently, a neutral or non-sentimental view about the fact that some animals (including most humans) eat other animals. Sometimes, however, he describes the enmity between species in a way which may be reminiscent of animal fables. For example, in the above-mentioned passage from the *Study of Animals*, he tells about a bird named the *anthos*, which is ‘at war’ with the horse (8.609b14–19). The bird only seems to make minor mischief for the horse by, for instance, mimicking him or scaring him:

Anthos is at war with the horse: the horse drives it out of the pasture, for the anthos forages in grass, and has white film on its eyes and does not see sharply: it mimics the horse’s voice and scares him by flying at him; and he drives it away, but whenever he catches it he kills it. The anthos lives beside river and marshes; its colour is beautiful and it lives well. (Trans. D.M. Balme)

The *anthos* has been identified as the yellow wagtail, because some of its sub-species have been observed to pick insects from farm animals and some of their calls remind one of the whinnying of horses.⁴⁷ Aristotle also mentions a bird named the *aigithios* (probably the long-tailed tit), which pecks the sores of donkeys—like the raven in ‘The Donkey, a Raven and a Passing Wolf’ quoted above. The reason for the *aigithios*’ enmity is, according to Aristotle, that donkeys accidentally upset their nests placed in thorn bushes (8.609a31–35).⁴⁸ Modern ethology may interpret reasons for ‘enmities’ between species as based on (in this case) parent defence behaviour due to the possible damage to be done to the offspring. For his part, Aristotle seems to stress specific reasons, using a specific case when the nests were upset. Particular reasons are also the cause (or pretended cause) for the wolf’s enmity toward the lamb in the fable ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ quoted earlier.

However, the idea of peaceful existence between species—rather than constant war—was assured by Aristotle in the above-mentioned passage. In his view, wild animals—even the wildest, ‘cruellest’ ones—can live peacefully together if there is enough food. Aristotle gives an example of crocodiles in Egypt which have become tame and gentle (*hēmeros*) towards the priest who feeds them (8.608b33–609a2).⁴⁹

Some fables point to the idealised Golden Age—also known as the Age of Zeus’ father, Cronus—when all living beings lived in peace and harmony, or when they were at least striving for all-inclusive justice. One of the defences against injustices was to seek help from the gods. Aristotle mentions in passing an animal fable in which the hares insist on equality with the lions (*Politics* 3.13.1284a15–17 = Perry 450). Traditionally, the passage has been understood to include the lions’ answer (which Aristotle does not mention) that the hares’ petition lacks ‘teeth and claws’.⁵⁰ An equally disappointing result occurs in a fable told by Phaedrus, in which a lion which had appointed

⁴⁷ (Arnott 2007, pp. 14–15) s.v. *anthos*.

⁴⁸ (Arnott 2007), s.v. *aigithios*. The description of the *anthos/aigithios* and other stories of animal friendships and enmities are later copied by Pliny (*Natural History* 10.95) and Aelian (*On the Characteristics of Animals* 5.48).

⁴⁹ Aristotle is naturally referring here to Egyptian animal cults. Although there were no animal cults in Greece, some animals were in a way protected as sacred animals to gods (like Apollo’s doves in Delphi). On gods linked to specific animals, see (Gilhus 2006, pp. 93–95).

⁵⁰ Aristotle is here presenting the idea that the best men in the *polis* are outside the law, like gods. Laws are made for citizens, which are equal, but the ‘lions’ in the *polis* are above/below the average citizens. After that, Aristotle moves on to discuss the *ostracismus*, the institution which made it possible to get rid of unpopular rulers—unpopular ‘lions’. Aristotle mentions

himself king tries first to be fair by restricting his diet, thus upholding ‘the sacred law of justice’ (*sancta incorrupta iura*); nonetheless, the lion soon lapses into his old habits of eating other animals (Phaedrus 4.14). Babrius, however, tells a fable (102) about an animal kingdom ruled by a lion which is not ‘wild’ or ‘restive’ (*thymōdes*), but is fair-minded (*dikaios*)—as fair-minded as a human might be assures the fable—and therefore all animals are ‘at peace’ (*eirēnē*). The lion acts as a judge and weak animals are able to seek justice: the lamb against the wolf, the wild goat against the leopard, and the deer against the tiger. One hare then states that he had always prayed that this would happen, that weak animals would be ‘feared’ by the strong. Here, the topic of the equality of the weak with the strong is also a reference to the mythic Golden Age with its all-inclusive justice. The weaker ones could seek protection without having to submit to the natural law that ‘might makes right’.

The oldest example of this type of fable is the fragment preserved by the seventh century BCE iambic poet Archilochus, in which a fox pleads for justice from Zeus against an eagle which had violated their friendship pact (fr. 177). The fox says that Zeus is a source of justice *both* among men *and* animals (*thēria*). This has been interpreted as Archilochus’ mocking comment on the Hesiodic passage mentioned above of Zeus only giving justice (*dikē*) to humans (*Works and Days* 274–80).⁵¹ For Hesiod, Zeus’ *dikē* means, in its basic form, the right to live and not to be killed. If this basic right is violated, the transgressor should be punished—but this right concerns only the human sphere.

Hesiod thus makes a clear distinction that Zeus’ justice concerns only humans. However, both Plato (*The Laws* 7.766a) and Aristotle (*Politics* 1.1.1253a34–7) state that without education and other restraints, it is man who is the cruelest (*agrios*) living being. Although both philosophers were only concerned with human cruelty towards other human beings, the fable genre also discussed, to a certain extent, the ill-treatment of animals and cruelty towards animals by humans.

5. Humans as a Threat to Other Animals

There are hence some fables or fragments of fables where animals seek help or even justice from Zeus—sometimes against other animals, including humans, and sometimes specifically against humans. For instance, bees ask for killing stings from Zeus so that they would be able to defend their honeycombs against humans (Perry 163), donkeys ask to be released from their toils (Perry 185), and a snake which has been trodden on by several men complains about it to Zeus (Perry 198). Dogs also petition the supreme god for better treatment by humans in Phaedrus’ fable (4.19 = Perry 517).⁵² However, in general, Zeus declines animals’ petitions or promises to give them what they want on impossible terms. Therefore, these kinds of fables surely functioned as aetiologies—and justifications—for animal husbandry, as well as the ill- or carefree treatment of domestic animals. Donkeys were worked to death because Zeus did not give them equal justice.

The most extensive of the kinds of fables depicting humans as an enemy for other animals is the fable ‘The Owl and the Birds’, part of which is found in the so-called Ryland papyrus 493, which is from the first century CE.⁵³ The owl tries to warn other bird species of the dangerous fowler (*ikseutēs*). It is naturally an everyday observation that birds warn birds of their own species (and therefore, unintentionally, also of other species) about enemies. That the owl, a predator bird, is the warner here, is perhaps because of its sharp sight. The same kind of fable is preserved in the Augustana

that the fable of the hares and the lions was told by Antisthenes. We may suppose that Antisthenes, the founder of the Cynic School, has told the fable in order to advocate the philosophy that ‘might makes right’.

⁵¹ (Steiner 2010, p. 104). Steiner also suggests that Archilochus’ fable functions as a subtext for Callimachus’ (fragmentally preserved) second *lamb* (from the third century BCE), where a fox and a swan complain that Zeus’ rule is not fair—thus implying that it is not like the rule of his father Cronus, which guaranteed peace and harmony for all animals and not just for humans. (Steiner 2010, pp. 97–99, 102).

⁵² The camel asks for bull-like horns (Perry 117; Syntipas 59, see (Perry 1952, p. 549)), and in a later fable, a hare asks the supreme god for horns like those of a stag (Perry 658). See also ‘Jupiter and the Goats’ (Phaedrus 4.17). In the Latin later fable, it is the lion as king of the animals, not Zeus or Jupiter, who dispenses justice by ordering that a wolf be hanged for eating sheep (Perry 596).

⁵³ The Ryland papyrus contains remnants of a collection of fables, five in all. (Adrados 1999, pp. 54–60).

collection (Perry 39), where it is not an owl, but a swallow, which tries to warn other birds about the fowlers' nets.⁵⁴

Dio Chrysostom, who lived in the second century CE, tells the same fable in a more elaborate fashion. The owl's warnings happen in the course of a long time. The time of the story marks human cultural and technical development, which meant more advanced methods in fowling. Time after time, the owl tries to warn other birds, but the situation becomes worse at every step. Finally, when she sees a man armed with a bow, the owl 'prophesies' (*prolegein*): 'This man will outstrip you with the help of your own feathers, for though he is on foot himself, he will send feathered shafts after you.' Other birds do not trust the owl's warning, albeit too late.⁵⁵ The teaching of this fable is apparently that wise men ('owls') are worth listening to. However, the fable also approaches bird-catching from the birds' point of view: fowling methods are painful and lethal and it becomes increasingly difficult to escape them. The growing threat to birds from human fowlers in these bird fables, and the one portrayed especially in Dio Chrysostom's version of 'The Owl and the Birds', reminds one of such modern classics as Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972) and Walt Disney's film *Bambi* (1942), where men are depicted as impersonal threats.

Describing humans as the enemies of many animals is expressed more clearly when humans are represented as carnivorous, as eaters of other animals. Some fables include sacrificial scenes and sacrificial animals, but they rarely make the connection between sacrificing and meat eating (see Phaedrus 5.4, Babrius 132, Perry 465). Eating animals is, however, treated in a much more concrete sense in the Old Comedies with animal choruses from the fifth century BCE, e.g., *The Birds*, *The Storks*, *The Ants*.⁵⁶ One possible theme in these mostly only fragmentally preserved animal-named comedies was the question of why humans treat animals as they do and why humans eat animals despite usually having plenty of other food to eat. The most explicit example of this theme is Crates' *Animals* (*Thēria*).⁵⁷ The animal choruses demanding the basic right to live or decent living can be compared with Aristophanes' women's comedies (*Lysistrata*, *The Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria* and *The Assemblywomen*), where women take over power (at least temporarily). Although these demands by animals in animal chorus comedies were apparently viewed as comical, these 'animal comedies' might also point to the current ways in which humans treated animals. Thus, in Aristophanes' *The Birds*, the only extant one of animal chorus comedies, cruel fowling practices are referred to both by the human protagonist Peisetaerus (522–38) and by the bird chorus, which even declares laws to protect birds from fowlers and bird-sellers (1077–87). Because these are all comedies, the Athenian audience were more likely to have laughed at, rather than pitied, the animals for these kinds of appeals. However, both the women's comedies and the animal chorus comedies gave the male audience of Athenian theatre the possibility to imagine situations from the (imagined) animal or female point of view. Therefore, they could have been lessons in empathy, a partial immersion in another's situation.⁵⁸

6. Concluding Words

Fables may sometimes bear traces of observation of the everyday behaviour of animals, although their motives can be humanised for the sake of the story. The most humanised feature of the animals

⁵⁴ Birds detect a man sowing flax seed, and then the seed sprouts. On both occasions, the swallow warns other birds that the men would make nets by braiding flax strings, but they ignore her. Therefore, birds live in constant danger of being trapped by nets. The swallow, however, decides to leave the other birds and live close to humans. The fact that swallows live near humans is also pointed out in the fable 'The Swallow and the Nightingale' (Perry 277, also told by Babrius 12): the nightingale declines the swallow's offer to live with humans by referring to her former tragic life as a human, a reference to the myth of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus. The swallow alludes to the same myth in 'The Crow and the Boastful Swallow', by asserting that she is the daughter of the King of Athens (Perry 377).

⁵⁵ Dio Chrysostom *Discourse* 12.7–10 (= Perry 437); see also *Discourse* 72.14–16 (= Perry 437a). See also (Adrados 1999, pp. 34–5). Translation of Dio's text is based on J. W. Cohoon's translation (1939). See (Cohoon 1939).

⁵⁶ The first were Magnes' Birds and Pherecrates' *Ant-men*. Crates' *Animals* (*Thēria*) in the 420s BCE was followed by Aristophanes' *The Birds* in 410 BCE, and later Archippus' *Fishes* (c. 402 BCE). On animal choruses, see (Rothwell 2007).

⁵⁸ (Korhonen 2017, pp. 144–58). The definition of empathy is Erika Ruonakoski's (Ruonakoski 2017, p. 40).

in fables is that animals are depicted as speaking human language.⁵⁹ While talking animals are part of the general storytelling in different modern genres (comics, animations, fairy-tales), talking animals were rare in Graeco-Roman literature and mythology. Fables are the exception, but the most commonly stated function of these talking animal characters in fables is to enable a discussion of ethical problems in everyday (human) situations by means of the simplification created by the use of animal characters. Unlike, for instance, the forceful and lively depictions of animals in the Homeric animal similes, which truly bring to mind the animals themselves, the animals in fables are humanised, often, however, more strongly in the concluding action (like the wolf's speech in 'The Raven, the Donkey and the Passing Wolf'). Yet, although animals in the Aesopic fables may talk, they are otherwise not overtly humanised (they do not, for example, wear clothes or stand upright).⁶⁰ Furthermore, fables in the type 'Begging for Mercy' could deal with such observed zoological facts as the 'surplus killing' of wolves and cats 'playing' with their prey.

Besides, if humanising makes it possible to use fables as examples for human situations, it also makes non-human species more readily understandable. Pascal Etler speaks about the emotionalisation of human-animal relationships in modern children's literature, meaning that humanised animals form part of a child's emotional education.⁶¹ In a way, fables already acted as children's literature in antiquity. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian from the first century CE states in his *Orator's Education* (1.9.2) that fables follow after nursery stories. However, the main function of the Aesopic fables was not to teach Greek and Roman schoolboys how to *feel*, but how to express themselves simply and clearly, along with the general worldly wisdom that fables offered.

Still, although animals in fables are humanised and the point of the story is not to sympathise with animals, fables also invite readers to consider the (imagined) point of view of animals, especially that of prey animals, the underdogs. If the audience of the *Iliad* identified with warriors and therefore, with predators in the similes, the overt focalisation of the victim, the prey, makes it possible to identify with them, the weak ones, in the fables. Then, one of the basic (and implied) questions behind some of these short stories, fables, may be why do animals (humans among others) harm, kill, and eat other animals? Why should one's life continue only at the expense of the death of others? Why are there those who kill? The modern response is that carnivorous predators eat prey because, otherwise, they simply could not survive and, furthermore, predators have an ecologically important role in the ecosystem. Instead, some fables imply that eating other sentient living beings may also be viewed as an act which needs to at least be humorously justified. The larger picture is the idea of decline, a lapse since the Golden Age when all animals lived in 'peace' without harming each other. In this train of thought, killing and eating other animals was a sign of moral decline.⁶²

The 'war' between species, which was based on some enmities between two animals of different species, was not only a fictitious reason, but an explanation used by Aristotle. In his hunting manual with hounds, Socrates' contemporary Xenophon calls prey animals strong 'adversaries' (*antipala*) of (human) hunters, which fight both for their lives (*psychai*) and for their dwellings (*Cynegeticus* 13.14). Some fables can depict a reverse rhetoric by depicting humans as enemies – even as a collective threat to other animals, especially wild birds. Although animals attempting to seek justice against human

⁵⁹ In Greek myths, animals usually did not talk human language, but there were some humans, like the seer Teiresias, who could understand animal languages. In the *Iliad*, Achilles' divine horse Xanthus is bestowed with the gift of human speech at a critical moment (*Iliad* 19.400–423). But it was a special occasion, a present by the goddess Hera, not an ability of this divine animal in general. Poets sometimes used a certain rhetorical device, the so-called *prosopopoeia* ('making a mask', speaking as another person), like Theognis, the lyric poet from the sixth century BCE: he has a few lines in which the lyric speaker is a mare (*Theognis* 257–60).

⁶⁰ Although animals in modern animal sensitive children's literature, like the rabbits Hazel and Fiver in *Watership Down*, seem to be much more humanised than the animals in ancient fables (the rabbits have names, for instance), they also preserve their animal specificity, e.g., the societal structure of rabbits.

⁶¹ (Etler 2014, p. 95).

⁶² On the ancient ideas that the introduction of meat eating coincided with the moral decline of mankind, see, for instance, (Dombrowski 2014, pp. 536–37).

violence can be viewed as a satirical or comical topic – like women gaining power in Aristophanes' women's comedies—this topic might also be viewed as an implicit way of educating empathy by putting oneself in the position of the underdogs in human societies, the non-human others.

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