Homo numerans, venerans, or imitans?

Human and Animal Cognition in *Problemata* 30.6

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περιφραδὴς ἀνήρ· κρατεῖ δὲ μηχαναίς ἀγραύλου θηρός ὑρεσιβάτα, λασιαύχενά θ' ἵππον ὁχμάζεται ἀμφὶ λόφον ζυγῷ οὐρεῖον τ' ἀκμήτα ταύρον.

*Sophocles, Antigone* 348–52

1 Preliminary Points

1.1 Problemata 30.6

It is a hard thing for a person to be under the shadow of melancholy; being a πρόβλημα overshadowed by *On Melancholy* (= Pr. 30.1) is not much fun either. Odd, short, and far less pellucid than its sister problems on human and animal psychology (30.3 and 12), and less obviously philosophically enticing than many of its fellow problems from Book 30, *Pr. 30.6* has languished in even greater obscurity, both relative and absolute, than its siblings. But this is not a just fate. This fascinating passage condenses a wealth of intellectual-historical background and a host of challenging interpretive problems into only a few short lines. Above all though, it provides us with a window—a small and rather opaque window, admittedly—into the state of the question of animal (ir)rationality in the Lyceum in the late 4th or early 3rd centuries.

The main question or problem of 30.6 is why man ought to be obeyed (πειστέον) more than other animals, and three possible answers are advanced:

Διὰ τί ἀνθρώπῳ πειστέον μᾶλλον ἢ ἄλλῳ ζῷῳ; πότερον, ὡσπερ Πλάτων Νεοκλεῖ ἀπεκρίνατο, ὅτι ἀριθμεῖν μόνον ἐπίσταται τῶν ἄλλων ζῴων; ἢ ὅτι θεοὺς νομίζει μόνον; ἢ ὅτι μιμητικώτατον, μανθάνει γὰρ δύναται διὰ τούτο
Why is it that man is to be obeyed rather than another animal? Is it, as Plato answered Neocles, that he alone of the animals knows how to count? Or that only he believes in the gods? Or that he is the most imitative (for this is why he is able to learn)?

We have four questions in this passage, with short glosses on the second and fourth questions. The first question—“why is it that man is to obeyed rather than another animal?”—is the actual πρόβλημα, and I will refer to it as “our problem,” “problem 30.6,” or simply “the problem.” It is an explanandum taken for fact but in want of an explanation or cause.

The three subsequent questions are possible explanatia for the problematic phenomenon, phrased in the “is it that…?” form, which is a very typical way of introducing putative answers throughout the Problemata. The three subsequent questions will be referred to as Option A, B, and C, respectively. Options A and C both have glosses: ὥσπερ Πλάτων Νεοκλεῖ ἀπεκρίνατο and μανθάνειν γὰρ δύναται διὰ τούτο, respectively. The most natural reading of the passage (endorsed herein) is that Option C is the preferred answer of the author. However, this reading is not strictly necessary; e.g. the case for reading Option C as the author’s choice or preference would be stronger if it had particles such as ἀρα or ἦν ὅτι. Nonetheless, there are two important reasons for taking C to be the option preferred: first, only it receives a gloss that elaborates on it or explains its suitability as an explanation. Option A has a gloss, “as Plato answered Neocles,” but this is anecdotal rather than evidential. Second, it is the most Peripatetic of the answers, alluding directly to a passage from Aristotle’s Poetics.

1.2 Problems with Our Problem
As many previous commentators have noticed, problem 30.6 is a rather odd question. Compare it to the similar but more intuitively formulated 30.3: Διὰ τί τῶν ζῴων ὁ ἄνθρωπος φρονιμώτατος; (“Why is man the most intelligent of the animals?”) That question is straightforward. The second thing to notice is that it is unusual for a πρόβλημα to be this short when it introduces rival explanations. Even when there are only two competing, putative explanantia, it is

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1 μᾶλλον ἦ can mean “more than” or “rather than.” On my preference for the latter, see n. 13.
2 When multiple competing explanations are offered following “πότερον . . . ὅτι,” either “ἡ διὰ τί” or “ἡ διὰ τί” are the typical ways of introducing the succeeding putative answers.
3 The ideas in Options A, B, and C will be referred to as the Homo numerans, Homo venerans, and Homo imitans view, respectively.
4 Barthélemy-Saint Hilaire (1891, 2:22).