The Essence of Aristotle's Zoology

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After a long period in which Aristotle's contribution to the study of living things was treated with reverential incomprehension, there have been steps recently to recover its sense.

It is certainly not profitable, of course, to look for Aristotelian 'anticipations' of modern discoveries and to base a claim for his modern interest on those sort of grounds. But it is possible to show that Aristotle had an approach to the living thing (though he concentrated rather exclusively on animals) that is strikingly contemporary, and that, because he thought so powerfully, he was able to explore the implications of this conception with a clarity that is indeed still arresting today.

In various passages throughout the 'biological' works, and indeed throughout the corpus, Aristotle makes it clear that the key to understanding an animal is, in his view, the identification of its 'end'. 'Nature' he says famously at one point, 'does everything for the sake of something' (De Partibus Animalium I 641b 11, 12), and he makes it clear throughout De Partibus Animalium that the animal and its structure are not exceptions.

Moreover, it is the animal's for-the-sake-of-which that must be grasped first if anything else about it is to be understood, because it is of course its 'purpose' which will explain its having whatever features it has. Here is Aristotle making the general point:

In quotations from De Partibus Animalium and Metaphysics the translations are by Balme and Ross respectively, except where otherwise stated. Translations of other passages are from the editions mentioned in the list of references.

1 A modern example of this approach is offered by Slaughter, Ch. 1.
2 Notably Grene, Balme (1) and (2), Barnes and Pellegrin.
3 E.g. 'Now, as each of the parts of the body, like every other instrument, is for the sake of some purpose, viz. some action, it is evident that the body as a whole must exist for the sake of some complex action' (PA I 645b 16-18 trans. Peck). See also PA I 640b 17-23; 641b 11; and 645b 20.
4 E.g. 'Hence we should if possible say that because this is what it is to be a man, therefore he has these things: for he cannot be without these parts' (PA I 640a 33f trans. Balme).
... since we see more than one cause in connection with coming-to-be in nature, for example the cause for-the-sake-of-which as well as the cause from which comes the beginning of the movement, we must be clear about these too, as to which sort of cause is naturally first and which second. First is evidently the one we call for the sake of something. For this is the definition, and the definition is the beginning alike in things composed according to an art, and in things composed naturally (De Partibus Animalium I 639b 11-16).

As far as an animal is concerned, its 'end' is identified with some kind of 'action' or 'activity':

Now, as each of the parts of the body, like every other instrument, is for the sake of some purpose, viz. some action, it is evident that the body as a whole must exist for the sake of some complex action (De Partibus Animalium I 645b 15f, translated by Peck)

— or, as Balme prefers to translate it, 'for the sake of a full activity'.

Commentators have often taken this to mean that an animal's 'end', for Aristotle, is something wholly to do with behaviour. For example, Stephen Clark, who interprets Aristotle as maintaining that an animal's end is its 'ergon' (often translated as function), concludes that 'the ergon of a variety of living creature... is the particular form of life, of activity which 'makes sense' of its structure'.

An animal's 'end' cannot be defined solely in terms of its activities, however, if we are to do justice to the consistent importance Aristotle attaches to the physical make-up of animals — for example, when he says at Historia Animalium 491a 12ff that in discovering the causes of the differences between animals, the first thing to do is to consider their parts. If we accept that for Aristotle the 'end' of an animal gives its definition attributing to him the view that an animal's 'end' is to be behaviourally defined would be to commit him to regarding physical constitution as entirely incidental to what made an animal the animal that it was.

the body... is in a way for the sake of the soul, and the parts are for the sake of the functions in relation to which each has naturally grown. Therefore we must first state the activities, both those common to all and those that are generic and those that are specific' (PA I 645b 18-22 trans. Balme), See also PA 641a 15-17; 640a 33, 34.

5 Balme (1), p. 19. see also Met 1050a 22 ("For the action is the end").

6 Clark, p. 16. And if the equation of form with end (in the case of an animal) is accepted — see below — the claim of Nicholas White is a further illustration: 'Aristotle is often ready to think of the form of a thing, especially a living thing, as its characteristic way of behaving...'. (White, p. 194).

7 'First <in priority> is the one <i.e. the cause> we call for-the-sake-of-something. For this is the definition... ' (PA I 639b 14, 15 trans. Balme).

8 Which he clearly does not — see e.g. PA I 640a 33.