

Homonymously Human:
Aristotle's Brutish Character in *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle lists three characters to avoid: vice, incontinence, and brutishness (*thēriotēs*). He juxtaposes each with its “opposing” good type of character: incontinence is opposed to continence, vice is opposed to virtue, and brutishness is opposed to a godlike character. Of the godlike character, Aristotle writes, “Hence, if, as men say, surpassing virtue changes men into gods, the disposition opposed to Brutishness will clearly be some quality more than human” (1145a23). The reader is left to wonder whether we may infer from this comment that the brutish character is, therefore, *less than human*. In this paper, I shall argue that, for Aristotle, the bestial character must be *sub-human* given Aristotle's commitments to the function argument, his view of nature as a secondary substance, what it is for something to be said of a primary substance *homonymously*, and what it is to be a privation of a capacity.

The fact that brutes lack *noûs* is troubling. Not only is this fact disturbing, but also it has significant implications for how we (and Aristotle) can classify brutes. After all, man is defined by his distinguishing mark, reason (*logos*). If *thēriotēs* does not have this essential rational part, then *thēriotēs* cannot perform the function of a human—not even *poorly*. *Thēriotēs* cannot be human *synonymously*. After all, the account of a human being must necessarily contain reference to reason, as human beings are *essentially* rational animals. But that same account would have to be predicable of *thēriotēs*, and it cannot be so. Therefore, we must predicate the term “human” to *thēriotēs* homonymously. If so, an interesting consequence arises; since the predicate *rational animal* cannot be said of any individual brute, brutes cannot *really* be human. However, they are animals. Oddly enough, their particular deformity renders them nondescript animals without a true species.

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