

# SIMPLIFIED INTERPRETATIONS ON ARISTOTLE'S 'CHILDREN AND ANIMALS'

RuoNan Liu  
Keystone Academy, Beijing 101138, China.

**Abstract:** In contemporary scholarship on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the recurring conjunction of “children and animals” has frequently been treated as a minor rhetorical gesture rather than a philosophically structured argument. This essay contends, however, that Aristotle’s coupling of the two figures is both deliberate and conceptually significant. While prior analyses have primarily denoted behavioral similarities between these subjects, this study examines the underlying logic behind such an alignment. It proposes that Aristotle’s pairing not only equates non-rational beings, but also constructs a graduated ontology of capacity. In short, children occupy a liminal category: like animals, they act from appetite and habituation; unlike animals, they possess the innate faculty of *logos* awaiting cultivation. Hence, the comparison forebodies Aristotelian education, wherein moral pedagogy is tasked with actualizing the latent rationality of the young. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates how this nuanced textual device reinforces Aristotle’s vision of virtue as a rational achievement, and it suggests that overlooking such stylistic precision may obscure further coherence of his ethical thought.

**Keywords:** Ethics; Education; Reason; Virtue; Rationality; Happiness

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher explores how humans achieve the highest good, *eudaimonia* through living virtuously, which means acting according to reason and developing character; prevalent thoughts and concepts such as the highest good, types of virtue, and the contemplative life has keenly influenced medieval societal pursuits and day-to-day life.

Among his arguments of achieving happiness, in chapter II of book III, Aristotle carries out a perceptive comparison of children and non-human animals [1]. In which, most philosophy enthusiasts have wrongly interpreted this juxtaposition of stating “children and animals” on the same line as a wild expression of Aristotle’s depreciation or even critique to children, as he enlists them aside non-sentient and lower beings, or a joke to insinuate the unappreciative nature of children. However, this simple analysis of a phrase made by Aristotle risks being a vague misrepresentation, and for readers to understand the meaning of quoting the two organisms together, we must realize how Aristotle is conveying the comparison on a textual level and synthesize the thinking with different aspects of wider pictures including Aristotelian ethics and education system, as well as Aristotle’s arguments on children in other works, such as *Politics*. By examining the arguments made upon this topic from a fine to large scale, this essay ought to provide more comprehensive insights into the significance of discussion on children and animals, and address some common questions elicited by novice explorers.

## 2 COMPARISONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ANIMALS

The claim that the juxtaposition of children and animals could emphasize a negative perception of Aristotle towards children is not invalid in complete sense. Despite its naturalism, Aristotle’s ethics does not emphasize the goodness of children, but denotes multiple lacking traits [2], often being the main evidence of interpretations above. However, this text intends to synthesize the literal aspect of Aristotle’s comparison between children and animals to arrive at a rather neutral conclusion.

The root at which the claim is initiated by Aristotle is to define voluntary and the moral responsibilities associated to each subject. By which, Aristotle distinguishes that, children and animals, along with human adults, share in voluntary, but not a rational choice, *prohairesis*, which he believes is very closely tied to virtue, and a better guide to men’s characters than their actions. Lacking *prohairesis*, children and animals may not develop character traits and therefore is not diachronically responsible for their actions, though they can be blamed or praised [3]. On a clearer view, Aristotle’s juxtaposition confirms his minor argument that children are pathologically weak, physically disproportionate, and generally irrational, thus being closer to animals than men. Together, Aristotle does claim animals and children are inferior to human adults in terms of achieving virtue and happiness, the central destination of discussion in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, he goes on to make distinctions between children and non-human animals.

One careful distinction is the potential to be changed. Fundamentally, both children and animals are in a preparatory stage yet to achieve *Eudaimonia*, the biggest happiness, characterized by virtue and rationality. However, while children are immature in both aspects, Aristotle states that animals do not possess *logos*, and are entirely driven by appetite [4]. In this way, they lack the potential to be changed and to strive for happiness. In comparison, Aristotle claims that “we do not call a child happy, for he is not yet capable of noble actions”. Through which, he accounts that children may

achieve happiness in the strive for noble actions that is driven by *logos*. Therefore, a distinction is that children are potential personnel, while animals are actual beings, that is, the ultimate form that may not be changed. Though he further sought that animals and children can be changed in voluntary actions, the notion of acting voluntarily may only be changed in children, ultimately driving differences in the actuality of the beings.

### 3 THE ONTOLOGY OF CAPACITY

A qualitative difference between animals and children can also be speculated from Aristotle's account. In is unsaid whether the capacity of the two differs, but rather in the nature of capacity, where children possess incipient rational capacity and can develop deliberate virtues, while animals possess fixed natural capacities that does not develop into rational deliberation, that is, *prohairesis*. In this way, children are able, through education and habituation like blaming and praising, grow into adult human, while animals remain inferior. It can similarly be claimed that children have potentiality, *dunamis*, to become full moral agents.

It is clear in chapter VI, book III of *De Anima*, that while children are preparatory, they behold capacities of human adults that are not yet guided and developed, while animals remain limited by one-way capacities that lead inevitably to a single affect and remains to be driven by appetite or instinct rather than rational thought [5].

### 4 ARISTOTELIAN EDUCATION

These ideas remain fundamental in Aristotelian ethics and education. For example, in claims such as Juan Antonio's "Only Persons Grow Moral" [6]. The distinction between rational thought and voluntary action is one of the cornerstones of Aristotle's education, in which he states that the ultimate purpose of education is to align a person's desires with rational thought, cultivating virtue and good character. Specifically, Aristotelian education places emphasis on integrating virtues into character so that individuals naturally desire to do good and just things, or to achieve *eudaimonia*, the state of being by living virtuously.

In Aristotelian education, the lack of rational deliberation in children is resolved in progressional strategies. The dominant strategy that Aristotle proposes is the emphasis on sciences including physics, metaphysics, psychology. Physics is for students to explore the realm of and interact with their natural surroundings, improving their capabilities of understanding *logos* by inspecting the underlying operations of the universe. Metaphysics challenges them to thinking beyond physics, and to apply *logos*, or rational thinking in interpreting the essence in being, in which they are convinced to the pursuit of *eudaimonia* and happiness, to understand the destination of actuality. Finally, in psychology, students are guided to and taught on the human mind and behavior. This helps them reflect and identify personal limitations to self-correct and develop; through a change in mindset, the indirect-voluntary behaviors are guided though the innate appeal to virtue [7]. The three core aspects above of Aristotelian education could be placed in context with Aristotle's account of children in *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the framework can be integrated to explain a process of actualizing deliberate rationality in children: understanding *logos* through physical occurrences – applying *logos* beyond physics – embedding *logos* in being.

Rhetoric and music training are often involved to balance the educational systems, reflecting a side aspect to the destination of education expected by Aristotle, also closely influenced by Plato. Rhetoric helps individuals articulate thoughts persuasively, being a valuable asset for participation in public life and contributing to social discourse. While, music serves to nourish the soul, enabling individuals to appreciate the beauty of harmony and order in life. By and large, the educational system of Aristotle, by actualizing deliberate rationality within human beings, serves two purposes: pursuing personal happiness and achieving social order and harmony on a collective scale.

### 5 ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS

*Nicomachean Ethics* is also said to be a core body of work where Aristotle examines the theme of ethics. Avoiding generic and repetitive summary of its content, several interpretations of moral responsibility can be drawn independently on the account of animals and children.

First, according to the narrative, responsibilities in voluntary action may be bonded to rational deliberation. Specifically, children possess rationality in potentiality but not in actuality, so their actions are voluntary but not reasoned. Thus, they are only held semi-responsible as appropriate subjects for moral education. Whilst animals act voluntarily but wholly without reason; hence, they are not moral agents and bear no moral responsibility, though they may be subjects of training [8]. This reveals a narrow perspective that could be examined: rationality as a condition of moral agency.

Second, contrastively, there is also a critical distinction between the capacity to act voluntary and the capacity to be held morally responsible. The discussions supplementing to this point of view is complex, as the capacity for adult humans to act voluntarily is controversial. Though Aristotle did not state explicitly whether adult actions are voluntary, some papers claim that their actions is not complete voluntary, as they are backed by virtue in instinct, while other papers disagree reasoning that deliberate rationality is aligned to voluntary actions, as a result of Aristotelian education. But in every way, as claimed in *The Concept of Brutishness (Thēriotēs) in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, "Aristotle did not attribute to them (childrens and animals) moral responsibility" [9]. Hence, the capability of voluntary actions is independent of moral responsibility.

Finally, A correspondence can be seen between moral standing of a being and its natural order. From rational adults as complete moral agents to children as moral subjects in training, and to animals as non-moral beings, this inclusion of

non-anthropocentric subjects in ethical discussions may suggest an extension of Aristotle's moral community to non-human animals.

## 6 THE BIG PICTURE

Returning to the initial claim of Aristotle's underrating of children, an integrated picture of children across Aristotle's entire body of work should be used to evaluate the validity of such a claim. Aristotle's references to children are dispersed across his corpus, primarily within *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, but also touching on *Rhetoric*, *De Anima*, and his *Metaphysics*.

First and most fundamentally, Aristotle notes that children also possess the tripartite soul: vegetative, rational, and appetite. This means, they have both rational and irrational parts, but the rational part is undeveloped. Therefore, the original claim may be undermined as the psychological model of children is indifferent with that of adults. This hints that the children are only in the developing status, rather than absolutely incapable in any aspect. In other works, such as *Metaphysics* and *On the Soul*, this idea is consolidated as Aristotle states the child is a becoming-adult, from potentiality to actuality, and that the rational soul is dormant or incomplete before maturity [10].

Second, children are placed and evaluated in households. In *Politics*, Aristotle constitutes that the state (*polis*) arises from the aggregation and completion of prior, natural human associations. The first and most natural of these is the household (*oikos*), which exists to satisfy daily needs. In part XII of Aristotle's *Politics* Book I, he introduces that a complete household consists of three fundamental and natural relationships: master and slave for preservation or security, husband and wife for reproduction and mutual support, as well as father and child for generation and moral development [11]. The child, therefore, is not an incidental member but a key component of the most basic unit of community. A household without the parent-child relationship would be incomplete, just as a state without households is impossible. Hence, children are more often viewed positively as an integral part of the unitary components of society. Additively, side attributes in a household context are that children must be loyal to the father, or even as a property of the father. This paternity rule, as claimed by Aristotle, is absolute, beneficial to the child, and guided by affection [12]. Aristotle describes children as belonging to their parents "as a part belongs to a whole". They are possessions as extensions of the parent's being [13]. In essence, it is rightful to claim that children, by Aristotle's definition, is not inferior, but incomplete in ontology, yet propertyed by their parents as future selves. In this context, they are again claimed rather positively.

An idea supportive to the underrating claim would be Aristotle's exclusion of children in citizenship. Later in *Politics*, it is claimed that a child is a potential citizen (*polites dynamis*) but not an actual one. Citizenship requires the developed rational mind to rule and to be ruled. Children, like slaves and women, are governed for their own good but should not govern. Nevertheless, children education is a duty for the legislator, to mold the child's non-rational soul through habit, preparing it for a later life of governing or simply rational virtue [14]. It could be also understood that Aristotle see children as critical and valuable contributors of future societal and political forces; in this case, they behold unquantified potential of achievements.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, by all definition, the simple understanding, drawn from Aristotle's claim: "Animals and children" to state that he perceives children as a disruption, is poorly considered. Rather, a more reasonable view is that children are incomplete beings that is both different and like an animal, possessing potential to be changed by Aristotelian education specifically upon deliberate rationality. And that children possess potential to achieve greatness after actualization. Their societal roles are also complex, as they are a critical part to the household and to the society. Thus, it should be concluded that Aristotle's perception of children is multifaceted and sophisticated, while the juxtaposition of children with animal serves to uncover important evaluations of children's potentiality, linked to the broader Aristotelian system.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin, Hackett Publishing, Originally published ca. 350 B.C.E. 1999.
- [2] Monteils-Laeng, Laetitia. Aristotle's Perception of Childhood. *Archives de philosophie*, 2017, 80(4): 659-676. DOI: 10.3917/aphi.804.0659.
- [3] Carron P E. Aristotle on Blaming Animals: Taking the Hardline Approach on Voluntary Action in the *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1-5. *Epoché*, 2019, 23(2): 1-57. DOI: 10.5840/epoche2019131129.
- [4] McCready-Flora I C. Aristotle on Reasoning and Rational Animals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2023,101(2): 470-485.
- [5] Aristotle. *De Anima*. Translated by Z. Ben, I. Ben, and S. Hen, Originally published ca. 350 B.C.E. 1994.

- [6] Casas Pardo, Juan Antonio. Only Persons Grow Moral: Student Personhood, Moral Growth, and the Purpose of School. Columbia University Libraries, PhD dissertation. 2024. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/3pvq-2g25>.
- [7] Hunt C. An Aristotelian Model of Education. *Aristos*, 2023, 7(1): 18-32.
- [8] Simoneau-Gilbert V. Can Animals Be Moral Agents? Why the Debate Matters for Animal Ethics. *The Plant-based and Vegan Handbook: Psychological and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Springer International Publishing, 2024, 51-67.
- [9] Marcinkowska-Rosół M. The Concept of Brutishness (Thēriotēs) in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 2018, 66(3SP): 81-117.
- [10] Mitchell E M. Aristotle's Metaphysics. A Study of Greek Philosophy, S. C. Griggs and Company, 1891, 182-196. DOI: 10.1037/12973-026.
- [11] Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by B. Jowett, Originally published ca. 350 B.C.E. 1905.
- [12] Tress Daryl McGowan. Aristotle's Child: Formation through Genes, Oikos, Polis. *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*, ORB: Binghamton University Libraries, 1995, 358. <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/358>.
- [13] Connell S. Nurture and Parenting in Aristotelian Ethics. 2019.
- [14] O'Hear Anthony. Family and State in Education: What Role for Parents' Rights? *Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society*, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep49267.5>.