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Bird Communication in Ancient Greek and Roman Thought

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of the article is to analyse ancient Greek and Roman theories on bird communication. The author observes that the examples of bird communication were often used by ancient philosophers as arguments against the prevailing conception that only humans possessed reason. The article focuses mostly on the thought of Aristotle, Stoics, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, and Porphyry. It indicates strategies used by those thinkers when describing bird communication, the main themes connected with this topic, and the main consequences of the discussion on animal rationality in antiquity.

KEYWORDS:

communication, language, birds, reason, animal, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, philosophy, Aristotle, Stoics, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, Porphyry

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BIRD COMMUNICATION IN ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN THOUGHT

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For in the other powers which we possess we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish¹.
Isocrates, *Nicoles or the Cyprians*

For the ancient Greeks, there was no other such an evident difference between humans and animals as the ability to speak. It was the rhetoric talent that provided political career and success both in ancient Greece and Rome; it was the intelligible speech that differentiated Greeks from foreigners, onomatopoeically called barbarians (*barbaroi*); and, finally, it was the language that enabled humans to abandon the state in which the beasts had lived. As Isocrates observed, owing to the power of speech man has founded cities, invented arts, and – what is probably the most important – created laws. This has resulted from the differentiation between ‘the good’ and ‘the right’ that was made possible by the use of language.

The importance of speech in the ancient Greek culture is mirrored in the term *logos*, which means both ‘language’ and ‘reason’. The lack of intelligible language was an evident proof that animals did not possess reason; or, alternatively, the irrational beings (*zoa aloga*), as animals were generally called in Greek, would never be able to utter any meaningful sound. There was no speech without reason, as communication required rational choices, and no reason without speech, because it was language which enabled to develop the mind abilities². This opinion had far-reaching

¹ Isocrates, *Nicoles or the Cyprians*, trans. G. Norlin, Cambridge, MA. 1980, 3.5–6.

² In fact it is difficult to indicate which observation (about animals as speechless or animals as irrational) antedates the other one. Stephen T. Newmyer suggests that in Stoic philosophy the notion that animals are not able to speak is the consequence of the belief that they do not possess reason (*Speaking of Beasts: The Stoics and Plutarch on Animal Reason and the Modern Case against Animals*,

consequences, as most of the discussions on the moral status of animals in antiquity focused not on the question whether they are able to feel pain, but whether they are rational³.

However, there was one specific group of animals that seemed to undermine the view that beasts were not able to speak at all. While listening to the birds' songs, some ancients could not hold back the impression that voices of these animals were meaningful and multifarious enough to be called a language, therefore they must have resulted from a rational decision. What is more, certain birds, such as parrots, were able to imitate human voices, becoming an excellent argument to refute the theory that no animal could utter articulated sounds⁴.

Therefore for those thinkers who denied animal rationality, bird communication posed a philosophical problem. On the other hand, for those who defended animal intelligence, it became one of the best arguments to support the view that beasts are both rational and able to use language within their species. The aim of this article is to analyse the theories on bird communication of those who assumed that man is the only species possessing reason and of those who affirmed that animals were able to utter meaningful speech. Regarding the first group, I will particularly focus on the thought of Aristotle and Stoics, while the second one will consist of analysis of Plutarch's, Sextus Empiricus' and Porphyry's thoughts. I will indicate the main themes connected with the topic of bird communication, strategies used by individual thinkers when presenting the problem, and the main consequences of both denying and defending animal rationality in antiquity.

The most systematic study of animal communication in antiquity was conducted by Aristotle (384–322 BC). For this philosopher *logos* was an exclusively human feature. In *Politics* he explains that many animals have *phone* that reveals pleasure or pain and enables them to indicate those sensations to others, but only humans have speech (*logos*) to exchange information concerning what is advantageous and harmful, and therefore also what is right and wrong⁵. Additionally, according to Aristotle, only human language consists of phonemes (*stoicheion*) that can be combined into more complex units, while indivisible sounds of animals cannot form any structure⁶.

“Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica, New Series” 1999, Vol. 63, No. 3, p. 102), whereas John Heath argues that it is the Greek observation that animals are speechless which antedates the notion that they are irrational (*The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato*, Cambridge 2005, p. 172).

³ The most thorough investigation on this topic so far has been conducted by Richard Sorabji in his book *Animal Minds and Human Morals. The Origins of the Western Debate* (New York 1995).

⁴ Ancients, especially Romans, were fascinated by imitating abilities of parrots, as can be seen for example in Ovid's *Amores* 2,6 and Statius' *Silvae* 2,4, poems devoted to these birds.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham, Cambridge, MA. 1944, 1253a10–14.

⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, Cambridge, MA. 1932, 1456b22–25.

In human language word has meaning established by convention and therefore it should be treated as a symbol, while animal voice is just a natural predisposition⁷.

Even though Aristotle assumes that animal sounds do not base on symbols and cannot indicate any moral values, he is particularly interested in birds voices which seem to be different from those of other species. In *The History of Animals* he writes: “Certain species of birds above all other animals, and next after man, possess the faculty of uttering articulate sounds”⁸. Birds owe this specific ability to the anatomy of their tongues. According to Aristotle, the language (*dialektos*) is the articulation (*diarthrosis*) of voice (*phone*) by the instrumentality of the tongue – vowels are produced through voice and larynx, while consonants through tongue and lips⁹. Many animals have *dialektos*, but only human tongue is free, broad and soft enough to pronounce various phonemes¹⁰. Nevertheless, birds’ tongues are also suitable for uttering varied sounds which make their language more advanced than that of other animals:

All [birds] are furnished with a tongue, but the organ is variable, being long in some birds and broad in others. (...) [The faculty of uttering articulate sounds] is chiefly developed in broad-tongued birds¹¹.

In being broad is comprised the possibility of becoming narrow; for in the great the small is included, but not the great in the small. What has been said explains why, even among birds, those that are most capable of [uttering sounds]¹² are such as have the broadest tongues; and why the viviparous and sanguineous quadrupeds, where the tongue is hard and thick and not free in its motions, have a very limited vocal articulation. Some birds have a considerable variety of notes. These are the smaller kinds. But it is the birds with talons that have the broader tongues. All birds use their tongues to communicate with each other. But some do this in a greater degree than the rest; so that in some cases it even seems as though actual instruction were imparted from one to another by its agency¹³.

It seems that according to Aristotle, birds are able to transmit not only simple sensations like pleasure and pain¹⁴ but also additional information. What is more, they are also capable of teaching their nestlings to sing what means that birds’ voice is not just natural predisposition, as in case of other species, but a result of education:

⁷ Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, trans. E. M. Edghill, 16a20–29 [on-line:] <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/interpretation.html> [30.09.2015].

⁸ Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, trans. D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, Oxford 1910, 504b.

⁹ Ibidem, 535a–b. See T. Fögen, op. cit., p. 219.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, trans. W. Ogle, Oxford 1912, 659b28–660a29.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, op. cit., 504b.

¹² The original *phthengomenoi grammata* was translated by William Ogle as “pronouncing letters” but it is not consistent with the idea of Aristotle that only humans are able to pronounce individual phonemes.

¹³ Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, op. cit., 660a28–660b2.

¹⁴ See S. T. Newmyer, *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought...*, op. cit., p. 61.

Of little birds, some sing a different note from the parent birds, if they have been removed from the nest and have heard other birds singing; and a mother-nightingale has been observed to give lessons in singing to a young bird, from which spectacle we might obviously infer that the song of the bird was not equally congenial with mere voice, but was something capable of modification and of improvement¹⁵.

Therefore the language of birds, as capable of modifications, is much more developed than those of any other animals. But still, according to Aristotle, only humans possess *logos*. It can be exemplified by his view on the parrots' mimicry of human voice:

As a general rule all birds with crooked talons are short-necked, flat-tongued, and disposed to mimicry. The Indian bird, the parrot, which is said to have a man's tongue, answers to this description¹⁶.

Aristotle admits that a parrot is described as having a man's tongue (*anthropoglotton*). It is consistent with the popular idea that this bird has a human voice and can be taught Greek, as it is described for example by Ctesias¹⁷. But even though parrot's utterance is articulated and consists of different phonemes, according to Aristotle it is nothing more than a mere imitation – *logos* is not involved in this process. Similar opinion can be found in *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus (c. 170–248 CE):

...birds know what they learn from men; for the birds will wish you "farewell," and say "Good day" or "Zeus help you," and such like, without understanding what they say and without any real sympathy for mankind, merely because they have been trained to move their tongue in a certain manner¹⁸.

It is also the philosophy of Stoics that has strongly influenced both ancient and modern attitude to animals. According to their doctrine, humans owe nothing to creatures that are irrational, as they cannot understand and share the concept of morality¹⁹. Even if the soul (*psyche*) of both humans and animals consists of eight parts, the last part, *hegemonikon* ('governing principle') only in humans developed into the faculty of reason. As the meaningful language comes from the rational *hegemonikon*, animals are not capable of speaking and their vocalisation arises from the impulse

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, op. cit., 536b.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 597b.

¹⁷ Ctesias, *Indika*, F45.8 [in:] A. Nichols, *The Complete Fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus: Translation and Commentary with an Introduction*, 2008 [A dissertation to the University of Florida].

¹⁸ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Conybeare, 1912, 1.7 [on-line:] <http://www.livius.org/sources/content/philostratus-life-of-apollonius/> [30.09.2015].

¹⁹ See S. T. Newmyer, op. cit., p. 104.

(*horme*)²⁰. As the consequence of being rational, humans possess the ‘internal reason’ (*logos endiathetos*) which gives rise to external ‘vocalised reason’ (*logos prophorikos*)²¹.

The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Soloi (c. 280–208 BC) notes that the phenomenon of birds communication is not quite relevant to this concept. As Varro reports, Chrysippus affirms that both children and some birds, such as crows and ravens, possess the ability of utterance that differs from the expression of other animals. However, he reports, they are not able to produce real words – their utterance is not the real speech (*loqui*) but a quasi-speech (*ut loqui*). It is because they are not aware of syntax²². It means that certain birds and children possess the pure vocal utterance (*logos phophorikos*) but the meaningful inner language based upon reason (*logos endiathetos*) is an exclusive ability of fully developed humans, as only they are able to connect audible sound production with inner ideas²³.

The opposite view to the one of Aristotle and Stoics is presented by Plutarch (c. 50–125 CE) in his dialogue *On the Intelligence of Animals*. For Aristotimus, one of the characters of the dialogue, the birds’ ability to mimicry is an evident proof that animals possess *logos* as they are capable of uttering articulated sounds and learning. What is more, even untrained birds can utter such subtle voices that they often become an inspiration for poets:

As for starlings and crows and parrots which learn to talk and afford their teachers so malleable and imitative a vocal current to train and discipline, they seem to me to be champions and advocates of the other animals in their ability to learn, instructing us in some measure that they too are endowed both with rational utterance and with articulate voice; for which reason it is quite ridiculous to admit a comparison of them with creatures who have not enough voice even to howl or groan²⁴. And what music, what grace do we not find in the natural, untaught warbling of birds! To this the most eloquent and musical of our poets bear witness when they compare their sweetest songs and poems to the singing of swans and nightingales²⁵.

Regarding the sweet songs of a nightingale, even the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca (c. 4BC – 65 CE) admits that it is more charming and melodious than any human voice, yet only man possesses reason (*ratio*)²⁶. The example of a nightingale is expanded by Plutarch with the reference to the Aristotle’s description of this bird teaching her nestling. Plutarch observes that teaching requires more intelligence

²⁰ *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, ed. H. F. A. von Arnim, Stuttgart 1964, 2.821. See S. T. Newmyer, *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought: A Sourcebook*, New York 2011, p. 60.

²¹ *Ibidem*; idem, *Speaking of Beasts...*, op. cit., p. 103.

²² Varro, *On the Latin Language*, trans. R. G. Kent, Cambridge, MA. 1938, 6.56.

²³ T. Fögen, *Animal Communication* [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, ed. G. S. Campbell, Cambridge 2014, p. 221.

²⁴ Aristotle describing fish voices compares them to the sounds of birds (*Historia Animalium*, 535b).

²⁵ Plutarch, *On the Intelligence of Animals*, [in:] idem, *Moralia*, trans. H. Cherniss, W. C. Helmbold, Cambridge, MA. 1957, 973A.

²⁶ Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, trans. R. M. Gummere, Cambridge, MA. 1917, 76.9–10.

than learning, therefore imitation is not the only ability of birds; they are as well capable of educating their young to improve their singing:

Now since there is more reason in teaching than in learning, we must yield assent to Aristotle when he says that animals do teach: a nightingale, in fact, has been observed instructing her young how to sing. A further proof that supports him is the fact that birds which have been taken young from the nest and bred apart from their mothers sing the worse for it; for the birds that are bred with their mothers are taught and learn, not for pay or glory, but for the joy of rivalling each other in song and because they cherish the beautiful in their utterance rather than the useful²⁷.

The anthropomorphism, a strategy frequently used by Plutarch, was quite a common way of describing animals in antiquity²⁸. It is evident in the story of a Roman barber's jay (*kitta*). The bird is described as able to mimic a variety of sounds: human language (*anthropou rhemata*), animal voices (*therion phthongous*), and sound of instruments (*psophous organon*). It happened once that during a funeral trumpeters stopped in front of the barber-shop and played for a long time. Afterwards the jay remained silent for a certain period of time. Plutarch cites different opinions on this enigmatic incident: some people affirmed that the bird was stunned by trumpets or poisoned by a rival bird-trainer. But according to Plutarch, the jay did not lose its voice or ability to hear but it was silent deliberately, practising the imitation of the trumpet – as it finally reproduced the sound meticulously²⁹. For Plutarch, the conscious silence of the bird is an example of a self-instruction (*automatheian*) and a proof of the rational operation. As Thorsten Fögen observes, according to Plutarch, birds do not imitate sounds randomly but make a conscious reflection on what they want to convey, what goes beyond blind mimicry³⁰.

It was also Sextus Empiricus (c. 160–210 CE) who disagreed with the conception that *logos* is an exclusively human feature. As a physician probably belonging to the so-called Empiric school, philosophically allied with the Sceptics, he denied the point of speculations on the human and animal nature because of inability of their comprehension³¹. In his *Outline of Pyrrhonism* Sextus presents several arguments against the “dogmatics” (*dogmatikoi*), as he calls the Stoics, *inter alia* about animal rationality. This rationality of animals, according to Sextus, is evident in the example of their communication. Although Empiricus in his work focuses mainly on dog intelligence, he also mentioned bird language and holistically analyses the phenomenon of animal communication:

²⁷ Plutarch, op. cit., 973B.

²⁸ J. Mossman, *Plutarch on animals: rhetorical strategies in “de sollertia animalium,”* “Hermathena” 2005, No. 179, pp. 147 ff.

²⁹ Plutarch, op. cit., 973C–E. See T. Fögen, op. cit., p. 222.

³⁰ T. Fögen, op. cit., pp. 222–223.

³¹ See S. T. Newmyer, *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought...*, op. cit., p. 64.

We observe that animals (...) give forth humanlike sounds, including jays and such others. Even if we do not understand the sounds of the so-called irrational animals, it is not at all unlikely that they are using language though we do not understand it but suppose it uniformly meaningless. We hear dogs giving forth one sound when they are warding off enemies and another when they are howling, and yet another when beaten and still another when they are fawning. Thus if one were to look closely at the matter, one would note a great variety of utterances in this and other sorts of animals in differing situations, so that it could readily be said, judging from these circumstances, that the so-called irrational animals have a share of external reason. If they are inferior to humans neither in the sharpness of their perceptions nor in internal reason, nor, to go further, in external reason, they should then be no less trusted than we in respect to their sensory impressions³².

Sextus observes that birds, such as jays, utter humanlike (*anthropinas*) sounds. Contrary to Aristotle, Empiricus perceives such skill as a counterargument to the Stoic theory that only humans possess *logos* because jays also make meaningful, articulate sound. Their utterance is comprehensible but Sextus uses this example also as a starting point for a broader discussion on how we can judge the animal utterance as meaningless since we do not understand it. This argument, even though presented rather in order to challenge the “dogmas” of Stoicism than to defend animals³³, becomes a solid argument in the works of the second (besides Plutarch) most known animal defender of antiquity, Porphyry (c. 234–305 AD).

Porphyry joins Sextus in his critique of the Stoic conception of animal irrationality. He also mentions that we do not understand animal sounds, just as foreign languages, which resemble for us “the clangour of cranes”³⁴. According to Porphyry, beasts communicate in a manner that was given by the nature and their sounds are readily comprehended within their species. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that animals do not first think silently in the soul about what they experience before saying it – and therefore one cannot say they do not possess both kinds of *logos* – *endiathetos* and *phosphorikos*³⁵. “This is just as if crows should think that their voice alone is external reason, but that we are irrational animals, because the meaning of the sounds which we utter is not obvious to them,”³⁶ adds Porphyry. He observes that even if sounds of animals are incomprehensible for us, people who live close to them, like shepherds or cowherds, readily understand animal messages, for example that they are hungry, thirsty or weary³⁷. Similarly to Sextus Empiricus, Porphyry suggests that the variety of voices uttered by animals is a proof that these sounds are

³² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. S. T. Newmyer, 1.73–76 [in:] S. T. Newmyer, *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought...*, op. cit., p. 65.

³³ S. T. Newmyer, *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought...*, op. cit., p. 64.

³⁴ Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, trans. Th. Taylor, 1823, 3.3 [on-line:] http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry_abstinence_00_eintro.htm [30.09.2015]. Cf. Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray, Cambridge, MA. 1924, 4.433–438.

³⁵ Porphyry, op. cit., 3.2–3.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 3.5.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

meaningful, as there is a difference between utterances of an animal being terrified, summoning their young to food or fighting³⁸.

In the discussion on birds language, Porphyry goes a step further than Plutarch and Sextus. He observes that “no one who has learnt our language is able to teach us through ours the meaning of what is said by brutes”³⁹. Therefore animal language seems to be unfathomable for humans and some people are given a false impression that animal sounds are meaningless. However, some myths and legends tell about fortunate individuals, in particular seers who were able to communicate with animals, especially birds, such as Melampus, Tiresias, and not much prior to Porphyry’s time Apollonius of Tyana. This ability allowed them to learn from birds about future events or incidents that had occurred in other places. Porphyry narrates that even his associate once had a servant who understood the meaning of sounds made by birds and claimed that all of them were prophetic⁴⁰. Porphyry adds that there are still some nations that understand the sounds of birds. Even augurs who practised divination while observing bird flight are classified by Porphyry as those who are capable of understanding the language of animals, as they learn to distinguish birds’ sounds⁴¹.

Porphyry adds a piece of interesting information about the prophesying abilities of birds. Like most of the ancients, he perceives them as the messengers between people and gods:

The Gods, however, silently indicate their will, and birds apprehend their will more rapidly than men, and when they have apprehended it, they narrate it to men as much as they are able⁴².

Porphyry also cites the fragment of Aristotle in which the nightingale teaches its young to sing as an example of animal intelligence⁴³. Contrary to Aristotle, Porphyry perceives animal ability to mimicry as the proof of reason. Interestingly, he does not conceal that birds such as parrots merely imitate human language, especially as a result of their keeper’s teaching, but he observes, basing on a legend about hyaenas⁴⁴, that wild animals are also able to mimicry human voice to deceive shepherds. Therefore, such imitation is not just a result of taming, but the proof of intelligence:

If, however, it appears that they imitate us, that they learn the Greek tongue, and understand their keepers, what man is so impudent as not to grant that they are rational, because he does not understand what they say? Crows, therefore, and magpies, the robin

³⁸ Ibidem, 3.4.

³⁹ Ibidem, 3.3.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 3.4.

⁴² Ibidem, 3.5.

⁴³ Ibidem, 3.6.

⁴⁴ This legend has been cited also by Pliny the Elder (*The Natural History*, 8.44) and Claudius Aelianus (*On the Characteristics of Animals*, 7.22).

redbreast, and the parrot, imitate men, recollect what they have heard, are obedient to their preceptor while he is teaching them; and many of them, through what they have learnt, point out those that have acted wrong in the house. But the Indian hyaena, which the natives call crocotta, speaks in a manner so human, and this without a teacher, as to go to houses, and call that person whom he knows he can easily vanquish. He also imitates the voice of him who is most dear, and would most readily attend to the person whom he calls; so that, though the Indians know this, yet being deceived through the similitude, and obeying the call, they come forth, and are destroyed⁴⁵.

Regarding birds taming, Porphyry gives also an example of a partridge which was taught by him to utter voice similar to human. Porphyry reports that the bird evidently tried to answer him, what may be also the proof of its reason:

When we were at Carthage, nurtured a tame partridge, which we caught flying, and which, in process of time, and by associating with us, became so exceedingly mild, that it was not only sedulously attentive to us, caressed and sported with us, but uttered a sound corresponding to the sound of our voice, and, as far as it was capable, answered us; and this in a manner different from that by which partridges are accustomed to call each other. For it did not utter a corresponding sound when we were silent, but when we spoke to it⁴⁶.

It was also Celsus (2nd century CE), the author of an anti-Christian work entitled *The True Word*, who mentioned legendary people who can talk with animals, especially birds. His work survived only in fragments in *Against Celsus* by Origen but it includes observations on the nature of birds prophecy:

If, because man has been able to grasp the idea of God, he is deemed superior to the other animals, let those who hold this opinion know that this capacity will be claimed by many of the other animals; and with good reason: for what would any one maintain to be more divine than the power of foreknowing and predicting future events? Men accordingly acquire the art from the other animals, and especially from birds. And those who listen to the indications furnished by them, become possessed of the gift of prophecy. If, then, birds, and the other prophetic animals, which are enabled by the gift of God to foreknow events, instruct us by means of signs, so much the nearer do they seem to be to the society of God, and to be endowed with greater wisdom, and to be more beloved by Him. The more intelligent of men, moreover, say that the animals hold meetings which are more sacred than our assemblies, and that they know what is said at these meetings, and show that in reality they possess this knowledge, when, having previously stated that the birds have declared their intention of departing to some particular place, and of doing this thing or the other, the truth of their assertions is established by the departure of the birds to the place in question, and by their doing what was foretold⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Porphyry, op. cit., 3.4.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. R. Donaldson, 4.88, [on-line:] <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/origen.html> [30.09.2015]. See also the discussion on the motif of the swan in Plato (L. Sosnowski, „Duszny” zwierzyńiec jako obraz człowieka Platona, „Kwartalnik Filozoficzny” 2012, No. 40). This bird sings when dying because of the joy of the forthcoming return to god.

The argument of Celsus is directed against the Christian anthropocentric view of nature, including animals, which exist only to be divine signs interpreted by Christians. Resignifying animals as rational beings, Celsus tries to undermine Christian philosophy, especially the concept that all other beings had been created only to fulfil the needs of man. However, this fragment provides also interesting attitude to the prophesying abilities of birds. Similarly to Porphyry, Celsus supposes that birds are even closer to deity than humans, as they first learn divine messages.

Porphyry and Celsus belonged to the most influential opponents of Christianity in the ancient world. However, with the victory of this religion, the attitude towards animals have changed to their disadvantage. As Richard Sorabji proved, the ancient debate on the animal reason was multifarious and the image of animals as irrational beings had many opponents. Notwithstanding, Christianity was influenced only by one-side of this debate, the view of Aristotle and Stoics⁴⁸.

The role of Aristotle in the formation of later philosophical attitude to animals is ambiguous. On the one hand, his strongly anthropocentric view on human-animal relations has influenced the Christian theology, in particular works of Thomas Aquinas, and indirectly the thought of many later philosophers. On the other hand, his profound study of animal behaviour, including birds communication, provided several arguments to those thinkers whose goal was to undermine the irrationality of animals. Both Plutarch and Porphyry have adopted Aristotle's description of the nightingale instructing her nestlings as the evident proof of animal intelligence.

Both Aristotle and Chrysippus of Soloi admit that birds surpass other animals in their communication abilities. According to Aristotle, it is owing to the specificity of their tongues that the bird language is next after human's in regard to articulation. Also Chrysippus describes the language of certain birds as similar to children tongue and calls it a quasi-speech. Nevertheless, for both Aristotle and Stoics, no rational operation precedes the vocalisation of sound produced by birds. What is more, the imitative abilities of animals such like parrots are nothing more than a mere mimicry.

However, for Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, and Porphyry, the imitation abilities of birds are the best argument that animals can utter articulate voices. Moreover, according to Plutarch, the imitation of voices requires the capability of learning, which is a rational operation. He observes that animals are able not only to learn but also to teach (the example of the nightingale) and even to practice self-instruction (as in the story of barber's jay), which requires even more intelligence. The learning and self-instructing abilities of birds are also illustrated in Porphyry's story of the partridge. Porphyry suggests that numerous individuals from the past (Tiresias, Melampus, Apollonius of Tyana) communicated with birds which enabled them to foresee some events in advance. The prophetic and divinatory capability of birds, according to Porphyry and Celsus, is the proof that these animals are even closer to gods than humans. Therefore, especially in the philosophy of late antiquity, the problem of birds ability to

⁴⁸ R. Sorabji, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

communicate goes beyond the mere question of their capacity of rational operation. It reaches the level of religious question and also in this case, according to Porphyry and Celsus, birds can prove that animals are not so much inferior to humans.

Birds were not the only animals that, according to ancients, proved that not only humans are capable of thinking. Nevertheless, because of the significance of speech in the Greek concept of reason, it was birds whose communication skills equipped numerous ancient philosophers with the arguments that might have refuted the view of Stoics. Even if these arguments are not quite convincing for us, we have to admit that birds singing is still one of the most charming and willingly used literary motifs.

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SUMMARY

The aim of the article is to analyse ancient Greek and Roman theories on bird communication. The author observes that the examples of bird communication were often used by ancient philosophers as arguments against the prevailing conception that only humans possessed reason. The article focuses mostly on the thought of Aristotle, Stoics, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, and Porphyry. It indicates strategies used by those thinkers when describing bird communication, the main themes connected with this topic, and the main consequences of the discussion on animal rationality in antiquity.