From Animal Bodies To Human Souls:

(Pseudo-)Aristotelian Animals In Della Porta's Physiognomics

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Abstract

This article analyses the role that animals play in Della Porta's method of physiognomics. It claims that Della Porta created his own, original, method by appropriating, and yet selectively adapting Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian sources. This has not been adequately reconstructed before in previous studies on Della Porta. I trace, in two steps, the conceptual trajectory of Della Porta's physiognomics, from human psychology to animal psychology, and ultimately from psychology to ethics. In the first step, I show how Della

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Porta substantially adapts the physiognomic principle of the body-soul relationship as found in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*. In the second, I demonstrate that the real aim of Della Porta's physiognomics is a practical one, namely understanding how to live a good life, and I explain why he refers to Aristotle in order to ground this conception.

Keywords

Giovan Battista Della Porta – Aristotle – physiognomics – animals – body-soul interaction – human uniqueness – hands

1. Introduction: Physiognomics is in the Hands of the Animals

In the *Chirofisonomia*,[1] Giovan Battista Della Porta (1535-1615) describes how he used to visit jails[2] in order to study the hands and feet of criminals, both dead and alive:

[1] This is the vernacular version, prepared by Pompeo Sarnelli, of Della Porta's *De ea naturalis physiognomiae parte quae ad manuum lineas spectat*: Della Porta, *Della chirofisonomia* [...] (Naples, 1677).

[2] Della Porta made arrangements with a hangman named Antonello Cucuzza to inspect corpses of criminals straight after execution: see Giovan Battista Della Porta, *De ea naturalis physiognomoniae parte quae ad manuum lineas spectat libri duo, e in appendice Chirofisonomia*, ed. Oreste Trabucco (Naples, 2003) (abbreviated: *Chirofisonomia*), 6. He also inspected corpses at the church of S. Restituta (ibid., 92). See also Sergius Kodera, "The

> I put no less effort into visiting public jails, where a multitude of riotous thieves, patricides, street murderers, and other similar types of human beings are always kept, with the aim of carefully inspecting their hands. Then, by looking at the feet and the hands of animals, I compared their shapes with those of the humans, not without natural reasonings and by using the same method that I had employed in the *Fisonomia*. And so in the end, after many and continuous efforts, and several observations, I have compiled in this book the truth contained in them, and what I have learned through repeated experience. If this isn't a perfect description of it, then at least it is not so imperfect.[3]

Laboratory on Stage: Giovan Battista della Porta's Experiments," *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 3.1 (2014), 15-38, here 30-1.

[3] *Chirofisonomia*, 92: "Né hebbi minor pensiero a visitare tutte le carceri pubbliche, dove sempre è racchiusa gran moltitudine de' facinorosi ladri, parricidi, assassini di strada e d'altri huomini di simile fattezza, per vedere diligentemente le loro mani; doppo, contemplando i piedi e le mani de gli animali, conferii le loro figure con quelle de gli huomini, non senza naturali ragioni, e con l'istesso metodo, del quale mi sono servito nella *Fisonomia*. E così alla fine doppo molte, e continue fatiche, e varie esperienze quanto di verità in quelle si conteneva, e quanto mi haveva insegnato la moltiplicata esperienza ho compilato in questo libro, il quale habbiamo condotto se non a totalmente perfetta, almeno a non tanto imperfetta descrittione."

The essential element of Della Porta's method of physiognomics is clearly described in this passage: it consists in using animal bodies in order to understand the depths of human character. Della Porta inspects the prisoners' hands and compares them with the "hands and feet" of animals, in order to seek bodily evidence of the deranged exceptionality of those human beings. The central question driving Della Porta's method of physiognomics is how the soul manifests itself in the shape of the body, and the description of his visits to jails reveals that this cannot be answered without observing animals. There is a precise sequence to Della Porta's method, as sketched here: first, he scrutinizes human hands; second, he compares them with the equivalent body-part of animals in order to decipher the meaning of signs and features that would otherwise remain mysterious. Human character is literally inscribed in the human body, but it becomes legible only through the use of a key to decode it – and this is the animal body. What could appear at first sight as a simple, and even commonplace use of animals to describe human features (for instance a particularly powerful man might be called "as strong as an ox"), is in fact the result of a precise account of the differences and similarities between animals and humans, grounded in the intertwining of anatomy and psychology. The use of animals in Della Porta's physiognomics is systematic, and it presupposes a theory of the relationship between a body and the soul inhabiting it. This, in turn, involves a twofold consideration: first, it is necessary to address the relationship

between soul and body in both animals and humans; second, comparing animal and human bodies inevitably leads to a comparison of their respective souls as well.

This article analyses the role that animals play in Della Porta's method of physiognomics. It claims that Della Porta created his own, original, method by appropriating, and yet carefully and selectively adapting Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian sources.[4] This has not been adequately reconstructed before in the studies on Della Porta.[5] I will trace, in two steps, the conceptual trajectory of Della Porta's physiognomics, from human psychology to animal psychology, and ultimately from psychology to ethics. In the first step, I show how

[4] I thus disagree with Porter's view that Della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia* "was basically a collection of the opinion and physiognomical traditions of the earlier authorities" (Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: The Art of Physiognomy in European Culture 1470-1780* (Oxford, 2005), 129).

[5] Karen Raber, for instance, talks about "analogies" between humans and animals in Della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia* (Raber, *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* (Philadelphia, 2013), 52). Juliana Schiesari states that in the case of Della Porta "bodily manifestations of psychic vicissitudes inevitably seem to trigger comparison with animal behaviour," and then explains that "bodily symptoms are not simply the translation of a mental or emotional disposition; they are the trans-species signs of those dispositions." She defines Della Porta's approach as a "systematized key of animal characteristics," but does not discuss in detail how this works, and does not take into consideration the ancient tradition of physiognomonics (Schiesari, *Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender, and Domestication in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto, 2010), 57-9).

Della Porta substantially adapts the physiognomic principle of the body-soul relationship as found in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*. Della Porta often refers to this source, but I argue that man-animal comparisons play a radically different role for Della Porta and the Pseudo-Aristotle. In the second step, I then proceed to demonstrate that the real aim of Della Porta's physiognomics is a practical one, and that he refers to Aristotle to demonstrate that the investigation of the soul-body relation ultimately serves the purpose of understanding how to live a good life.[6] Humans need physiognomic investigation to select associates wisely, and thus physiognomics can even be considered an essential tool for building human societies.[7] As he deploys and adapts both pseudo-Aristotelian and Aristotelian writings, Della Porta's aim is to put this understanding into practice, thus moving from the level of psychology to that of ethics.

The following analysis is centred on Della Porta's main work on physiognomics, *De humana physiognomonia*, the text in which his method and its differences from the Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian sources emerge most clearly and fully. It is also

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[6] On physiognomics as a means for humanistic self-representation, see Katherine MacDonald, "Humanistic Self-Representation in Giovan Battista Della Porta's *Della Fisonomia dell'Uomo*: Antecedents and Innovation," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 36.2 (2005), 397-414.

[7] Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Della fisonomia dell'huomo* (Naples, 1610) (abbreviated: *Fisonomia*), "Proemio."

necessary to refer to the treatise dedicated to the physiognomic study of the hand (*Chirofisonomia*), for two reasons: first, because it highlights clearly Della Porta's specific use of animals as key to physiognomics; and second, because the focus on the hand enables direct comparison with the role of this body part as criterion for human-animal differentiation in the Aristotelian corpus. Furthermore, the analysis is based specifically on the 1610 Italian version of *De humana physiognomonia*, which presents the latest version of the text revised by the author.[8] Della Porta fully exploited the dual-language channel to disseminate his writings in Latin and in vernacular editions.[9] The latter often include apparatuses such as indexes, or lists of recipes, possibly encouraging a more practical use of the books in

[8] Giovan Battista Della Porta, *De humana physiognomonia/Della fisionomia dell'huomo*, ed. Alfonso Paolella (Naples, 2011-2013) (abbreviated: *DHP*), vol. 1, xxxiii. For this reason I shall translate from the 1610 Italian edition, referring to the Latin version whenever the passage in question contains noteworthy differences in terminology.

[9] See Antonella Orlandi, *Le edizioni dell'opera di Della Porta* (Pisa-Rome, 2013), 12. On Della Porta's linguistic choices in Latin and in the vernacular, see Raffaele Sirri's introduction to Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Taumatologia e criptologia*, ed. Raffaele Sirri (Naples, 2013), xiv and xxv. Della Porta's strategy bears some resemblance to Campanella's: see Germana Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella: The Book and the Body of Nature* (Dordrecht, 2010), 115. Vernacular editions of philosophical texts need to be studied in their own right: see the methodological framework developed by David Lines in "Beyond Latin in Renaissance Philosophy: A Plea for New Critical Perspectives," *Intellectual History Review*, 25.4 (2015), 373-389.

question, as is the case with the *Della magia naturale* (which in the 1677 edition includes the Italian *Chirofisonomia*).[10] In the case of *De humana physiognomonia*, Della Porta tenaciously pursued the project of printing an Italian edition following the 1586 Latin edition. Throughout, Della Porta's aim is that of disseminating knowledge of his method, and in the dedicatory letter to the marquis of San Marco, Marcello Cavaniglia,[11] he justifies this publication by the desire to cater for the rising interest in his work.[12]

The Italian editions of Della Porta's physiognomic works present formal and stylistic peculiarities, which I will point out in the analysis of specific passages. Versions of the same core material can vary according to the usage he envisaged for a particular edition, and the readership he wanted to address, and even according to his assessment of the risk of collision

[10] See also the dedication of the publisher, Antonio Bulifon, to Fabio Capece, stating that this edition had "some interesting, peculiar topics" ("alcune materie curiose") that were lacking in the Latin one (in *Della magia naturale libri XX* (Naples, 1677)). The original Latin version of the treatise has remained unpublished. On Bulifon see Nino Cortese, ed., *Giornali di Napoli dal 1547 al 1706* (Naples, 1932). Bulifon also published several works by Sarnelli, including a guide to Naples for foreign visitors (see Vladimiro Valerio, "Representation and Self-Perception: Plans and Views of Naples in the Early Modern Period," in *A Companion to Early Modern Naples*, ed. Tommaso Astarita (Leiden, 2013), 63-86, here 80).

[11] On Cavaniglia see Erasmo Ricca, *La nobiltà del regno delle due Sicilie*, Part 1, vol. 4 (Naples, 1869), 132.

[12] Cf. Milena Montanile, ed., *L'edizione nazionale del teatro e l'opera di G. B. Della Porta: atti del Convegno, Salerno, 23 maggio 2002* (Pisa-Rome, 2004), 60-2.

with the Inquisition.[13] Indeed, the first edition of *De humana physiognomonia* was printed in Vico Equense after three years in the hands of the Inquisition.[14] The main accusation against Della Porta's physiognomics was that interpreting the meaning of bodily signs is ultimately a form of divinatory practice. In *Coelestis physiognomoniae libri sex* (1603) Della Porta had rather argued in favour of a "naturalized form of divinatory astrology,"[15] and in all his physiognomic publications he maintains that physiognomics is a fully scientific method.[16]

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[13] The issue of the man-animal distinction recurs in accusations of heresy (one famous example is the trial against Bruno: see Fulvio Papi, *Antropologia e civiltà nel pensiero di Giordano Bruno* (Florence, 1968), 3.

[14] See *DHP*, vol. 1, xii. See also Michaela Valente, "Della Porta e l'Inquisizione." *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 5 (1999/2), 415-34.

[15] See Sergius Kodera, "Giambattista della Porta," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015) http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/della-porta/ (accessed 30 January 2017).

[16] On Della Porta and magic/divination see William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, 1994), 196ff. On Aristotelianism and (the condemnation of) magic see Ugo Baldini, "The Roman Inquisition's Condemnation of Astrology: Antecedents, Reasons and Consequences," in *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Gigliola Fragnito (Cambridge, 2001), 79-110, here 86. For the specific issue at the centre of the present essay, the *Coelestis physiognomonia* does not add new conceptual layers, but it is a necessary point of reference to investigate the role of animals in the accusations that physiognomics could turn into a dangerous form of divinatory practice.

But what is essential to the present study is the explanation of why animals are necessary in Della Porta's understanding of physiognomics as a science that allows a transition from the body to the soul of the human (or animal) subject under examination. The key starting point is the definition contained in Book 1 of the *Fisonomia*. Della Porta here defines physiognomics as "a science, which from the attributes that are fixed on the body and from the accidents that change the signs, investigates the natural habits of the soul." [17] Physiognomics thus promises to supply the philosopher with a key, which will make it possible to infer from the presence of certain visible signs, or bodily features, corresponding invisible characteristics of the soul. The assumption is that the foundation is the body itself, rather than celestial influences acting on the body, and it is in this context that the role of animals is central.[18] As I will show, Della Porta uses Aristotelian materials in order to support this line of argument.

This scientific approach is exemplarily defended in the title chosen by Pompeo Sarnelli for the translation of Della Porta's treatise on hands: *Chirofisonomia*, rather than

[17] *Fisonomia*, 58: "una scienza che impara da' segni che sono fissi nel corpo, et accidenti [che trasmutano i segni], investigar i costumi naturali dell'animo." (I amend the passage, which in this edition appears corrupted: see *DHP*, vol. 1, 87 and vol. 2, 96.)

[18] See Trabucco's introduction in *Chirofisonomia*, xxxi-xxxii and xxxviii. Further on this point, Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Coelestis physiognomiae libri sex* (Naples, 1603), 21.

Chiromantia.[19] Sarnelli supports his defence of Della Porta's physiognomics by quoting the theologian Martin del Rio (1551-1608), according to whom the study of the lines of the hands can help to establish the temperament (*temperies*) of the body, and hence to understand the dispositions of the soul.[20] This transition from the body to the soul is justified by Sarnelli with reference to Aristotle's *Historia animalium*, "where the philosopher infers from the shortness or length of the lines [in the hand] the shortness or length of life." But Sarnelli adds that the reason for this inference is made explicit in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, which explains that the more articulated an animal is, the longer it lives.[21] In this defence,

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[19] *Chirofisonomia*, xlvi and 83. Jütte has suggested that the source of inspiration for this title might have been a previous work on the same topic by Abramo Colorni (d. 1599): Daniel Jütte, *The Age of Secrecy: Jews, Christians, and the Economy of Secrets, 1400-1800* (New Haven and London, 2015), 144. On Sarnelli see Ruth B. Bottigheimer, ed., *Fairy Tales Framed: Early Forewords, Afterwords, and Critical Words* (Albany, 2012), 71ff.

[20] Ibid. See also Jütte, *Age of Secrecy*, 360. On the religious legitimacy of *chiromantia*, see Roberto Poma, "Les erreurs de la main. Regards croisés sur la chiromancie naturelle de Giambattista della Porta," in *Die Hand: Elemente einer Medizin- und Kulturgeschichte*, ed. Mariacarla Gadebusch-Bondio (Berlin, 2010), 117-33.

[21] *Chirofisonomia*, 83. The pairing of bodies and souls in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomics* can lead to a deterministic view: Steven J. Williams, *The Secret of Secrets: The Scholarly Career of a Pseudo-Aristotelian Text in the Latin Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor, 2003), 285. Trabucco has stated that *De humana physiognomonia* follows in the Aristotelian tradition, and that the innovation of the *Chirofisonomia* consists in expanding the field of

Sarnelli follows Della Porta himself not only in the juxtaposition of Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian writings, but also – and more importantly – in extending the physiognomic procedure to include animals, too. In the *Fisonomia* Della Porta explains why this inclusion is essential for the foundation of the method itself, and he does so through a dialogue with the main ancient text dealing systematically with physiognomics: the *Physiognomonica*.[22]

2. The Sympathy of Body and Soul: Della Porta's *Fisonomia* and the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*

A classic eighteenth-century work on physiognomics, Johann Caspar Lavater's *Physiognomic Fragments*, states that both Aristotle and Della Porta grounded their physiognomic investigation in comparisons of humans and animals, which Lavater deems to be often arbitrary.[23] Some of the famous vignettes of human and animal heads included in Della

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research to include hands. But this expansion, in my opinion, reveals the originality of Della Porta's interpretation of Aristotle, uncovering his non-conformity with Aristotelianism on the man-animal differentiation. Cf. Trabucco's introduction in *Chirofisonomia*, lii.

[22] On the authorship of the text and its role within ancient physiognomics see Aristotle, *Physiognomonica*, ed. Sabine Vogt, in *Aristoteles Werke in deutscher Übersetzung*, gen. ed. Christof Rapp, vol. 18.6 (Berlin, 1999), 43ff.

[23] Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig, 1775-1778), vol. 4, 57: "Aristoteles, und nach ihm am meisten Porta, haben bekanntermaßen viel auf diese Aehnlichekeit gefußt –

Porta's *De humana physiognomia* are reproduced in Lavater's book, but only for the sake of showing that there is little scientific evidence to support such a physiognomic method.[24] What Lavater does not seem to acknowledge is that the function of animals and of man-animal comparisons is radically different in Della Porta and in the *Physiognomonica*: Della Porta was not – as Lavater put it – a "compiler" drawing his material mostly from the Aristotelian tradition.[25]

For Della Porta, physiognomics is "a law or rule of nature, that is that by a certain norm, rule and order of nature one can know that from a given shape of the body a certain passion of the soul is known."[26] Furthermore, physiognomics serves the purpose of disclosing what Della Porta calls the "habits of the soul," "that is, those that belong to the sensitive part, and are common to man and the beasts, called διάνοια by the Greeks."[27] The precise

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aber oft sehr schlecht; denn sie sahen Aehnlichkeiten, wo keine – und diejenigen oft nicht, die auffallend waren."

[24] Ibid.

[25] See Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente*, vol. 2, 192. On Della Porta see also ibid., 218. It is noteworthy that Lavater understands the aim of his work to be the promotion of knowledge and the love of humanity.

[26] *Fisonomia*, 58: "legge, o regola di Natura, che con certa regola, norma et ordine di Natura si conosce che da tal forma di corpo, si conosce tal passione dell'anima."

[27] Ibid.: "[i costumi dell'animo], che sono quelli che sono nella parte sensitiva, che sono communi all'huomo e alle bestie, da Greci detti διάνοια." *DHP*, vol. 1, 87: "Et dum animi

reference to *dianoia* is an indicator that Della Porta here has in mind the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*, which comprises two tractates. At the beginning of Tractate A the relationship between bodies and dispositions is defined in these terms: "Dispositions [*dianoiai*] follow bodily characteristics and are not in themselves unaffected by bodily impulses."[28] This connection is the foundation of physiognomics, yet usually humans are only capable of understanding the dispositions of those animals they know well (as is the case for horsemen with horses, or huntsmen with dogs), without applying this method more generally. Tractate A also explains that physiognomists developed three ways of approaching the study of physiognomics. The first consists in comparing the bodies of certain species of animals with human bodies. For instance, if a man resembles a hare, an expert in physiognomics would conclude that he is in character as timid and meek as that animal.[29] The second method does not rely entirely on animals, but also takes into account the differences between human races. Finally, the third ancient method of physiognomics consists in choosing "superficial characteristics" which are then paired with corresponding dispositions.

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mores dicimus, eos intelligimus qui in sensitiva parte sunt, quae hominibus et brutis communis est et a Graecis διάνοια dicitur."

[28] Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, in *Minor Works*, ed. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA, 1955), 84-5 (805a1-2).

[29] Ibid., 84-7 (805a).

The author of *Physiognomonica* considers these methods faulty, and the reason is that "those who proceed in their science entirely by characteristics are wrong."[30] The text claims that we know from experience that sometimes people look alike but have nothing in common in terms of disposition (*dianoia*, again). All in all, "those who base this science of physiognomics on wild beasts [*theria*] do not make their selection of signs correctly. For it is impossible to go through the forms of each of the beasts and say that whoever resembles this beast in body, will also be similar to it in soul."[31] In other words, those who ground their physiognomic investigation in a straightforward comparison between humans and animals, quoting certain specific signs or characteristics that they have in common, will probably draw arbitrary or even wrong conclusions. For example, upon encountering two people with soft hair, the physiognomist might recall that the rabbit has very soft fur and is timid: but can he legitimately infer that both people in question will be as timid as the animal?[32] Furthermore, a man might in fact resemble not just one, but a whole variety of animals with regard to specific characteristics: he could at the same time have the soft fur of the hare, but also the large head of the lion, and the physiognomist might find himself incapable of drawing one straightforward conclusion about the character – timid or ferocious? – of that human. Such an approach would not be scientifically sound.

[30] Ibid., 87 (805a33-b1).

[31] Ibid., 87-99 (805b10-13).

[32] Ibid., 93 (806b6-8).

The pseudo-Aristotelian text thus recommends various strategies to overcome such difficulties. First of all, it is of the utmost importance that the signs be chosen skilfully. Not every bodily characteristic taken on its own will be very telling, but if it is combined and considered together with other characteristics that tend to occur together, then the material for drawing the inference will at least be stronger. Therefore even if it is true that "generally speaking it is foolish to put one's faith in any of the signs,"[33] yet "if the man who is quick to anger, hard to please, and small-minded is always jealous, then if there are no signs of a jealous man, it might still be possible for the physiognomist to recognize the jealous man from the other qualities."[34] This method does not appear to be as heavily reliant on man-animal comparisons as the other three. On the contrary, the focus has shifted from animal bodies to clusters of characteristics found in humans, making careful and limited use of man-animal parallels.[35] Tractate B focuses on the difference between the male and the female character by using examples from the animal world; but here, too, the animals offer little more than simply explicatory analogies. As Sabine Vogt explains, the man-human analogies in this tractate are considered to be self-explanatory, and thus no detailed reasons are given for the parallels between animal features and human characters.[36]

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[33] Ibid., 95 (806b37-807a1).

[34] Ibid., 97 (807a4-7).

[35] Cf. ibid., 100-5 (807b19-808b10).

[36] Vogt, "Einleitung," in Aristotle, *Physiognomonica*, 153-9.

Della Porta, however, employs the pseudo-Aristotelian source to justify a far-reaching and specific use of animals for physiognomic investigation, turning animals into the key to his own method. While for *Physiognomonica* the animal world offered a complex, but also vague and unreliable, pool of characteristics, Della Porta builds on the idea that the relation between the body and the soul of an animal guarantees the success of physiognomics. Referring to the three methods mentioned in the *Physiognomics*, Della Porta writes that there are "three ways of knowing habits, as Aristotle discusses in the *Physiognomics*, and all three are reduced to a syllogism."[37] This "physiognomic syllogism," as Della Porta terms it, is at the basis of his claim that physiognomics is a scientific discipline. Della Porta refers to Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* as the methodological source, arguing that such an Aristotelian syllogism, once applied to physiognomic practice, would also involve elements of comparative anatomy.[38] The syllogism would work like this: in order to find out which bodily characteristic signifies strength, the physiognomist would first consider all animal species, noting which species are strong. Second, he would observe that strong animals have big "extremities." Using the physiognomic syllogism, he would thus conclude that possessing big extremities is undeniably a sign of strength.[39] But Della Porta himself is well aware that using animals in physiognomic syllogisms could be methodologically questionable, as

[37] *Fisonomia*, 11.

[38] Ibid. On this syllogism see Caputo, "Un manuale di semiotica del Cinquecento," 79-80.

[39] See *Fisonomia*, 59.

Physiognomonica had warned: for instance, different animals could share the same characteristic, or one characteristic might not be present in all specimens of a species. In such cases, Della Porta recommends consideration of all animals that share a particular disposition, in order to select the signs pertaining only to those.[40] Della Porta's suggests that the selection be progressively refined, until one has identified a sign that all creatures with a certain disposition share, even if they belong to different species altogether.

Yet, the crucial question that Della Porta must address is why animals should be essential to the physiognomic procedure at all: would it not be safer, and perfectly sufficient, to compare only human bodies and personalities in order to isolate certain characteristics? Della Porta's answer is based on his understanding of the way in which souls and bodies are matched in the case of humans and of animals. In the case of animals, body and soul are always in a specific relation to each other: they are perfectly matched, in such a way that a certain body will always be inhabited by a soul with certain characteristics. This correspondence of souls and bodies in the case of animals is the real foundation of Della Porta's method:

[40] Ibid., 21. Schiesari argues that this method implies that Della Porta does not describe 'real' animals, but instead collects "a vast array of animalistic traits" (Schiesari, *Beasts and Beauties*, 60).

> Nature never made an animal with a body of one animal and the soul [*animo*] of another, that is to say a wolf, or a lamb that would have the soul [*anima*] of a dog, and of a lion; but the wolf and the lamb have the soul of a wolf and of a lamb. Therefore it necessarily follows that a certain body is appropriate to a certain soul, suitable to its own species.[41]

Thanks to this correspondence of bodies and souls in the case of animals, it is possible to rely on the fact that a certain bodily characteristic (for instance, soft fur) will also be indicator of an internal characteristic that the animal will most certainly have (in this case a 'softness' of the soul). Upon encountering the same bodily character in a human being, it is thus legitimate to start formulating a syllogism about the invisible habits of the soul.

Animals provide a map for understanding humans. According to Della Porta the study of animal bodies allows one to gain access to the complex depths of human souls: this is necessary because, in the case of humans, there is no perfect match between the outside and the inside. Therefore physiognomics is the only path that is able to guide from the

[41] *Fisonomia*, 6: "Ne mai la Natura fece un animal che havesse il corpo d'uno, e l'animo di un altro animale, cioè un lupo, over agnello, che havesse anima di cane, e di Leone, ma il lupo, e l'agnello han l'anima di lupo, e di agnello; onde per cosa necessaria ne segue, che in tal corpo se gli conviene tal anima convenevole alla sua specie."

observation of the exteriority to the revelation of the hidden interiority, and it does this by comparing humans and animals.

The reason why animal bodies are 'easy' to read, and human bodies are not, is explained in another pseudo-Aristotelian text to which Della Porta often recurs, the so-called *Secretum secretorum.*[42] The *Secretum* offers a series of counsels, also on the topics of hygiene and medicine, which Aristotle was supposed to have given Alexander the Great in the form of a letter. This text circulated in a vernacular version prepared by Giovanni Manente: *Il Segreto de Segreti, le Moralita, & la Phisionomia d'Aristotile* (1538).[43] In Book I of the *Fisonomia* Della Porta uses a key argument drawn from the *Secretum*, according to which man bears in himself all possible signs, or characteristics, which are found in individual animal species. This is part of God's plan, because man is the worthiest creature of

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[42] Cf. the edition of the Latin text in Richard Foerster, ed., *Scriptores physiognomonici graeci et latini* (Leipzig, 1893), 2 vols., here vol. 2, 182-222.

[43] There is a vast literature on the Renaissance reception of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum*: see especially W.F. Ryan and Charles B. Schmitt, eds., *Pseudo-Aristotle, The Secret of Secrets: Sources and Influences* (London, 1982) (= Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, IX); and more recently the useful overview presented by Ilaria Zamuner, "La tradizione romanza del *Secretum secretorum* pseudo-aristotelico. Regesto delle versioni e dei manoscritti," *Studi Medievali,* 46.1 (2005), 31-116. On the Italian translations of the *Secretum* see Matteo Milani, "La tradizione italiana del *Secretum Secretorum*," *La parola del testo*, 5/2 (2001), 209-53.

all, and a sort of microcosm, in which all characters of all animals can be found.[44] In other words, human nature is never restricted to one characteristic, and this explains why it is difficult to understand the human soul by simply looking at the human body.

This is the reason why animals become crucial to physiognomic investigation: from the analysis of the animal body Della Porta proceeds to inferring the psychological character not only of animals, but of humans, too. In doing so, Della Porta has placed animals at the centre of this mechanism, reformulating the guideline he found in Tractate B of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomics*, which had stated: "it seems to me that soul and body react [*sympathein*] on each other."[45] There is sympathy between the body and the soul, in the sense that they accord with each other. For Della Porta this synchronization is natural in animals, but it can vary greatly in the case of humans, whose bodies and souls are not necessarily in a sympathetic relationship. Unlike animals, humans can lie and be deceptive, thus making it even more difficult to read the signs of the body:

> The human soul, says Cicero, is so enveloped by the most obscure veils and hidden underneath the dark mist of dissimulation, that when you believe that the eyes, the forehead and the entire appearance, and more than anything else the words spoken,

[44] *Fisonomia*, 23.

[45] Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, 105 (808b11-12).

> are revealing to you the truth, in fact they are deceiving more than ever. Sometimes, as Seneca says, underneath the appearance of a benevolent man, one catches a glimpse of the soul of a beast, and in fact fiercer than the beasts.[46]

Humans tend to employ a series of 'tricks' to hide their souls in the inscrutable depths of their bodies: the matching criteria of souls and bodies, therefore, are not as clear in the case of humans as they are in animals. While the bodies of animals speak to us, informing us of the kind of soul they house, the bodies of humans tend to disguise the character of the soul inside.

Indeed, even language, traditionally associated with man's unique capabilities both to think and to express himself in speech, appears in this context to be a deceptive strategy for confusing one's conversation partners. Humans might be able to speak through language, but their bodies appear, at least at first glance, to be mute. Animal bodies, on the other hand, do not speak with human tongue, and yet they talk to us (or at least to the physiognomist) with a

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[46] *Fisonomia*, "Proemio:" "L'animo humano, dice Cicerone, è così involto negli oscurissimi veli, e così nascosto sotto la tenebrosa caligine della simulatione, che quando stimi gli occhi, la fronte e tutto il sembiante si manifestino la verità, e il parlar più di tutti, all'hor mentiscono più che mai. Si scorge talvolta sotto sembianza di huomo benigno, come afferma Seneca, come animo di fera, anzi più fiero delle fiere fere." Cf. *DHP*, vol. 1, 3 ("animo humano" translates "mens humana").

clearer language. Seen from this perspective, physiognomics is a remedy to the drawbacks of human uniqueness, providing a solution to the difficulty of understanding a human being's nature simply by looking at his bodily features. Quoting the Greek physician Adamantius, a main source for Renaissance physiognomics, Della Porta writes that even when the mouth does not utter words, the forehead and the eyes can be the gateways to a human's interiority.[47]

Animals provide us with a compass for approaching the study of humans. They are not simply examples: for Della Porta they are the most effective instrument for making sense of the plurality of signs inscribed on human bodies. But the process of deciphering is made difficult not only by the amount of information that must be structured in a physiognomic syllogism: Della Porta laments the fact that the physiognomist must also be a good philologist in order to be able to reconstruct exactly which comparisons the ancient sources on physiognomics recommended. Della Porta often reads the *Secretum* in parallel with the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*, and with authentic Aristotelian texts, deciding on each occasion which interpretation appears to make more sense. For instance, he expresses his doubts about the relationship between a certain quality of the nostrils and propensity to anger: it seems that the "ancient translation of the Arabic text is very false and full of lies, and one

[47] *Fisonomia*, "Proemio:" "Dice Adamantio che la Natura, ancor che taccia la bocca, si ragiona dalla fronte, e da gli occhi."

cannot guess what it means."[48] In another passage he claims that the old Latin translation of Aristotle's physiognomics (by Bartolomeo da Messina)[49] is also inaccurate, because the practical descriptions of the signs do not make sense.[50]

The task of the physiognomist is thus in equal measure a philological and a practical one, involving skills in comparative anatomy, and even in medicine. But despite the difficulties, Della Porta believes that physiognomics is nothing less than a path towards

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[48] Ibid., 103: "Ma l'antica traslazione dal testo Arabico è assai falsa e bugiarda, né si può intendere che voglia dire."

[49] See the edition of the Greek text accompanied by Bartolomeo da Messina's translation in Foerster, ed., *Scriptores physiognomonici graeci et latini*, vol. 1, 3-91. For a brief summary of the transmission see *s.v.* 'Physiognomy' in *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Thomas F. Glick, Steven Livesey and Faith Wallis (London, 2005), 400. On medieval physiognomics see especially Jole Agrimi, "'Ingeniosa scientia nature.' Studi sulla fisiognomica medievale," (Florence, 2002). Several Latin versions of the *Physiognomics* were published between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century; Foerster did not include them in his critical edition because their *lectiones* are variously corrupted (Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomonici graeci et latini*, vol. I, 60-2). On this tradition see also Charles B. Schmitt and Dilwyn Knox, *Pseudo-Aristoteles Latinus: A Guide to Latin Works Falsely Attributed to Aristotle Before 1500* (London, 1985), 45-9. Particularly noteworthy is the 1514-1515 folio edition printed in Pavia with the title *Infinita nature secreta*: this contains various physiognomic and chirophysiognomic treatises, and opens with the pseudo-Aristotelian physiognomics.

[50] *Fisonomia*, 98.

understanding humanity, and that every philosopher should engage in it, because "anyone who neither loves nor gladly embraces it will never be a philosopher and will not desire to live well."[51] This statement reveals that one main purpose of physiognomic investigation consists in applying the knowledge gained through comparative study to the aim of achieving a good life. It may seem that animals are left behind, as the attention now focuses on man's pursuit of a fulfilled life. This would not be not surprising since, in line with Aristotle's *Ethics*, to which Della Porta refers,[52] animals do not partake in any degree in virtue, and thus cannot be said to be just or unjust, or to aim for a good life. Yet, once animals are placed at the heart of the physiognomic procedure, their influence inevitably stretches beyond the physical comparison and reaches further, affecting the ethical development of the discourse, too.

3. Physiognomic Advice for a Happy Life

By outlining his method of physiognomics Della Porta indirectly intervenes in one of the major areas of debate in the Renaissance reception of Aristotle: the difference between the

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[51] Ibid., "Proemio:" "Dunque questa scienza ricerchiamola tutti assai volentieri, e abbracciamola di tutto cuore, come cosa veramente nostra, e che tratta di noi medesimi, la qual chi non ama, e chi volentieri non abbraccia, ne serà egli Filosofo mai, ne desidererà di viver bene."

[52] See also the description of the just man, echoing the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ibid., 283.

soul of animals and the human soul, approaching the problem from the point of view of the relation to their respective bodies.[53] Della Porta appears to follow in the tradition of assigning to beasts only a sensitive soul: if the habits of the soul are identified with the sensitive soul, it follows that the latter is in fact that 'soul' which is under investigation in the physiognomic procedure. Physiognomics would thus use the link between the body and the sensitive soul of animals to delve into a much more complex human compound. But the terminological crossovers, particularly evident if one compares Latin and vernacular texts of Della Porta's *Physiognomics*, point to an underlying philosophical crossover between the body and the soul: they are closely linked in the case of animals, and by using the method of comparing animals to humans it seems only logical to infer a very strong link in the case of the latter, too. The danger is thus that of turning man into merely a more complex animal, one with a broader spectrum of features, but an animal nonetheless. In other words, materialistic conclusions are easily drawn from such an approach, and Della Porta himself is conscious of

[53] For an overview of this debate see Cecilia Muratori, ed., *The Animal Soul and the Human Mind: Renaissance Debates* (Pisa-Rome, 2013); on the legacy of ancient philosophy in Renaissance debates on animals, with special regard for the issue of rationality, see Thierry Gontier, ed., *Animal et animalité dans la philosophie de la Renaissance et de l'âge classique* (Leuven, 2005) and id., *La question de l'animal. Les origines du débat moderne* (Paris, 2011); on the ethical consequences of the negotiations regarding the man-animal distinction see Cecilia Muratori and Burkhard Dohm, eds., *Ethical Perspectives on Animals in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period* (Florence, 2013).

this problem. It becomes crucial to explain the nature of the soul that is under examination in his physiognomics.

Adopting a very Aristotelian method, Della Porta presents a survey of the ways in which ancient philosophers understood physiognomics and the differences between body and soul that emerged from them. In the case of Empedocles, for instance, the emphasis on the overlap of body and soul implied by physiognomics led to the conclusion that the soul is nothing other than "harmony of elements." Similarly, according to Galen, "the soul itself is nothing other than harmony, and a temperament of the body, that is to say of dry, cold, humid, and that the good temperament produced good habits and the bad one bad habits."[54]

Della Porta implies that, in order for physiognomics to be a reliable method, the body and the soul must be so closely related that it becomes difficult to conceive the human soul as incorporeal and separable from the body itself. The medical concept of temperament might end up taking the place of the soul. But Della Porta is quick to add that this opinion is "condemned and refuted by theologians," thus distancing himself from materialistic conclusions which are easy to draw from such a theory of the soul's nature. He then counters Galen's materialistic view by pointing out that we observe instances of the body's influence

[54] *Fisonomia*, 10-1: "l'anima istessa non esser altro che armonia, e temperamento del corpo, cioè del secco, freddo, caldo, humido, e che il buon temperamento produceva buoni costumi, e il cattivo cattivi." On temperament and complexion, see Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, *Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2013), 32.

on the soul on a daily basis: "dietary changes, as well as changes of the places and the physical activity bring about modifications, as for instance from an overwhelming phlegm derives stupidity, and from black choler melancholia, and from phlegm lethargy."[55] Yet these frequent modifications of the body-soul balance regard only that kind of soul which humans and animals have in common, namely the sensitive soul.

Affecting the soul by acting on the body is an instance of the synchronization, or *sympathein*, about which Della Porta had read in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonia*: "Aristotle in the *Physiognomics* proves that when the soul changes a habit, the body changes the shape of the features, and when the body changes its shape, the soul, too, changes its habits." [56] Apart from natural circumstances, such as food and climate, there are also exceptional or pathological interventions of the body on the soul. For instance, Della Porta uses the example

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[55] *Fisonomia*, 11: "percioche ei si muta al mutar de' cibi, de' luoghi, e di essercitio, come dalla soverchia fleuma nel cervello venir la stupidezza, e dalla colera nera la maliniconia, e dalla fleuma la letargia." In the Latin version the theologians are not mentioned directly: *DHP*, vol. 1, 21: "cuius sententia ab omnibus explosa est et mores non solum ex pravo corporaturae habitu mutari, sed alimentorum et loci ratione, utpote ex superabundanti phlegmate in cerebro, in desipientiam, ex nigra bile melancholiam et ex phlegmate in letargum trahi."

[56] Ibid., 5: "Prova Aristotile nella *Fisonomia* che l'anima mutando il costume, il corpo muta forma de' lineamenti, e il corpo mutando la sua forma, l'anima muta anchor ella i suoi costumi."

of lycanthropy, describing a transformation from man to wolf that affected the external shape as well as the behaviour: the werewolf has the body of a wolf, and behaves as such.[57] Indeed, elsewhere in the *Fisonomia*, Della Porta imagines that "if the human soul were to enter the body of a dog, but retain the intellect, it would have no other habits than those of the dog, and the same [would happen] if it were to enter a wolf's body: it would assume the habits of a wolf, because those habits are given by its temperament."[58] The fact that Della Porta here refers to the habits and the temperament, rather than using directly the word 'soul' is telling: the parallel between bodies and souls of animals and humans would suggest that the same

[57] Ibid., 6. On lycanthropy see especially Dennis M. Kratz, "*Fictus lupus*: The Werewolf in Christian Thought," *Classical Folia*, 30 (1976), 57-79. Della Porta is briefly mentioned on p. 75, but the article contains no discussion of transformation into werewolves in Italian Renaissance literature. Similarly, Charlotte von Otten, ed., *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture* (New York, 1986) provides useful background, but no specific materials on Italian Renaissance authors. On Medieval reflections on werewolves and the human-animal border see Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (London and New York, 2011, second ed.), 141-2. Caroline Walker Bynum raises the issue of the connection between food intake and metamorphosis, including that from man into wolf ("Metamorphosis, or Gerald and the Werewolf," *Speculum*, 73/4 (Oct., 1998), 987-1013.

[58] *Fisonomia*, 44: "se l'anima umana venisse in un corpo di cane, restandogli però l'intelletto, non havrebbe costumi se non di cane, così in un corpo di lupo havrebbe costumi di lupo, perché tai costumi le dà il suo temperamento."

mechanism of interaction is in place in both cases. Lycanthropy is of course a rare, pathological transformation, but one could ask how body and soul affect each other in the case of perfectly natural phenomena, such as the process of growth and ageing. Della Porta explains that

> when the soul enters the body of a child, because of the excessive moisture that disturbs it, we see that it is little different than a brute animal. During adolescence the temperament becomes hotter and the intellect emerges, and it lasts up to a certain point and no longer. With the onset of old age, it starts to decline, and this does not depend on the soul, which remains the same throughout life.[59]

Here Della Porta is careful to underline that the 'human soul,' indirectly identified with the intellect, remains unaffected, and that it only becomes more or less 'visible' according to the state of the substratum, that is to say the temperament affecting the body. Less extreme cases than lycanthropy are derived from the Bible: "Salomon says that the melancholic soul makes

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[59] Ibid.: "Venendo l'anima nel corpo d'un figliuolo, per la soverchia humidità che l'offende, veggiamo ch'è poco meno che un animal bruto, nella adolescentia cambiando il temperamento in caldo mostra intelletto, e dura fin ad un certo tempo, e non più. Viene alla vecchiezza e comincia a declinare, il che non vien dall'anima, per sempre sempre ella la medesima in tutta la vita."

the bones dry and if it is joyful it fattens them."[60] Madness is also a prominent example of how the body can even intervene to restore the balance of a specifically human part of the soul: the intellect. Madness is a "disease of the intellection [*intelletto*], and the physicians, by taking care of the body, heal the soul from the madness, so that with the care of the body, the sensitive part of the soul, which was sick, is healed."[61] In this case, Della Porta explicitly uses the word 'soul,' rather than specifying that it is the changes in the temperament that indirectly support or hinder the performance of the soul's faculties, and of intellection in particular. With reference to Plato, Della Porta supports the view that changes of the body directly affect the soul, because "when diseases of the body occur, the soul becomes ill as well." More specifically, "from the bitter and choleric humours which wander around in the body, rise vapours which penetrate into the hidden areas of the soul and force it to change and to become brave, shy, crude and forgetful."[62] This theory uses a physical explanation of the chain of modifications set in motion by changes in the body. The digestion of food is one of

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[60] Ibid., 6: "Dice Salomon che l'anima melancolica dissecca l'ossa, e essendo allegra l'ingrassa." Cf. *Proverbs* 17.22.

[61] Ibid.: "La pazzia è una malattia dell'intelletto, e i Medici curando il corpo curano l'anima della pazzia, onde dalla cura del corpo si guarisce la sensitiva parte dell'anima, che era inferma."

[62] Ibid., 4: "[D]a gli amari e colerici umori che vanno vagando per lo corpo, i vapori surgenti penentrando ne' reposti luoghi dell'anima la costringono a lasciar d'essere come era e a divenir audace, timida, rozza e smentichevole."

the most common ways in which the body acts on the soul, because it affects the temperament.[63] Ingesting food changes the body and thus leads to a change in the soul, including its most important part, arguably present only in humans, the capability of thought. Della Porta notes, for instance, that salt makes man clever, while goat's milk and honey promote strong intellect and memory, as Galen said.[64] Aristotle himself – adds Della Porta – stressed the link between the quality of the blood and a creature's level of intelligence (*sagacitas*).[65]

These are all instances of the body's effect on the soul, including its thinking faculty. Indeed, if the opposite were true – that is to say, if the soul were completely independent of the body – there could be no science of physiognomics at all, because the relation between a certain type of soul and a certain type of body would be arbitrary. Della Porta underlines that this is precisely what would happen if Pythagorean transmigration of the soul took place: it would be impossible to study the outside shape in order to catch a glimpse of the inside, because bodies would simply be containers (and the very same soul could inhabit different bodies).[66] On the contrary, physiognomics assumes that there is a very tight relationship between body and soul. But this means that the relationship between humans and animals

[63] Ibid., 343.

[64] Ibid., 45.

[65] Ibid., 10.

[66] Ibid., 9.

also becomes more compelling, potentially putting the human soul on the same level as the animal soul, and ultimately opening the way to viewing man as a complex animal.

Foreseeing this objection, Della Porta adds the following explanation:

> Our soul receives the habits when God infuses it in the bodies, and this is accepted not only by Hippocrates, Aristotle, Plato and Galen, but also by the theologians themselves [...] [U]pon receiving the soul, matter takes on the form and the soul receives the habits of the quality of the embryo.[67]

All philosophers (even Galen!) are said to fundamentally agree on the fact that a person's habits first come into play when the soul is infused in the body. But the soul received from God plays no crucial role in the *Fisonomia*, which focuses on the habits instead. It thus remains an empty conception, especially when Della Porta, in Book 6, claims that the real goal of physiognomics is an ethical one. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a point of reference, and Della Porta states that "in the book on morals to Nicomachus, Aristotle says about the soul

[67] Ibid., 43: "l'anima nostra riceve i costumi quando dall'altissimo Dio se infonde ne' corpi, e questo non solo da Hipocrate, Aristotele, Platone, Galeno, e da gli altri Filosofi è accettato, ma dagli istessi Theologi [...] [N]el ricever l'anima s'informa la sostanza, e l'anima prende i costumi della qualità dell'embrione."

that one part is rational and the other irrational."[68] But once again, the distinction does not seem to have an impact on the course of Della Porta's own physiognomic procedure. Rather, the role of the comparison with the animals, and of practical, material interventions becomes even stronger when Della Porta explains that virtue is not achieved by employing rational thinking, and not even with imagination or moral convictions. Much more prosaically, it is achieved with "purgations, topical remedies and natural virtues of herbs, stones, and animals, and occult properties."[69]

On the practical level, a crucial difference between humans and animals that crystallises from Della Porta's physiognomic reflection is the simple observation that man is the only animal that chooses his own food, and that by directing his dietary choice he can learn how to provoke bodily changes that echo within the soul itself. The difference between humans and animals with regard to the synchronization of body and soul is best exemplified by the respective approaches that man and the animals have towards food. Animals spontaneously choose the food which is appropriate to them: an herbivore will always turn to

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[68] Ibid., 282: "Aristotele nel libro de' morali a Nicomaco fa che dell'anima una parte sia ragionevole, l'altra irragionevole."

[69] Ibid., 329. The whole passage reads: "A che dunque ci gioveria questa arte, se conosciuti i suoi defetti, non potessi quegli convertirgli in virtudi? Ma ciò non con pensieri, imaginationi, o persuasioni di morali Filosofi, che per lo più vani riescono, ma con purgationi, locali rimeddi, e natural virtù di herbe, pietre et animali, & occulte proprietadi."

vegetables, and a carnivore to meat, while man's diet is flexible and in a sense unpredictable, just like the soul that is enclosed in his body: "Only man enjoys and wants to help himself to all of them, so that it is still unclear what is his proper food, beyond bread and water; and still he has various habits, pleasant, savage, indulgent, beastly."[70] Humans can thus eat like a violent beast, or like a tame one. Selecting which foods to ingest appears to be Della Porta's practical way to deal with vices and virtues – not very Aristotelian, after all, since for Aristotle virtuous habits are acquired by training, and certainly not through such alimentary interventions.[71]

Vices and virtues appear to affect animals too: the lion and the elephant have a sense of justice,[72] while foxes, women and snakes are deceitful, a grouping that stresses how human-animal comparisons for Della Porta have a clear gender connotation.[73] One animal is represented as being particularly close to humans in terms of character: the monkey [see fig. 1]. The comparison is not particularly flattering since, "with regard to its habits, the monkey

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[70] Ibid., 44: "sol l'huomo di tutti gusta e vuol servirsi, onde ancor non si sa qual sia il suo proprio e peculiar cibo dal pane, e dall'acqua in poi; e però ha varii costumi, piacevoli, selvaggi, indulgenti e ferini."

[71] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1180a.

[72] Cf. *Fisonomia*, 283-4.

[73] Ibid., 285. On the gender differentiation in Della Porta see Schiesari, *Beasts and Beauties*, 60.

is full of malignity and deceit" and it is an animal that "simulates very well."[74] Indeed, Della Porta states that in applying physiognomics man is like a "simia di Dio" (literally: a monkey of God),[75] learning how to catch a glimpse of the inside in the outside. But he carefully adds that man should use his reason ("il lume della ragione") in aping God. *Simia* can simply mean "imitation" ("to ape"), and indeed the Latin version features the verb *aemulari*.[76] Yet the choice of the expression "simia di Dio," in the vernacular, is telling, given the importance of the animal *simia* in Della Porta's method. In *Chirofisonomia* the hands of the monkey are the main point of comparison for the interpretation of the lines that can be observed in human hands. In line with Aristotle, Della Porta states that the human hand is the best testimony to the marvel and dignity of the human body; and yet his physiognomic study of the hand draws its material from visits to the jails, comparing the hands of particularly brutal human

[74] *Fisonomia*, 27.

[75] Ibid., 1.

[76] Cf. *DHP*, vol. 1, 7. On the monkey as a symbol of imitation in classical antiquity, see Catherine Connors, "Monkey Business: Imitation, Authenticity, and Identity from Pithekoussai to Plautus," *Classical Antiquity*, 23.2 (2004), 179-207. For an overview of the various roles and symbols associated with the ape from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, mainly folly, sinfulness, and *vanitas*, see H.W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London [printed in Vienna], 1952), and especially chap. 10 on 'simia' as imitation.

specimens with those of the animal which most resembles humans at their worst.[77] In fact, Della Porta explains that he chose to inspect the hands of criminals on purpose, because those humans are more prone to follow sensual inclinations than reason: therefore, the distance between animals and humans seems to be particularly short in their case.[78] If reason can still be considered a qualitative difference that distinguishes humans from animals, the jails nevertheless provide plentiful counter-examples.

Generally, the physiognomic procedure prompts the question whether it is possible to compare animals and humans in terms of bodies, and characters, while assuming that they differ on a qualitative level, for instance by attributing to humans only the capability to think rationally. Possessing reason, in fact, is an attribute directly connected to possessing hands, as Della Porta suggests by quoting *On the Parts of Animals*, where Aristotle argued that it is not by chance that only humans have hands, and that it is the possession of hands which distinguishes man from all other animals.[79] Being endowed with hands and being capable of

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[77] Cf. *Chirofisonomia*, 99, where Della Porta quotes Ennius: "Quanto simile a noi la simia pare/ bestia brutta, insolente."

[78] Ibid., 91.

[79] Ibid., 94. On the role of hands in Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian writings see especially Aristotle, *On the Soul*, ed. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA, 1995 [1936]), 181 (432a 1-3): "The soul, then, acts like a hand; for the soul is an instrument which employs instruments, and in the same way the mind is a form which employs forms." *Parts of Animals,* ed. E. S. Forster and A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA, 1998 [1937]), 371 (687a9-10):

reason are characteristics that are necessarily linked in nature's design, and they converge in defining human uniqueness.[80]

Della Porta's engagement with the Aristotelian legacy shows how the role of animals in the body-soul comparison provoked the question about human uniqueness, and the quest for a good life that was supposed to express it. Yet, Della Porta's animals are not Aristotle's: unlike Aristotle, Della Porta grounds this aim in the human-animal resemblance rather than on their radical difference. Della Porta creates his own comprehensive method for understanding human nature by using animals as mirrors that allow us to 'see' humanity. But

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"but surely the reasonable point of view is that it is because he [man] is the most intelligent animal that he has got hands." On the parallel between the mind and the hand, with regard to man's learning process of how to use them, see: Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems II*, ed. W.S. Hett (Cambridge, MA, 1957 [1937]), Book 30, § 5, 171: "just as we do not use the hand in the best way as soon as we are born, [...] in the same way also the mind [...] does not assist us in the best way at once." On the differences between bodies that possess hands and bodies that do not, see also Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems I*, ed. W.S. Hett (Cambridge, MA, 1953 [1936], Book 10, § 16, 213: "it is necessary for the other animals to see sideways, since they don't have hands." For an overview of the Aristotelian legacy in Renaissance zoology see Stefano Perfetti, *Aristotle's Zoology and its Renaissance Commentators (1521-1601)* (Leuven, 2000).

[80] According to Jonathan Lear, Aristotle does not mean that man "gained his superior intelligence through his hands," but rather that "man is endowed with hands because he has the practical intelligence to employ them in their myriad uses." (Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge, 1988), 49).

the reflected image implicitly questions man's uniqueness by firmly linking his soul to his body, through the mediation of the animals.

Della Porta's description of his visits to jail best highlights his distance from the Aristotelian background: not only are the animals' paws referred to as "hands and feet," but these paws themselves become the instrument for understanding the secret of the human hand. Placed at the centre of the natural philosophical investigation, the animals also tend to invade a territory that, in Aristotle's view, remained precluded to them: ethics. In Della Porta's reinterpretation, physiognomics emerges as a complex philosophical approach, which proceeds from the study of the natural world to include psychology and ethics. The physiognomist – that is to say the philosopher – must act in his practice like a "simia di Dio," aping God and yet remaining uncomfortably similar to a real monkey.

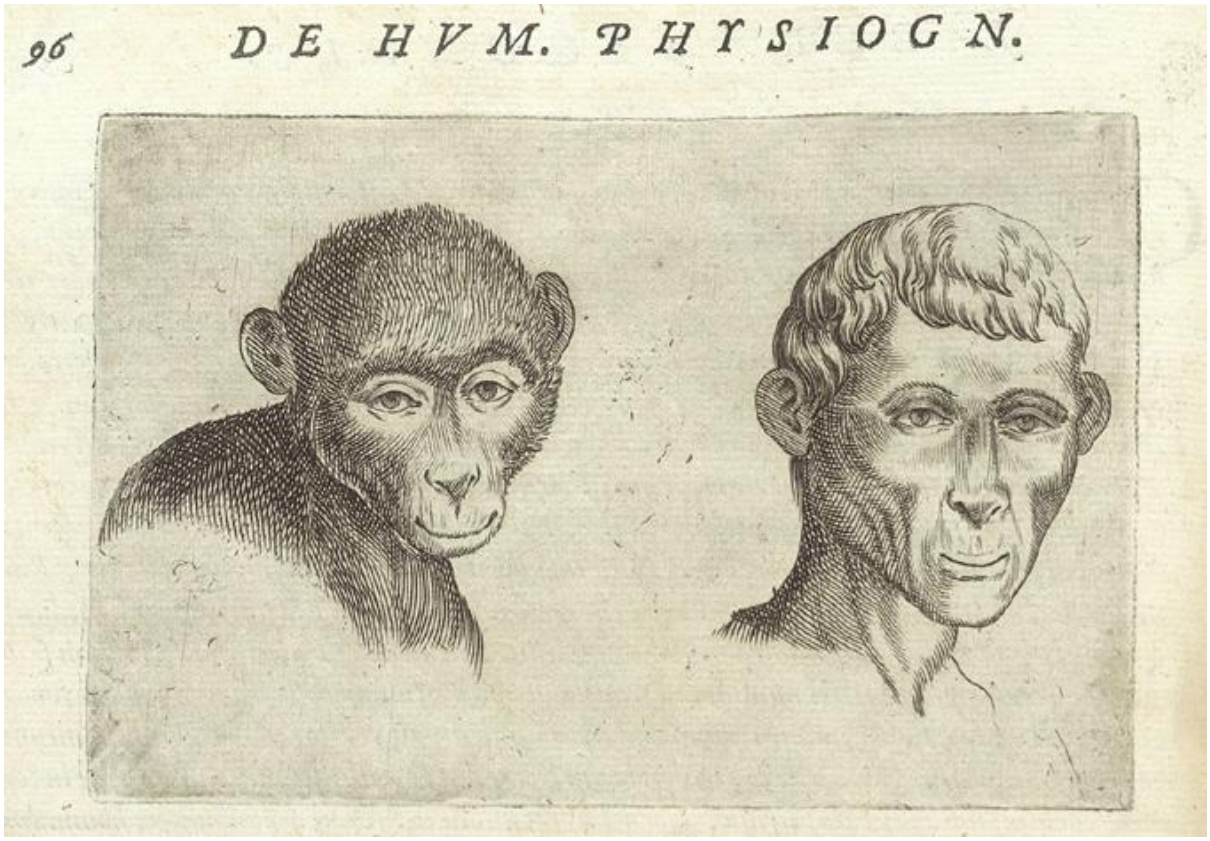

Fig. 1: The animal ‘simia’ in Della Porta’s *Fisonomia* (1610), in comparison with a human head featuring ‘monkeyish’ characteristics. Giovan Battista Della Porta, *De humana physignomonia* (Vico Equense, 1586), 96.

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