

THE ZOOMORPHIC PHYSIOGNOMY OF GIOVAN BATTISTA DELLA PORTA

ÉVA VÍGH

The description of animals, their forms, behaviour, soul, and character as well as the interpretations of the above-mentioned from the time of the pictographs document the role they fulfilled in the relation of man and the material world. Since the classical age the preserved written and artistic monuments, which are the subjects and tools of the hermeneutic tradition of zoology and zoonymia, prove the ample presence of animal forms in facts and beliefs with mystical, allegorical, and moral meanings. Naturally both the allegorical as well as the moralizing view, which may be valid up to the present in literary and artistic contexts, were predominantly characteristic of European thinking and civilisation until the early modern period.

The aim of this paper¹ is to shed light on the close relation of zoomorphism and ethics in physiognomy through the work of Giovan Battista Porta, the most important author on this issue of 16th century Italian cultural history. Zoomorphic physiognomy is one of the historical summits of the moral comparison of *humanitas* and *animalitas*, a long disputed epistemological issue made use in several ways. Comparison of forms and “characters” of animals to the outlook of man was a fundamental method in the physiognomic analyses since classical times. Physiognomy, as the several-thousand-year-old cognitive method of human character and affects, makes it possible to draw conclusions regarding the nature of the soul and emotions through the perception of the human body, its movements and accent, i.e., it does research into the relations of body and soul. The first systematic discussion of physiognomy is preserved in the form of a treatise attributed to Aristotle, in which the author, dealing with the cognitive methods of man, pays special attention to the justification of zoomorphic comparison. The perception and transfer of physiognomic signs, i.e., the issue of the methods of physiognomic analysis is therefore a basic point of departure even in this (Pseudo)-Aristotelean work.

Obviously, different methods exist, through which external signs bring about scrutiny of the soul. According to Pseudo Aristotle one of the three methods justifies the central

¹ The related research was carried out with the support of a Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Szeged, named MTA-SZTE Antiquity and Renaissance: Sources and Reception (TK2016–126).

role of research into animals. Perception of external characteristics and behaviour of animals, i.e., reliance on zoomorphic analogies has always been present in the understanding of human character and emotions from the earliest times. Each of the physiognomic treatises surviving until modern times regards it a fundamental method, and for example Marcus Antonius Polemon dedicated a whole chapter to the “character” of animals, by which he emphasised the possibility of physiognomic comparison between the human and the animal world on the basis of external characteristics and moral similarities.

Therefore, when Giovan Battista Della Porta (1535–1615), the author of the most noteworthy physiognomic treatise of 16th-century Italian classicism summed up the contemporary knowledge of physiognomy and its methods, this science had already possessed a several-thousand-year-old tradition. The whole physiognomic activity of Della Porta² makes a perfect transition from the scholarship of the 16th century imbued with the culture of magic to the new methods of research in the 17th century, which relied on rationalistic bases, providing an explanation to its 17–18th century survival. Della Porta relies on the three methods of physiognomy, which derive from Pseudo Aristotle, when he, enumerating the theses beginning from classical authors up to that of his contemporaries, analyses the intrinsic relation of body and soul as compared to that of the animals.

The most often employed method of the semiotician of Italian classicism is the analysis based on analogies, which he uses the most frequently, almost exclusively of all interpretative methods. No matter if it is the comparison between man and animal, man and nature in general, man and the stars, the analogical effect always prevails, each of the signs related to “similarities”, “affinities”, “attractions” and “repulses” is interpreted with the help of this method. During the course of the physiognomic analyses of Della Porta this method is feasible in the case of the correspondence of body and soul on all levels of reality, but it is especially relevant in the analysis of correspondences between the worlds of man and animal, because here the comparison of immediately recognizable forms provides opportunity for analyses full of fantasy, while simultaneously visualizing these chapters of his book.

² G. B. Della Porta published several physiognomy-related treatises: *De humana physiognomonia* (1586) and its Italian version, *Della fisonomia dell'huomo* (1598); *Phytognomonica* (1588), *Coelestis physiognomoniae* (1603), its Italian translation, *Della celeste fisonomia* (1614); his *Chirofisonomia*, written in 1586, was published posthumously (1677). For a complete bibliography on Della Porta (continuously updated) see, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://centrostudigbdellaporta.altevista.org/bibliografia-dellaportiana-3/>.

The multitude of zoomorphic examples and analogies can be found in all classical and medieval physiognomic works. The whole second chapter of the book on physiognomy by the above-mentioned Polemon (II century AD) deals with moral issues:

quo agitur de similitudine quam reperis homini intercedentem cum ceteris animalibus quadrupedibus volucris reptilibus et aliis. Neque enim omnino ullum invenies cui non cum animali similitudo aliqua aut aliquis eius character intercedat. Quo magis oportet te horum memorem esse singillatim in homine. Invenies igitur inter homines cui similitudo cum bestiis et feris est.³

Della Porta himself amply used the work of the Greek rhetor, and there are hardly any chapters in his work where there are no zoological or zoomorphic examples. The comparison with animals is partly explained by the intention of visualization which can also be seen in the engravings that characterise his work, and, since its publication, we see the same in countless other editions on physiognomy. The zoomorphic analogies, thanks to the popular, still effective illustrations, created such visual and semantic models which have always been parts of intellectual and popular imagination.

Della Porta was the first in modern times who subjected the possible physiological-affective comparison between man and animals to coherent analysis, and even set up a system. His physiognomic imagination makes up a cosmological entirety, where each sign is connected and refers to another, whether it should be a characteristic taken from the circle of man, animals, plants or minerals. Though animals play a predominant role, but "accordingly there are no plants, minerals and any other thing in the world, which do not have something in common with man."⁴ If, as our author professes, man is the only creature which possesses the characteristics of all animals, this explains that physiological, physical and moral variety, which characterises men, and on this basis it is possible to make zoo-ethical perceptions. Therefore, the relation of microcosm and macrocosm is also the principle of physiognomy: all elements and parts correlate with each other, and can be interpreted from each other, but at the same time each element is centrally significant.

The Neapolitan author in the first book of *Della fisonomia dell'huomo* lays down the fundamental principles regarding methods and sources, which he consequently employs

³ Polemon's treatise is edited by Richard Foerster, ed., *Scriptores physiognomonici graeci et latini*, vol. 1 (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1893): "Physiognomonica Pseudaristotelis, Graece et latine, Adamantii cum epitomis graece, Polemonis," 170–92.

⁴ Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Della fisonomia dell'huomo*, ed. Alfonso Paoletta (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2013), 47.

in relation with animals as well. As far as sources are concerned, Della Porta does not enumerate all the authors and their works with philological accuracy, he simply indicates that:

he who wants to deal with this science in depth must study the history of animals with great diligence to understand their habits, ways of thinking, the description of their body parts, because all this science rests upon them.⁵

The ample, but not in all cases systematic, source material and the annotation which Della Porta employs in his zoomorphic physiognomy are not just unnecessary support. In his work he makes regular and more or less accurate references to his sources, compares the views of different authors, to which he attaches his own conclusions. Aristotle/ the Philosopher is mentioned on the pages of *Fisonomia* 558 times by name, and we have almost the same volume of citation data in the references to Polemon (542) and Adamantius (512), who are almost always mentioned together. The latter is mentioned so many times mainly because he “copied [the views and his description of] Aristotle’ about types of men and animals ‘in an excellent way.”⁶ Due to the relation of soul and body, Plato and Platonists are also mentioned many times (63). Among the classical authors – now focusing only on the issue of zoology – the frequent references to Plinius (70), Plutarch (33), Aelianus (23), Flavius Philostratus (19), Solinus (10) and Oppianos (15) are self-explanatory. In the case of medieval writers, the authority of Albertus Magnus cannot be questioned, due to *De animalibus* and his being an Aristotelian, and this is exemplified by the number of references to him (238).

Therefore, Della Porta, similarly to most Renaissance authors, directly relied on classical sources, and the chapters of popular medieval encyclopaedias on animals or the rich symbolism of bestiaries did not make an impact on him, at least not on the level of quotations. The scholar, whose activity balanced on the edge of magic and modern scholarship, did not view the role of animals in the classification or codification of human soul and forms of behaviour through the characteristic works of medieval thinking, i.e., the screen of Christian spirituality. However, the influence of Christian bestiaries on the contemporary imagination and way of looking at things should not be underestimated even if Della Porta did not regard these characteristic works and authors of medieval symbolism to be *auctores*. His *Fisonomia* provides a precise analysis of all classical authors

⁵ Ibid., 45–6.

⁶ Ibid., 128.

covering all details on the level of (contemporary) scholarship with constant and conscious references to zoomorphic examples.

It is characteristic of his method that he compares the opinions of different authors, interprets the corrupted texts, he always stresses his own opinion either if it is accordance with that of the author, or if it differs from it, and he does not forget about classical literary references which support the physiognomic analysis. This historical, philological and methodological consciousness is what made his logically built physiognomy consisting of six books in later centuries the most widely read work among people interested in physiognomy. Concerning the methods of zoomorphic physiognomic perception, Della Porta refers to his favourite philosophers again: "According to the Pythagoreans, souls parting from the original bodies may enter not only different human bodies, but that of beasts, too."⁷ With this statement, our author supports his contention according to which it is the soul that combines man and animal, that is, the souls of the living are in infinite relationship with each other. The casuistic of the analogy between man and animals assumes the correspondence between the form of the body and the characteristic of the soul.⁸ In the question of body and soul Plato and the hermeneutic-Platonic renaissance thinking is the basis of reference for Della Porta, while in the field of morals it is unanimously Aristotle.

Notwithstanding, no systematic, epistemological analysis and consequent method following a philosophical trend can be expected from Della Porta. Apart from physiognomic and zoological literature, he combines his readings and sources in connection with the comparison between man and animals in a way which is characteristic of renaissance syncretism. Della Porta, referring to Plato, contends that "if a man regarding his body is similar to an animal, he is similar to it concerning his habits and intentions as well. This means that if we describe the forms of all animals, and we allocate to it a feature or passion or characteristic, we can conclude to the morals of that man."⁹ However, he does not fully share this notion attributed to Plato, but he himself contends that "it is futile and stupid to imagine that it is possible to find such a man, whose whole body is similar to that of an animal. But if it is partly similar, it can be true only for certain parts of his body."¹⁰ Therefore, the taxonomy, which in the end leads to the formation of an ethical opinion,

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Cf. the relationship in the etymology of the Latin *anima* (soul as vigour), *animus* (soul as character), *anima* (living creature), *animalis* (life-giving/animal) and *animalitas* (animality), which assumes a certain semantic affinity.

⁹ Della Porta, *Fisonomia*, 43.

¹⁰ Ibid., 44.

has a morphological base, and the symbolic analogy between man and animal is only valid with certain restrictions.

The pseudo-Aristotelian analogic method based on comparison with animals is the most frequent for the Italian author and the most expedient in his whole zoomorphic physiognomy. The Aristotelian syllogism in relation of the body and “soul” of animals is fundamental, because if in the case of an animal we take its form into consideration, then this form can be associated with a characteristic or temper fitting to it. The best example for it is the lion’s appearance and “disposition”: this animal regarding its nature is noble and vigorous, and as far as its body structure is concerned, its chest and shoulder are wide, and its back and limbs are strong. Consequently, all creatures like this are strong and brave. Della Porta provides an endless list of examples, some of them being very graphic:

This means that if a part of a man’s body is similar to that of animals, he may be similar in his character, too. If a man’s eye is similar to that of a lion, and it is moderately hollow-eyed, this refers to the temper of a lion, if it is very hollow-eyed, this refers to the temper of a monkey, that is, he may be of ill-morals, if his eye is smooth/velvety, you will say he is similar to an ox, but if it is bulging, stupid and rough, he is similar to the [character] of a donkey.¹¹

Considering the length of chapter XV of Book I in *Della fisonomia dell’huomo* discussing the physiognomic description and moral character of animals, it can be regarded as a separate little treatise, which proves the usefulness of the comparison between man and animals based on analogies, and at the same time it indicates the notion about animals in contemporary thinking. It is worth quoting a passage from this zoo-ethical treatise in detail, because it is the constant of animal ethology and human behaviour and moral. Man therefore can be

brave as a lion, timid as a rabbit, fearless as a cock, unpleasant as a dog, unfriendly as a raven, benevolent as a turtle, malevolent as hyena, nice as a dove, deceitful as a fox, tame as a lamb, quick as a deer, tractable as a panther, lazy as a bear, kind as an elephant, worthless and stupid as a donkey, obedient as a peacock, chatty as a female sparrow, useful as a bee, vagrant as a goat, unruly as a bull, balking as a mule, dumb as a fish, thoughtful as a lamb, lecherous as a pig, mischievous as a little owl, useful as a horse, noxious as a wolf. And accordingly, there are no plants, minerals or other materials in the world, which do not have a characteristic feature common with man. People of the past thought that Prometheus having created man from material, took a certain

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

disposition from all animals and imbued man with them, thus he proved that solely man possesses all the characteristics of animals.¹²

Applying the creation-myth to the basic principle of zoomorphic physiognomy, Della Porta places the beginning of relations between man and animals to ancient times, bearing in mind that the polyvalent characteristics of most animals result in identification with polyvalent morals regarding the morality of man. All the creatures of the universe may represent God and Satan, too, as they possess a double nature, which is either



Fig.1 Frontispiece of *De humana physiognomonia* (1586)¹³

¹² Ibid., 47.

¹³ Accessed August 27, 2022, <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/giambattista-della-porta-s-de-humana-physiognomonia-libri-iiii-1586>.

praiseworthy or condemnable: and in reality, almost all animals endowed with some positive or negative characteristic can be associated with man. This typological-figural interpretation of moral virtues and sins originates from the obvious need to make man's intellectual, emotional or moral characteristics perceptible, visible through evident similes and analogies, that is, so that abstract principles should be embodied in an easily perceptible (animal) form.

Even the frontispiece of the first, still Latin edition of Della Porta's physiognomic treatise is a telling example from the viewpoint of zoomorphic analogies. On the frontispiece the author's portrait is surrounded by different faces on the left, and animal heads on the right,¹⁴ and the two respective groups can be compared zoo-ethically. These zoomorphic examples will in turn be dealt with in the treatise. On the top, the timid man and the rabbit can be seen, then the comparison of the portrait of the stupid, dirty guy with the pig, the insolent and shameless type with the raven, the portrait of the lecherous with the hind, the coward and flattering figure with the cat, the short-witted with the ram and the narrow-minded, simple man with the donkey shows even on the title page of the book the central role of zoomorphism in the physiognomic analyses.

Although Della Porta always bears in mind the principle of *epiprepeia* (full impression) of pseudo-Aristotelian origin, still, for him, the role of the head – and within it that of the eyes – is predominant during the physiognomic analysis as well as in the case of zoomorphic analogies. Therefore, it is worth paying more attention to this zoomorphic opportunity for comparison and proving that Della Porta's physiognomy – and, in general, that of the classical and early modern age – is basically of Aristotelian origin in this respect. In Book V of Della Porta's treatise, which can also be interpreted as a physiognomic variation of *Nicomachean Ethics*¹⁵ supplemented with zoomorphic analogies, the author unanimously stresses the Aristotelian principle of the mean. Namely, if the proportion of the form or colour of a body part in relation to whole differs from the mean in the direc-

¹⁴ For the expressive title page, also used in subsequent editions of the book, as well as for the circulation of the branches and the transmigration of the engravings, cf. Alfonso Paoletta, "L'autore delle illustrazioni delle *Fisiognomiche* di Della Porta e la ritrattistica. Esperienze filologiche," in Marco Santoro, ed., *La „Mirabile natura“: Magia e scienza in Giovan Battista Della Porta (1615–2015)* (Pisa / Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2016), 82–6.

¹⁵ For the moral philosophical relation of Aristotle's ethic and Della Porta's physiognomy see Éva Vígh, "I costumi seguono i segni...": Caratteri morali e forme del corpo nella Fisonomia di Giovan Battista Della Porta," in *Il costume che appare nella faccia“: Fisiognomica e letteratura italiana* (Roma: Aracne, 2014), 235–68; Vígh, "Moralità e segni fisiognomici nella Della fisonomia dell'huomo di Giovan Battista Della Porta," in Marco Santoro, ed., *La „mirabile“ natura: Magia e scienza in Giovan Battista Della Porta* (Pisa / Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2016), 111–24.

tion of the less or the more, the body is not beautiful, therefore the morals cannot be good either. Della Porta, simultaneously, interprets the principle of *kalokagathia* in a physiognomic, and within this, an ethical context following Neo-Platonic and stoic interpretations of beauty and goodness. He refers to the fact several times that “the mean between extremities always indicates the good”,¹⁶ and “everything which is beautiful, is good by nature, and everything which is ugly, is bad, and this is true not only for man, but for everything else, in connection with stones, grasses and flowers, too, as it is well proven in our *Fisonomia*.”¹⁷ He takes sides more emphatically in the definition of beauty, because this external characteristic unanimously indicates noble moral values:

Another form of beauty, which in reality should not be called beauty, shows the concordance of parts fitting to each other harmoniously, and in this way signifies rather outstanding morals and a noble soul in the symmetry of order, the proportionate character of body parts and in the vigorous feature of body liquids fitting to each other in an appropriate way. [...] This is the beauty, which implies all virtues and repels all sins.¹⁸

In the case of the head, the physiognomic analysis is performed according to its proportion to the whole body, its size, proportion, and its form. In this respect, the big head is the external sign of a clumsy spirit, awkwardness, and disobedience. Among the zoomorphic examples, Della Porta first refers to the donkey, because “the donkey has a big head, a mean and low soul, and awkward habits”,¹⁹ then follows the characterisation of the other big-headed animals living in the air and in water. However, the analogical comparison is provided with a scientific explanation as well: according to this – and now the basis of reference is Albertus Magnus – the too big head can be attributed to the presence of excessive humidity and moderate warmth, so these types of animals are stupid and timid. In addition, if the face is too big in proportion to the head, this is characteristic of the donkey, so it is the sign of the obstinate and lazy man.²⁰

¹⁶ Della Porta, *Fisonomia*, 224.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 496.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 495.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 172.



Fig. 2 Head of man and donkey
(G.B. Della Porta, *Della fisonomia dell'huomo* – 1610)²¹

The further zoomorphic-physiognomic signs of simplicity and narrow-mindedness support the validity of comparison with the donkey. During his line of thought on forehead, Della Porta, discussing round, high and hunched forehead, refers to the image of donkey, in accordance with his sources. The big (donkey) ear is also an external sign of stupidity, but thanks to the warm and humid temperament, these types of men live long and possess excellent hearing. Thick lips, especially if the lower lip is protruding, are also the zoomorphic physiognomic signs of narrow-mindedness and weak judgement. As compared with 'the appropriate state', bulging eyes also refer to stupid, uneducated and hard-headed man:

Aristotle in his book about [the body parts of] *Animals* writes about bulging eyes in a disapproving fashion, and Galenos act accordingly. If we want to learn about the natural causes of this, they say that its cause is the big amount of humidity in the front chambers of the mind, which weakens man and refers to stupidity. Galenos talking about *Melancholys* says this originates from melancholic temperament and clumsiness of the soul, and it is also the cause of thick lips. According to Plinius, this is the exact reason for their short-sightedness: the more bulging the eye is, the farther it is from the mind, that is, from its origin and appropriate state. And if it had to be compared to an animal, Aristotle in his *Physiognomy* compares them to the donkeys, because they have excessively bulging eyes, so he deems these people having the mental capabilities and morals of a donkey. It is also Aristotle, who writing to Alexander, says that those whose eyes are similar to that of the donkey, are stupid and hard-headed. According to Polemon and Adamantius, not all bulging eyes are worthy of praise. Atheneus contends that people having so bulging eyes like that are of very bad nature.²²

²¹ Accessed August 27, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/dellafisonomiade00port/page/n5/mode/2up>.

²² Della Porta, *Fisonomia*, 319. Galenos speaks about melancholy in his work *Quod animi mores corporis temperamenta sequantur* (*The characteristics of the soul follow the temperament of the body*), which was very popular at the time of Della Porta. The work written to Alexander the Great attributed to Aristotle is *Secretum secretorum*. In its chapter on physiognomy a detailed description can be read on the eye.

The voice of a donkey, which is harsh, forceful, an ear-splitting roar without restraint, is a sign of stupidity.²³ The reader is not at all surprised, when, reading about the “shameful body parts”, finds that “the big tool of a man signifies a foolish and stupid man, who can be compared with the donkey, because among the animals, the donkey has a big penis.”²⁴ A detailed description of the donkey can also be read in Della Porta’s work, and here – as a summary of signs read elsewhere – stressing the disproportionate signs, which differ from the mean value, is remarkable.

The donkey has a big head, a big and fleshy mouth, a round forehead, big, bulging eyes; the lips are big and the upper hang over the lower, it howls in a very rough and different voice, its body is thin and ugly, its heart is big, that is why it is timid, its blood is black and thick, its gait is slow and lazy, it moves only if it is frequently hit; its sexual organ is long and disproportionately big. Regarding its habits, it is rather dirty and mean in its soul; however, it is also tame, nice and pleasant. If it meets somebody on the road, does not give way, collides with him, it is excessively lecherous; any kind of contemplation and activity is beyond it, lazy and bears all offences; it lives for a long time.²⁵

Regarding his external characteristics, the stupid man, who can also be identified with the donkey, has a meaty face, thick lips, ponderous way of speaking, straight neck and back, his body bends towards the left, furthermore, the outlook of a stupid fellow can unanimously be characterised with that of the donkey (and the goat).²⁶ And if the head, which is well bigger than the mean size, does not promise too much in the field of morals and soul, the people with small heads are not good, either, because – according to interpretation of the Aristotelian principle of the mean – nature provided them with a little mind and intelligence. Trying to find his way through the multitude of classical examples – beside the ones supplied by Polemon, Adamantio, (Pseudo)-Aristotle, Rhazes – Della Porta voices his own opinion as well. As we mentioned, this kind of handling the sources characterises Della Porta’s whole physiognomy, when he compares the statements of sources with each other, he emends the parts, which are – or which he thinks to be – corrupted, and at controversial parts he himself acts as an arbitrator. In connection with the small head, Della Porta discusses the analogy between the ostrich and the disproportionately small-headed man, because, as compared to its body, this animal has the smallest head. Because of this, “it is so stupid, that when hunters chase it, and it wants

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, 204.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 518.

to escape from them, it keeps its head in the bushes, and while keeping it there, it believes its enormous body is hidden, too."²⁷

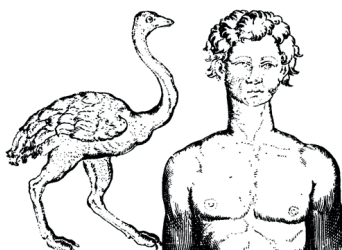


Fig. 3 Head of man and ostrich
(G.B. Della Porta, *Della fisonomia dell'huomo*– 1610)

Referring to “ostrich policy” is a current *topos*, and Della Porta supported its popularity, which is well-known from Aristophanes, the Bible, and other sources as well, with scholarly explanation. This time, as on many other occasions, he relies on Galenos, according to whom “the small head can be explained by the wrong development of the mind, therefore, the small head is always a bad sign.”²⁸ Referring to Avicenna, the explanation is further extended to moral perceptions: according to this, the small head lacks natural morals and virtues of the soul alike, therefore such a man is irresolute, easily irritated and indecisive in everything. And as a small vessel cannot contain a lot, it cannot be expected from a small head to contain a mind which is bigger than the size of the head: “therefore, the small head is necessarily bad.”²⁹ Apart from the size of the head, the long and thin neck characteristic of the ostrich is also a sign of stupidity, timidity and prolixity.³⁰ As far as the ostrich is concerned, it possesses a wide range of symbolism: in the *Iconologia* of Cesare Ripa, for instance, it appears as the symbol of justice, strictness and gluttony, exemplifying the polyvalence of zoomorphic symbolism.

It is obvious from the above (and naturally from the Aristotelian principle of the mean) that only the average big head, which is proportionate with the body, is praiseworthy. A head like this is compared by Della Porta to that of the lion, since as its form is described by Aristotle, it is a rather excellent animal as a result of its proportionate body and its other characteristics. In connection with the angular forehead, the lion analogy recurs:

²⁷ Ibid., 106–7.

²⁸ Ibid., 107.

²⁹ Ibid., 107.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 223.

such a forehead is evaluated again, together with the medium-sized face, according to the mean principle, which signifies generosity, cleverness, a sharp mind, eloquence and virtue according to the interpretation of several classical authors as well, who are so frequently quoted by Della Porta.



Fig. 4 The ideal head of the lion
(G.B. Della Porta, *Della fisonomia dell'huomo* – 1610)

The physiognomic analyses in connection with the lion may lead to several interesting conclusions, because there is no other animal which is so often mentioned and to which so many, usually positive characteristics are attributed.³¹ The reception of topic signs enumerated by physiognomic reference books can be detected in works dealing with other subjects, too, based on specific physiognomic criteria. In Ripa, where one can find a full quarry of lion symbolism, it is a symbol of proud eagerness, ambition, mercifulness, moral strength; it is of hot temperament, and its vehemence and formidable character is also a result of those features. When discussing temperament, during the characterisation of choleric psyche Ripa quotes the figure of the lion as a zoomorphic example “to prove the force of nature and temper [...]. The lion is also known as generous and munificent as well as bountiful without falling into exaggeration.”³² In the entry on generosity one can read the detailed zoomorphic analysis of the lion and its characteristics. The lady symbolising generosity – beside whom the author positions the lion – “is of angular forehead and round nose, similarly to the lion as mentioned by Aristotle in Chapter 9 of his Physiognomy.”³³

³¹ For a brief history of the representation of the lion in ancient literature with bibliographical references, cf. Maria Fernanda Ferrini, Notes to the text of *Aristotele Fisiognomica* (Milano: Bompiani, 2007), 251–53.

³² Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Padova: Pier Paolo Tozzi, 1625), 110.

³³ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 405. The 9th chapter mentioned by Ripa corresponds with 41 or 809b 14–37 reference in modern editions.

Pseudo-Aristotle could easily mean a base of reference for modern age followers of physiognomy, as he depicted the figure of the lion – and that of the man who can be compared to it – with really exceptional detail. Della Porta describing the lion almost quotes it word by word:

the size of the lion's head is average big, the angular forehead is slightly flattened in the middle [...] its yellowish eyes are not too round, and not too bulging either, its eyebrows are big, its nose is rather massive than tight or small, a bit round and firm; its upper jaw is not too protruding, proportionate with the lower one, its mouth is big, its lip is tight, so that the upper lip rests on the lower, and does not hang towards the corners of the mouth; its neck is big, but only average massive, and it only consists of one straight bone; it is covered by hair as long as its shoulder, the end of it is wavy; its chest is powerful, the shoulders are wide, its breast and back are quite strong; its bones are massive and firm, and they contain hardly any marrow; its colour is yellowish, it walks with slow, deliberate treads and at each step it moves its shoulders gently, its voice is deep. As to its inner characteristics: it is generous, longing for victory, strong, nice-looking, gentle and kind with those with whom it gets into connection.³⁴

The lion is the *par excellence* symbol of manhood as well: Della Porta mentions the lion as the zoomorphic symbol of braveness, pride, wildness, mercifulness and power 91 times in his *Della fisionomia dell'huomo*, and 10 times in *Della celeste fisionomia*.

Della Porta's reading of zoomorphic physiognomy portrays the visualised image of a series of moralities also analysed in *Nicomachean ethics*: each virtue and sin is complete with an animal figure fitting to it. This is not the place and opportunity to depict and compare with Aristotelean classification Della Porta's full repertory, which employs emphasis on each occasion with zoomorphic examples, and discusses the relation of the body as a moral symbol of the soul in forty-five chapters and several dozens of subchapters accompanying them. Still, it is interesting to describe the connections of *humanitas* and *animalitas* with a few zoomorphic examples in an ethical context and demonstrate the character of zoomorphism of *Fisionomia* and the way it is used throughout the work.

For instance, Chapter II of Book V analyses the different types of "badness" and "bad morality" in ten subchapters: after the discussion of the ugly faced and therefore bad/evil man and the figure of bad morality, the next subchapter, even in its title, depicts the zoomorphic image of the fraudulent man, who can be compared with the fox, wolf, snake and tiger. Della Porta also enumerates tale figures of Aesop, and with this, he emphasises the several-thousand-year-old literary tradition of moral symbols. This is fol-

³⁴ Della Porta, *Fisionomia*, 48. For the same description cf. Aristotle, *Fisiognomica*, 809b.

lowed by the description of the deceitful, which is comparable with the fox and the snake (moreover, with the Ethiopians and women). The characterisation of the false man is followed by the description of the thief, who is comparable with the wolf, the eagle, the sparrow-hawk, the raven and in general predator birds, then comes the malevolent man who can be compared with the ape, the fox, the snake and the Egyptian mongoose:

The hair of such a man is rare, his eyebrows are thick and meeting. His cheeks are finely drawn. His mouth is laughing. He talks through his nose. His neck is fragile and weak. His ribs are thin and weak. He is a hunchback. His bottoms are saggy, almost dried. His legs are long, walks with quick and short steps. His eyes are confused, his body staggers, he gasps for air. The corners of his eyes are fleshy. His pupils are small. The two eyes are placed far away from each other, they flicker, his vision is sharp and he is hollow-eyed. They may be small and dark, winking, dry, black or shining, or they close drily and are appropriately big. They may be shiny, clear, sullen, smiling and bright, too.³⁵

Features enumerated during the comparison with the ape (small, hollow eyes, small ears, flattened nose, small, hollow cheeks, humped back, emaciated bottom, short, withered fingers) refer to the dominance of malice, fraudulence, stealing, lechery, therefore in any case, bad morals. On the basis of our other readings, it is not surprising that he compares the outlook of the cunning man to that of the fox, the ape (and women). Finally, the chapter closes with the enumeration of the physiognomic signs of the worthless, the vicious, the ones susceptible to poisoning and murder.³⁶ The analogic semiosis of the rest of the moralities works in the same way, as each animal has its clearly defined, potentially cosmologic place for as much as it symbolises the structure and function of the universe and man within it.

Therefore, the zoomorphic examples are in the forefront in connection with almost all moralities. And if in a zoo-ethical context Aristotle is an irrefutable source, the issues of *humanitas* and *animalitas* themselves – characteristic of the Renaissance syncretic way of thinking – involve other philosophical trends, especially the hermeneutic-Platonic theories in the process of zoo-physiognomic cognizance. It is also extremely instructive from the viewpoint of the history of scholarship how Della Porta contaminates the theories of different authors, intellectual trends and eras on the relation of man and animals, creating his *own* zoo-physiognomy. His impact on the zoomorphic depiction of the taxonomy of characters was regarded for several centuries as an absolute source, and not only in the literature of physiognomy. And may we consider the innocent lamb, the flat-

³⁵ Della Porta, *Fisonomia*, 485–86.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 486–87.

tering or insidious cat, the arrogant peacock, the cowardly rabbit, the cunning fox, the wise owl, the slow snail, the roaring donkey, the strong bull, the sad turtle-dove, the dirty swine, the diligent bee, the faithful dog, the croaky crow, the puffed toad and the other animals with epithets, behind all the images we always see the equivalent human figure.