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Aristotle's *clivus naturae*

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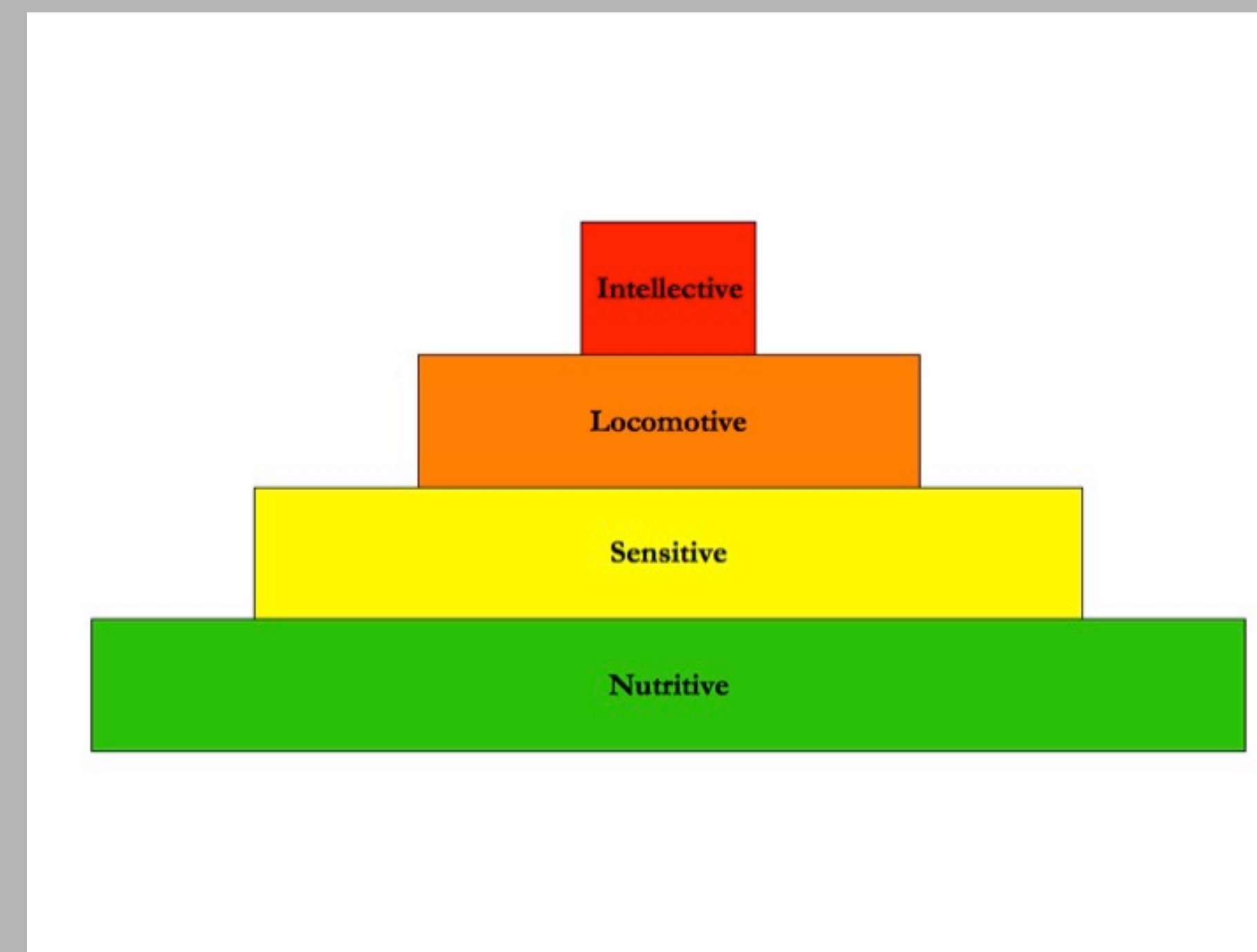
Aristotle's *clivus naturae*

Aristotle, in his book *On the Soul*, famously holds that the soul has four parts or levels, hierarchically and cumulatively arranged.

All living things possess the nutritive soul, i.e. the power to nourish oneself, to grow, and to reproduce. Plants have only that level of soul.

Animals possess in addition the sensitive soul, the power of sense-perception. Some (but not all) also possess the locomotive soul, the power to move about.

Only humans possess the top level, the intellectual soul, the power to think.



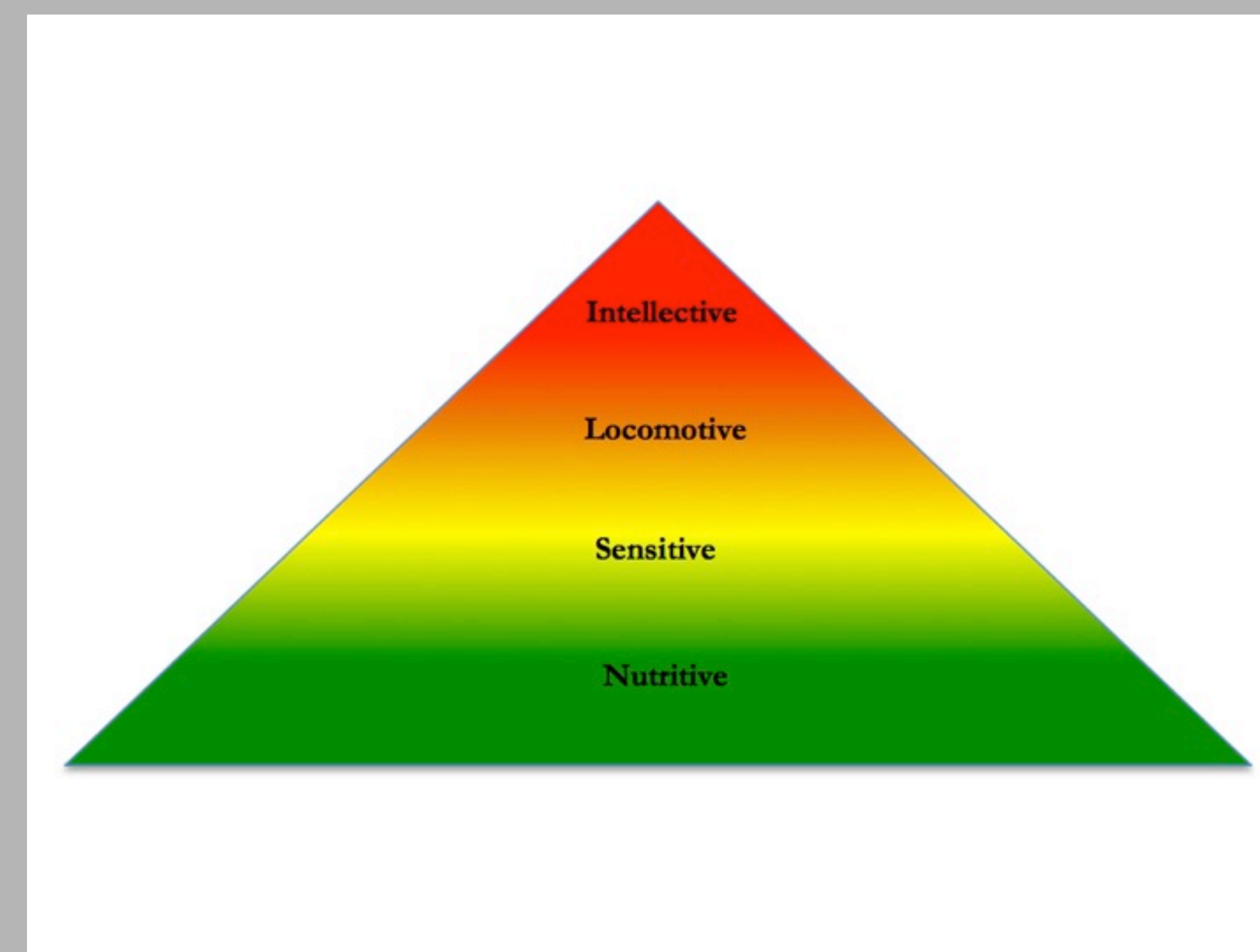
These four levels of soul are characterized by:

- (i) *indivisibility*. Though one can analyze the levels of soul into parts, in fact any such part is not found without the other parts. Even nutrition and reproduction are, at base, the same power. (There is a slight, but tolerable, exception in the case of sense-perception.)
- ii) *discreteness*. The parts of soul are separate, *κεχωρισμένα*; each is a distinct package of powers.
- iii) *cumulativeness*. Each level presupposes the one below it: an animal cannot have locomotion if it does not have sensation....

Altogether, then, it is the image of a staircase with four distinct treads: it is the *scala naturae*, the ladder of nature, as it appears in psychology.

But in some other works, like the *History of Animals*, where Aristotle is studying biology from a less lofty perspective, a different picture emerges.

The hard edges of the staircase soften considerably, and we get something much more like a slope than a ladder: a *clivus naturae* rather than a *scala naturae*. Some species are so close to each other that it is not clear on which side of the plant/animal divide they fall. There is still a hierarchy of living things, but the rise is not stepped—it is continuous.



In this closer, more empirical, study, the hallmarks of the psychic staircase break down:

- (i) *indivisibility*. The nutritive soul, e.g., breaks down into two distinct powers: ingestion and digestion. Animals have both, plants only the former: their nutrients are directly available in the soil in which they are rooted.
- (ii) *discreteness*. The levels of soul interact: sensation introduces pleasure into reproduction; locomotion requires sensation.
- (iii) *cumulativeness*. A living being does not need the lower level of soul fully developed to enjoy some of the higher powers: even animals with weak sensation can move around.

This tension in Aristotle's biology has a legacy that reaches into our own culture wars. The idea that the intellectual soul is a distinctive and discrete power of humans underlies religious notions of an eternal and separable soul. It lies behind our battles over abortion, euthanasia, and human exceptionalism. But Aristotle, in his close empirical studies, did appear to be working toward a different view....