

'A Brute to the Brutes?': Descartes' Treatment of Animals

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I

To be able to believe that a dog with a broken paw is not really in pain when it whimpers is a quite extraordinary achievement even for a philosopher. Yet according to the standard interpretation, this is just what Descartes did believe. He held, we are informed, the 'monstrous' thesis that 'animals are without feeling or awareness of any kind'.¹ The standard view has been reiterated in a recent collection on animal rights, which casts Descartes as the villain of the piece for his alleged view that animals merely behave 'as if they feel pain when they are, say, kicked or stabbed'.² The basis for this widely accepted interpretation is Descartes' famous doctrine of the 'animal machine' ('*bête-machine*'); a doctrine that one critic condemns as 'a grim foretaste of a mechanically minded age' which 'brutally violates the old kindly fellowship of living things'.³

But if we look at what Descartes actually says about animals it is by no means clear that he holds the monstrous view which all the commentators attribute to him. In fact the traditional rubric 'Descartes' doctrine of the *bête-machine*' is vague and ambiguous; it needs to be broken down into a number of distinct propositions if we are to sort out what Descartes said, and what he is implicitly committed to, from what he neither said nor implied.

Consider, then, the following assertions:

- (1) Animals are machines
- (2) Animals are automata
- (3) Animals do not think
- (4) Animals have no language
- (5) Animals have no self-consciousness
- (6) Animals have no consciousness
- (7) Animals are totally without feeling

¹ N. Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 136 and 140.

² T. Regan and P. Singer (eds), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), 4.

³ A. Boyce Gibson, *The Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Methuen, 1932), 214.

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Proposition (7) is the 'monstrous thesis' with which Descartes is so often credited. I shall argue that Descartes held theses (1) to (5), but that there is no evidence that he held (7), and even some positive evidence that he regarded (7) as false; however, fuzziness about (6) and its distinction from (5) (together with certain general features of his metaphysics) laid him open to be interpreted as committed to (7).

II

Thesis (1) is not explicitly asserted by Descartes in this form, but he commits himself to it in so many words in the famous passage on animals in Part V of the Discourse, where he says the body may be regarded '*comme une machine qui, ayant été faite des mains de Dieu, est incomparablement mieux ordonnée . . . qu'aucune de celles . . . inventées par les hommes*'.⁴ Thesis (1) in fact forms part of Descartes' general scientific 'mechanism', and, roughly translated, means that all animal behaviour is subsumable under physiological laws, which, for Descartes, are ultimately derivable from mathematical principles. Essentially, when Descartes says that 'all the motions of animals originate from the corporeal and mechanical principle',⁵ he is concerned to promulgate a scientific animal physiology which seeks explanations in terms of efficient rather than final causes.⁶ Now from none of all this does it follow that when Descartes calls something a 'mechanism' or 'machine' he is automatically ruling out the presence of sensations or feelings; Boyce Gibson's claim that Descartes 'uses the term [mechanism] explicitly to exclude . . . feeling' is not supported by any evidence.⁷ **In fact it is important to notice that the human body is, for Descartes, a machine in exactly the same sense as the animal body: 'God made our body like a machine, and he wanted it to function like a universal instrument, which would always operate in the same way in accordance with its own laws'.⁸ The phrase 'bête-machine' can thus be rather misleading, since the mechanical physiology Descartes has in mind operates equally in the case of *homo sapiens*.** Of course it is true that in the human, but not the animal, case there is the extra dimension of a

⁴ AT VI 56; HR I 116 (references to 'AT' are to volume and page number of Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (eds), *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Cerf, 1897–1913); HR stands for E. S. Haldane and G. T. R. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, repr. 1969)).

⁵ Letter to More of 5 February 1649: AT V 276; K 243 ('K' stands for A. Kenny, *Descartes' Philosophical Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970)).

⁶ *Principles*, I, 28 (AT VIII 15; HR I 230). See further AT V 158 and J. G. Cottingham, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 85f.

⁷ Nor does Gibson cite any; op. cit., 211.

⁸ AT V 163/4; cf. Cottingham, op. cit., 29.

‘soul’ (I shall come back to this); but this is a separate point. To deny that X has a soul is a separate claim from the claim that X’s movements can be explained by mechanical principles, and is not strictly entailed by it.

Proposition (2) is implied frequently by Descartes, and is stated explicitly in a letter to More of 5 February 1649:

it seems reasonable since art copies nature, and men can make various automata which move without thought, that nature should produce its own automata much more splendid than the artificial ones. These natural automata are the animals.⁹

It is Descartes’ use of the term ‘automaton’ more than any other that has led critics to convict him of holding the monstrous thesis (thus, Kemp Smith speaks of the Cartesian view that animals are ‘mere automata . . . incapable of experiencing the feelings of well-being or the reverse, hunger or thirst . . .’).¹⁰ But the inference from ‘x is an automaton’ to ‘X is incapable of feeling’ is a mistaken one. Webster’s dictionary gives the primary meaning of ‘automaton’ as simply ‘a machine that is relatively self-operating’; and neither this nor the subsidiary meaning (‘creature who acts in a mechanical fashion’) automatically implies the absence of feeling.¹¹ Even today, then, to regard total insensibility as part of the meaning of ‘automaton’ would seem to be an error; and this seems to have been even more true in the seventeenth century, where ‘automaton’ probably carried no more than its strict Greek meaning of ‘self-moving thing’. Thus Leibniz, defending his claim that we possess ‘freedom of spontaneity’ speaks of the human soul as ‘a kind of spiritual automaton’, meaning no more than that its action-generating impulses arise solely *ab interno*, and produce their effects without the intervention of any external cause.¹² What fascinated Descartes’ generation about machines ranging from clocks to the elaborately contrived moving statues to be found in some of the royal fountains was simply this: the complex sequences of movements which to primitive (or medieval) man might have appeared as certain proof of some kind of inner motive ‘force’ or ‘spirit’, could all be explained quite simply by reference to *internal mechanical structure*—cogs, levers and the like (Descartes mentions as an example a statue of

⁹ ‘deinde quia rationi consentaneum videtur, cum ars sit naturae imitatrix, possintque homines varia fabricare automata, in quibus sine ulla cogitatione est motus, ut natura etiam sua automata, sed artefactis longe praestantiora, nempe bruta omnia, producat’ (AT V 277; K 244.) This is a development of material found in *Discourse*, part V (loc. cit.).

¹⁰ Op. cit., 135.

¹¹ *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass: Merriam, 1963).

¹² *Theodicy*, I, 52.

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Neptune which would threaten with his trident the approaching onlooker who had unwittingly stepped on a button).¹³ The point Descartes is concerned to make over and over again about the behaviour of ‘natural automata’ like dogs and monkeys is that the mere complexity of their movements is no more a bar to explanation in terms of inner mechanical structure than is the case with the responses of the trident-brandishing ‘Neptune’.¹⁴

III

So far then, I maintain that Descartes’ characterization of animals as ‘machines’ and ‘automata’ is of itself quite insufficient to allow us to conclude that he thinks that animals lack feelings. When we get on to the remaining propositions in our list, things are not so simple.

It is, Descartes asserts, in principle possible to mistake a cleverly contrived artificial automaton for an animal. But we could never mistake an automaton, however ingenious, for a man. Why not? Because, says Descartes, an automaton could never talk: it could ‘never arrange its speech in various ways in order to reply appropriately to everything that could be said in its presence’.¹⁵ **This for Descartes indicates the crucial difference between animals and man—they do not think.** Animals do not *penser* or *cogitare*; they are not endowed with a mind (*mens, esprit*); they lack reason (*raison*); they do not have a rational soul (*âme raisonnable*).¹⁶

Descartes is thus explicitly committed to thesis (3), and holds, moreover, that it is entailed by (or at least strongly evidenced by¹⁷) thesis (4). Descartes was of course aware that parrots can be made to ‘talk’ and that dogs make noises which might be analogous to speech; but he has strong and, since Chomsky’s updating of them, widely admired arguments against construing such utterances as genuine speech. The talking of

¹³ *Traité de L’Homme*, AT XI 130–132. Cf. E. Gilson, *René Descartes Discours de la Methode* (Paris: Vrin, 1925), 420ff.

¹⁴ Descartes compares the plants in this connection, ‘que [la nature] remplit d’une infinité de petits conduits imperceptibles à la vue’: letter to Reneri of April 1638 (AT II 40; K 54).

¹⁵ *Discourse*, loc. cit.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. letter to More of 5 February 1649: ‘loquela unicum est cogitationis in corpore latentis signum certum’ (AT V 278; K 245).

¹⁷ Descartes at one point observes that ‘quamvis . . . pro demonstrato habeam, probari non posse aliquam esse in brutis cogitationem, non ideo puto posse demonstrari nullam esse, quia mens humana illorum corda non pervadit’ (AT V 276–277; K 244).

parrots is dismissed because it is not 'relevant to the topic';¹⁸ but the most important point Descartes has to make is that the utterances of dogs, cats, etc., are never, to use the Chomskian phrase, 'stimulus-free'; they are always, says Descartes, geared to and elicited by a particular 'natural impulse'.¹⁹

I shall come back to these arguments, but first an obvious objection must be faced. In admitting that Descartes held thesis (3) (that animals do not think), have I not thereby conceded that he must have held the 'monstrous thesis' (7) (that animals do not feel)? For does not Descartes' special sense of 'think' (*cogitare, penser*) include feelings and sensations? Well, it is certainly true that Descartes deliberately extended the normal use of '*cogitatio*' or '*pensée*'. In answer to a misunderstanding of Mersenne (that if man was purely '*res cogitans*' he must lack will), Descartes stated that willing was a *façon de penser*; he further explains that *la pensée* includes '*non seulement les méditations et les volontés*' but '*toutes les opérations de l'âme*'.²⁰ This is generally taken to include sensations and feelings—indeed, seeing and hearing are explicitly included by Descartes in the list of '*opérations de l'âme*' just mentioned.

Further analysis however makes it clear that the matter is not as straightforward as this, and that translators who render '*cogitatio*' or '*pensée*' as simply 'experience' are moving much too swiftly.²¹ When discussing whether '*video ergo sum*' might not do as well as '*cogito ergo sum*', Descartes says that 'I see' is ambiguous. If understood '*de visione*' it is *not* a good premise for inferring one's existence but if understood 'concerning the actual sense or awareness of seeing' (*de ipso sensu sive conscientia videndi*) it is quite certain, since it is in this case referred to the mind which alone feels or thinks it sees (*quae sola sentit sive cogitat se videre*).²² From this we can see that it is misleading to say, *tout court*, that *cogitatio* 'includes' sensations and feelings. The only sense in which a sensation like seeing is a true *cogitatio* is the sense in which it may involve the reflective mental awareness which Descartes calls *conscientia*—the self-conscious apprehension of the mind that it is aware of seeing.²³

The upshot is that Descartes' assertion of proposition (3) (that animals

¹⁸ To Newcastle, 23 November 1646 (AT IV 574; K 206).

¹⁹ To More, loc. cit.; to Newcastle, loc. cit.; and N. Chomsky: *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968), Ch. I.

²⁰ To Mersenne, May 1637 (AT I 366; K 32); and to Renari, April 1638 (AT II 36; K 51). Cf. A. Kenny, *Descartes* (New York: Random House, 1968), 68ff.

²¹ Cf. E. Anscombe and P. Geach, *Descartes' Philosophical Writings* (London: Nelson, 1969), xlviii, and my 'Descartes on Thought', *Phil. Quarterly*, July 1978.

²² *Principles*, I, 9 (AT VIII 7/8; HR I 222).

²³ *Conscientia* is defined in the *Conversation with Burman*: 'conscium esse est . . . cogitare et reflectere supra suam cogitationem' (AT V 149; Cottingham, op. cit., 7 and 61).

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do not think) need not commit him to denying any feeling or sensation to animals—for example a level of feeling or sensation that falls short of reflective mental awareness.

Notice, moreover, how the language argument fits into all this. In pointing out that animals have no genuine language, Descartes clearly thinks that he has a powerful case for concluding that they do not think. Yet for Descartes to regard this argument (*'non loquitur ergo non cogitat'*)²⁴ as having such evident force, 'think' (*cogitat*) here must evidently be used in the fairly restrictive sense described above. If Descartes were using '*cogitat*' in the alleged very wide sense, he would be offering us an argument of the form '*non loquitur ergo non sentit*' (he does not speak therefore does not feel). It is inconceivable that Descartes could have proudly produced *this* argument to his correspondents as self-evidently clinching.

IV

Our conclusion so far is that neither in calling animals machines or automata, nor in denying they have thought or language, does Descartes commit himself to the monstrous thesis that they have no feelings or sensations. It is now time to look at some positive evidence that he actually regarded the monstrous thesis as false.

The strongest evidence, which those who credit Descartes with the monstrous thesis seem strangely blind to, comes from the famous letters already cited where Descartes denies speech to the animals. Writing to More, Descartes says that the sounds made by horses, dogs, etc., are not genuine language, but are ways of 'communicating to us . . . their natural impulses of anger, fear, hunger and so on'.²⁵ Similarly, Descartes wrote to Newcastle that:

If you teach a magpie to say good-day to its mistress when it sees her coming, all you can possibly have done is to make the emitting of this word the expression of one of its feelings. For instance it will be an expression of the hope of eating, if you have habitually given it a tit-bit when it says the word. Similarly, all the things which dogs, horses, and monkeys are made to do are merely expressions of their fear,

²⁴ 'He does not speak therefore he does not think.' Strictly, the argument must be of the form 'he does not speak *and has no capacity for language acquisition*, therefore he does not think'; for Descartes says that infants think (AT VII 246; HR II 115)—though only after a fashion (AT V 149/50; Cottingham, 8).

²⁵ 'impetus suos naturales ut iras metus famem et similia . . . significant' (AT V 278; K 244).

their hope, or their joy; and consequently, they can do these things without any thought . . .²⁶

'Impulses of anger, fear, hunger'; 'expression of one of its feelings'; 'expressions of fear, hope and joy'. These are quite extraordinary phrases to use for a man who is supposed to believe animals are 'without feeling or awareness of any kind'. Is it possible that Descartes is here speaking loosely or metaphorically? This seems strange in letters which are explicitly and painstakingly devoted to clarifying the Cartesian position on animals. If this were not enough, in the letter to More, Descartes specifically separates *cogitatio* (thought) from *sensus* (sensation), and states that he denies the former, but not the latter, to animals: 'I should like to stress that I am talking of thought, not of . . . sensation; for . . . I deny sensation to no animal, in so far as it depends on a bodily organ'.²⁷

V

The last quotation might make a pleasing and neat vindication of Descartes' kindly fellowship with the beasts: he denied that animals think, but not that they feel. But philosophy is seldom as tidy as this, and we must conclude by discussing a major difficulty which has been put off until now. The difficulty, in a nutshell, is that the monstrous thesis fits in with, and the pleasing vindication clashes with, Descartes' dualism.

If substance is divided exclusively and exhaustively into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, what room is there for animal sensations? Since an animal is not a *res cogitans*, has no mind or soul, it follows that it must belong wholly in the extended divisible world of jostling Cartesian shapes. And this means that what we call (and, *évidemment*, Descartes himself called) 'animal hunger' cannot be anything more than a set of internal muscle contractions leading to the jerking of certain limbs, or whatever. This then must be the authentic Cartesian position—a position summed up when Descartes quotes with approval the passage in Deuteronomy which says

²⁶ 'Si on apprend à une pie à dire bonjour à sa maîtresse, lorsqu'elle la voit arriver, ce ne peut être qu'en faisant que la prolation de cette parole devienne le mouvement de quelqu'une de ses passions; à savoir, ce sera un mouvement de l'espérance qu'elle a de manger, si l'on a toujours accoutumé de lui donner quelque friandise lorsqu'elle l'a dit; ainsi toutes les choses qu'on fait faire aux chiens, aux chevaux et aux singes ne sont que des mouvements de leur crainte, de leur espérance ou de leur joie, en sorte qu'ils les peuvent faire sans aucune pensée' (AT IV 574; K 207).

²⁷ 'velim notari me loqui de cogitatione, non de vita vel sensu; vitam enim nulli animali denego, utpote quam in solo cordis calore consistere statuo; nec denego etiam sensum quatenus ab organo corporeo dependet' (AT V 278; K 245).

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that the soul of animals is simply their blood; or when he says that animal life is no more than ‘the heat of the heart’.²⁸

No doubt this is where a pure Cartesian, a consistent Cartesian, would stop. But we have seen that Descartes, dualist or no, undoubtedly and explicitly attributes such feelings as anger, hope and joy to animals. I think the only explanation of this is that Descartes, either inadvertently or wilfully, failed to eradicate a certain fuzziness from his thinking about consciousness and self-consciousness. To say that X is in pain (angry, joyful) is certainly to attribute a conscious state to X; but this need not amount to the full-blooded reflective awareness of pain that is involved in the term *cogitatio*. To be dogmatic for a moment, I should certainly say that cats feel pain, but not that they have the kind of full mental awareness of pain that is needed for it to count as a *cogitatio* (i.e. the sort needed to support the premise of a *cogito*-type argument ‘*patior ergo sum*’—‘I am in pain therefore I am’). Descartes is certainly committed to thesis (5)—that animals do not have self-consciousness; but when as a result he consigns animals to the realm of *res extensa*, he simply does not seem to bother that terms like pain, anger, etc., which he uses of animals, clearly imply some degree of conscious (though perhaps not ‘self-conscious’) awareness.

VI

It is important to notice, in conclusion, that this strange fuzziness is not simply the result of a blind spot which Descartes had when dealing with animals, but connects with a fundamental and unresolved difficulty in Cartesian metaphysics. There is a fascinating chapter in Book IV of the *Principles* dealing with human sensations (*sensus*) and feelings (*affectus*). When we hear a piece of good news, says Descartes, we feel ‘spiritual joy’ (this is the sort of *pura cogitatio* that, presumably, God and the angels experience). But when the news is grasped by the imagination, the ‘animal spirits’ flow from the brain to the heart muscles, which in turn transmit more ‘movements’ to the brain, with the result that we experience a feeling of ‘*laetitia animalis*’.²⁹ It is evident that Descartes is in a philosophical mess here. One might expect that joy would be regarded as a purely mental state and thus confined firmly to the realm of *res cogitans*. But here is Descartes distinguishing between the pure intellectual apprehension of joyful news, on the one hand, and, on the other, a *feeling* of joy. This latter is the bizarre entity called ‘animal joy’, which is somehow bound up with heart muscles and brain commotions. The choice of the phrase ‘*laetitia animalis*’ here is no accident. Descartes clearly wants to

²⁸ To Plempius, 3 October 1637 (AT I 415; K 37); and to More (see note 5).

²⁹ *Principles*, IV, 190 (AT VIII 317; HR I 290–291).

say that the joy of dogs and cats is analysable into just such physiological events. But what he seems to forget is that as a strict dualist he should not be using the word '*laetitia*' at all in this case. For a true dualist, if something is '*laetitia*' (an inescapably 'mental' predicate) it cannot be *animalis* (part of *res extensa*); and conversely, if it is *animalis* it cannot be *laetitia*.

The truth, perhaps, is that Descartes was never completely comfortable with strict dualism, however emphatically he affirmed it. As the contortions in the Sixth Meditation show, *feelings* or *sensations* (like those of hunger or thirst) are an insoluble worry for him. We do not merely 'notice' that we are in pain, as a pilot observes that his ship is damaged, we actually feel it; and this shows that there is a '*conjunctio et quasi permixtio*'³⁰ between mind and body—a mysterious 'intermingling' of what are, remember, logically distinct and incompatible substances. This 'substantial union' is the uncuttable knot in the centre of Cartesian metaphysics. Descartes once wrote to a correspondent that if an angel (a pure *res cogitans*) were in a human body, he would not *feel* like us; he would merely observe the changes in his nervous system. This shows, Descartes observed, that feelings like that of pain are not the *purae cogitationes* of a mind distinct from body, but rather are the 'confused perceptions which result from a real union with the body'.³¹ Feelings, in other words, are an inexplicable result of the animal side of our nature, our mysterious intermingling with *res extensa*. If this is what Descartes says about human feelings, it is not surprising that he never got animal feelings properly sorted out. Strict dualism makes nonsense of Descartes' common-sense attribution of feelings like hunger to the animals; but then Descartes is unable to extract from dualism any clear account of the awkwardly undeniable experience of *human* hunger. At the end of the day, Descartes may not have been completely consistent, but at least he was not altogether beastly to the beasts.³²

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³⁰ AT VII 81; HR I 192.

³¹ 'sensus doloris, aliosque omnes, non esse puras cogitationes mentis a corpore distinctas, sed confusas illius realiter unitae perceptiones' (to Regius, January 1642: AT III 493; K 127-128).

³² I am indebted to Prof. A. G. N. Flew, whose questions about Descartes' position stimulated me to pursue this line of enquiry.