

Philosophy 355: Contemporary Philosophy  
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Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9am - 10:15am

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From Sixth Objections (Mersenne, AT 414): **The souls of animals differ from those of humans only by degree.**

The thinking of monkeys, dogs, and other animals seems to confirm the view that thought could be effected by corporeal motions, or was even identical with those very corporeal motions. For dogs bark in their sleep, as if they were chasing hares or rushing at robbers. They are aware when awake that they run, and when dreaming, that they bark. With you, I recognize that there is nothing in them distinct from their bodies. But if you deny that the dog knows that it is running or thinking, besides the fact that this is an unproved assertion, the dog himself might perhaps pass a similar judgment with respect to us, that we are also unaware that we run and think, when we run or when we think. For you do not behold the dog's internal mode of operation, just as he is not directly aware of yours. There is no lack of men of great attainments who at the present day concede reason to the animals or have in previous ages done so. So far am I from believing that all these operations can be satisfactorily explained by mechanism, without imputing to them sensation, life, and soul, that I am ready to stake anything in proving that that is both an impossibility and an absurdity. Finally, there are plenty of people who will say that man himself lacks sensation and intellect, and can do everything by means of mechanical structures, without any mind, given that apes, dogs, and elephants can perform all their operations by mechanical means. If the limited reasoning power to be found in animals differs from human reason, the difference is merely one of degree, and does not imply any essential difference.

Descartes's Response (426-7):

Even were I to concede that dogs and apes have thought, it would not in any way follow from this that the human mind is not distinct from the body. The conclusion would rather be that in other animals, too, the mind is distinct from the body. In fact, the brutes possess no thought whatsoever. I not only stated this, but proved it by very strong arguments, which no one has refuted. Yet those who assert, as if they were present in the animals' hearts, that dogs when awake know that they are running, and in their dreams know that they are barking, are simply saying something without proving it.

You go on to say that you do not believe that the ways in which the beasts operate can be explained by means of mechanics without invoking any sensation, life, or soul. (I take this to mean, "without invoking thought", for I accept that the brutes have what is commonly called life, and a corporeal soul and organic sensation.) Moreover, you are ready to wager any amount that this is an impossible and ridiculous claim. But these remarks should not be taken to constitute an argument, for the same could be said of any other claim, however true it might be. Indeed, the use of wagers in debate is generally resorted to only when there is a lack of arguments to prove the case. And since once upon a time distinguished people used to laugh at claims about the antipodes in such a fashion, I do not think that a claim should be immediately dismissed as false just because some people laugh at it.

You add in conclusion, "There are plenty of people who will say that man himself lacks sensation and intellect, and can do everything by means of mechanical structures, without any mind, given that apes, dogs, and elephants can perform all their operations by mechanical means." This is surely not an argument that proves anything, except perhaps that some people have such a confused conception of everything and cling so tenaciously to their preconceived opinions (which they understand only in a verbal way) that rather than change them they will deny of themselves what they cannot fail to experience within themselves all the time. We cannot fail constantly to experience within ourselves that we are thinking. It may be shown that animate brutes can perform all their operations without any thought. But this does not entitle anyone to infer that he does not himself think. Such an inference would be made only by someone who has previously been convinced that he operates in exactly the same way as the brutes, simply because he has attributed thought to them. He then remains so stubbornly attached to the sentence, 'men and brutes operate in the same way', that when it is pointed out to him that the brutes do not think, he actually prefers to deny his own thought, of which he cannot fail to be aware, rather than change his opinion that he operates in the same way as the brutes.

But I find it hard to accept that there are many people of this sort. It will be found that the great majority, given the premise that thought is not distinct from corporeal motion, take a much more rational line and maintain that thought is the same in the brutes as it is in us, since they observe all kinds of corporeal motions in them, just as in us. And they will add that the difference, which is merely one of degree, does not imply any essential difference. From this they will be quite justified in concluding that, although there may be a smaller degree of reason in the beasts than there is in us, the beasts possess minds which are exactly the same type as ours.