Descartes, Locke and the Soul of Animals

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Abstract

The view that animals are thoughtless brutes was the subject of considerable controversy during the seventeenth century. Locke clearly perceived his own position to differ substantially from that of Descartes. Historians usually credit Locke with an anti-Cartesian view of the nature of animals and with setting the vogue in France for a concept of soul that differentiated people and animals only in degree. According to Bayle, for example, "Locke has declared himself against those who will not attribute reason to beasts." In this paper I show that Locke does not attribute reason to beasts, that his ontological position does not differ in great detail from Descartes' and does not differ in its social consequences for animals. I argue that the major differences between Descartes and Locke on the question of animal consciousness are for the most part linguistic.
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In a letter to Henry More, Descartes states that 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 artificial ones. These natural automata are the animals."¹ The view that animals are thoughtless brutes was the subject of considerable controversy during the seventeenth century; as Rosenfield points out, Descartes' formulation of strict anomalous automatism "aroused a veritable storm of attack and defense, which raged over Europe in a series of major and minor flurries until its force was abated on the eve of the cyclonic French Revolution."²

In addition to his expressed interest in questions concerning the nature of animals, Locke was drawn into this controversy by his comment in 4.3.6 of the Essay that matter might be given the power of thinking by God. Locke clearly perceived his own view to differ substantially from that of Descartes. Historians usually credit Locke with an anti-cartesian view of the nature of animals and with setting the vogue in France for a concept of soul that differentiated people and animals only in degree. According to Bayle, "Locke has declared himself against those who will not attribute reason to beasts."³ Aaron notes that the doctrine that animals are thoughtless machines was in fact "most distasteful to Locke."⁴ In a classic work on the dispute, Rosenfield states that "it would be expected that his opinion of animals would differ from Descartes', inasmuch as their conceptions of matter and knowledge were so much at variance."⁵

Rosenfield credits Locke with attacking both scholastics and cartesians, yet there is only one reference to Locke's work which indicates, quite


⁵ Rosenfield, p. 190.
simply, a general discontent on Locke's part with these classical positions. Neither Bayle nor Aaron document exact passages from Locke which would justify the praise that Locke has received with regard to this historical controversy. In this paper I will show that Locke's ontological position does not, in fact, differ in great detail from Descartes' and does not differ in its social consequences for animals. I argue that the major differences between Descartes and Locke on the question of animal consciousness are for the most part linguistic.

Descartes views the difference between man and animal as one of kind rather than degree. In the Discourse he denies that brutes possess reason or even a degree of reason lower than man; that they "have none at all" follows from the fact that they do not speak:

For it is a very remarkable fact that there are none so depraved and stupid, without even excepting idiots, that they cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they make known their thoughts; while on the other hand, there is no animal, however perfect and fortunately circumstanced it may be, which can do the same. It is not the want of organs that brings this to pass, for it is evident that magpies and parrots are able to utter words just like ourselves, and yet they cannot speak as we do, that is, so as to give evidence that they think of what they say.

Even men who are born deaf and dumb surpass brutes, for they can communicate by inventing certain signs. In a letter to Henry More, Descartes explains that language or "real speech" is the "only certain sign of thought hidden in a body."

The behavior of animals does not indicate that they are conscious (think, desire, have emotions, etc.). Just as one would not apply mental predicates to machines or to a clock, one has no grounds for applying such predicates to animals. In The Passions of the Soul, Descartes recommends that the term 'thought' be used in the widest possible sense to include not only reasoning, but emotions as well. There is nothing in us which we ought to attribute to our soul, he says, except "our thoughts, which are mainly of two sorts, the one being the actions of the soul, and the other its passions." In denying that animals think, Descartes is also denying that they experience such passions as joy, fear, anger and sorrow. The activities of animals are not the result of reasoning, but

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7. Descartes to More.

of "the disposition of their organs" and can be explained solely in terms of the laws of physics that govern other material bodies.

Reflective consciousness of the self and of the object of thought constitutes the essence of the soul. Descartes prefers to restrict the term 'soul' to man's rational soul, a thinking spiritual entity. The so-called 'soul' of animals signifies nothing more than a vegetative and sensitive force. Sense perception that is not accompanied by self-conscious reflection cannot be referred to as "thinking." Although animals have sense perceptions, they are not conscious of such perceptions (do not reason, entertain or contemplate the basic data of sense). Since pleasure and pain are mental sensations, it follows that animals, devoid of mind, do not experience such sensations. Descartes does not deny that they show the external movements which in men are symptoms of pleasure and pain; in animals such motion is explained mechanically by appealing to the functioning of the heart, arteries, nerves, etc. In a letter to More he points out that sensations may be predicated of animals as long as they depend on bodily organs.9 That animals have "real feeling" or "real passion" is, however, explicitly denied.

In an attempt to explain his position to the Marquess of Newcastle, Descartes declares that he does not deny that animals sometimes "express passions" such as joy, fear and hope. The conviction still remains, however, that such passions are performed "without any thought."10 Descartes makes it clear that the difference between human and animal sensation is that the former is usually accompanied by thought, whereas the latter is never accompanied by conscious activity. He writes to More that "thought is included in our mode of sensation."11

In a letter to Plempius he explains that the souls of animals are nothing but their blood, the blood which is turned into animal spirits "by the warmth of the heart and travels through the arteries to the brain and from it to the nerves and muscles." Animals, he contends, do not see or sense things in the way that humans do. Speaking of Fromondus, Descartes says:

He supposes that I think that animals see just as we do, i.e. feeling or thinking they see, which is said to have been Epicurus' view and is still almost universal. . . I explain quite explicitly that my view is that animals do not see as we do when we are aware that we see, but only as we do when our mind is elsewhere. In such a case the images of external objects are depicted on our retinas, and perhaps the impressions they leave in the optic nerves cause our limbs to

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9 Descartes to More.

10 Letter to Marquess of Newcastle, 23 November, 1646.

11 Descartes to More.
make various movements, although we are quite unaware of them. In such a case we too move just like automata, and nobody thinks that the force of heat is insufficient to cause their movements.12

Descartes' view of the relation between mind and language is properly emphasized by Malcolm. None of our external actions, says Descartes, "can show anyone who examines them that our body is not just a self-moving machine but contains a soul with thoughts, with the exception of words, or other signs."13 External actions such as crying, limping, screaming, etc. are performances of a person's bodily machine and are on par with the behavior of animals, behavior which does not indicate a mental state or an experience of pain. Malcolm correctly points out that Descartes is led to construe pain as a thought: "it consists of a propositional content (which might be expressed by the phrase, 'My having an in-my-foot-pain'), plus the mental frame of affirming, joined (no doubt) by the mental frame of dislike."14 Although it is not clear whether pain involves propositional content, it does involve thought or self-awareness.

Descartes admits to More that no one can prove that animals do not have thoughts, for "the human mind does not reach into their hearts." Nonetheless, he regards animal mechanism as the "most probable" hypothesis. It is more probable, he says, "that worms and flies and caterpillars move mechanically than that they all have immortal souls." In the Discourse he states that "next to the error of those who deny God" there is "none which is more effectual in leading feeble spirits from the straight path of virtue, than to imagine that the soul of the brute is of the same nature as our own."15 Had Descartes granted animals any degree of reason he would have been forced to reject the Christian doctrine of the primacy of man's soul.

There are certainly passages in the Essay that indicate Locke's disapproval of Descartes' position. If, he says, beasts "have any Ideas at all, and are not bare Machines (as some would have them) we cannot deny them to have some Reason. It seems as evident to me, that they do some of them in certain Instances reason, as that they have sense."16 Locke finds it difficult to believe that "Dogs or Elephants do not think, when they give all the demonstration of it imaginable, except only telling us,

12Descartes to Plempius for Fromondus, 3 October 1637, in Descartes' Philosophical Letters.
13Letter to Marquess of Newcastle, 23 November, 1646.
15Descartes to More.
that they do so."17 Further, he says, "to pass by other Instances, Birds learning of Tunes, and the endeavors one may observe in them, to hit the Notes right, put it past doubt with me, that they have Perception, and retain Ideas in their Memories, and use them for Patterns."18

Direct observation convinces Locke that animals possess some reason, that they are conscious and exhibit memory and a certain degree of intelligence and knowledge. Considering the type of consciousness and knowledge that Locke attributes to animals, he might as well have said that brutes possess a vegetative and sensitive soul rather than rationality. He regards conscious activity (thinking, believing, knowing, etc.) as propositional. It is, he points out, propositions that "can be framed as the object of knowledge. . . . Everything which we either know or believe, is some proposition."19 According to Locke, only propositions can be affirmed and denied. Knowledge, he says, "consists in the perception (i.e., apprehension) of the truth of affirmative, or negative, propositions."20 The joining or separating of signs "is what by another name, we call Proposition. So that Truth properly belongs only to Propositions: whereof there are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of, viz., Ideas and Words."21

Strictly speaking, ideas are not the objects of knowledge. Consequently, the fact that animals have ideas is not in itself grounds for contending that they have knowledge, however limited this knowledge may be. One would have to show that animals have, not simply ideas, but abstract ideas. Any proposition that can be formed, e.g., "The ball is in the den," will include at least one general term or idea. According to Locke, general terms are framed by the mind according to a process of abstraction. This process involves stripping off from among the simple observable qualities which characterize a particular thing just those in respect to which it differs from things that resemble it closely in other respects. The product of this process of abstraction is a general idea of a sort or kind of thing in which all the qualities common to a set of resembling objects are combined.22 For Locke, the recognition of a particular object as a ball or a cat, requires that one have the general idea 'ball' or 'cat.'

17 Essay, 2.1.19.
18 Essay, 2.10.10.
21 Essay, 4.5.2.
22 Essay, 3.3.6-10.
The type of idea that Locke attributes to animals is particular. If the question arises whether beasts compound and enlarge these particular ideas to any degree, this, says Locke, "I may be positive in. That the power of Abstracting is not at all in them." Since animals lack the power of abstraction and do not think in terms of propositions, it is hardly plausible to maintain that man and animal differ only in degree. Locke seems to be aware that the difference is, as Descartes stated, one of kind. The "having of general ideas," he says, "is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt Man and Brutes; and is an Excellency which the Faculties of Brutes do by no means attain to. For it is evident, we observe no foot-steps in them, of making use of general signs for universal Ideas; from which we have reason to imagine, that they have not the faculty of abstracting, or making general Ideas, since they have no use of Words, or any other general Signs."^23

Locke does not impute this disability to a lack of fit organs to frame articulate sounds, since many animals "can fashion such Sounds, and pronounce Words distinctly enough, but never with any such application." And, as Descartes pointed out, men "who through some defect in the Organs, want words, yet fail not to express their universal Ideas by signs, which serve them instead of general words, a faculty which we see Beasts come short in." Locke would not grant animals simple ideas of reflection such as perception, thinking, doubting, reasoning, knowing, etc. Since animals do not reason, know or think, they cannot be said to gain such ideas by reflective consciousness. To say that animals "think" or "reason" is simply to say that they receive and remember "particular Ideas, just as they receiv'd them from their Senses."^24

Since animals lack the capacity or faculty of abstraction and do not compare their ideas in respect to "Extent, Degrees, Time, Place" and other circumstances, Locke finds it difficult to attribute mental predicates to them in the sense that they are attributed to man. The temptation to do so, however, is evident in the Essay and may be credited to the lack of popularity and widespread criticism of Descartes' hypothesis. Whereas Descartes prefers to describe the activity of a dog that recognizes its master in mechanical terms, Locke prefers to describe such activity in terms of mental predicates such as knowledge. However, at bottom, they are both describing a physiological process that occurs in animals. Locke says:

For though they take in and retain together several Combinations of simple Ideas, as possibly the Shape, Smell, and Voice of his Master, make up the complex Idea a Dog has of him; or rather are so many distinct Marks whereby he knows him: yet, I do not think they do of themselves ever compound them, and make complex Ideas. And perhaps

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23 Essay, 2.11.10 (Italics mine).

24 Essay, 2.11.11.
even where we think they have complex Ideas, 'tis only one simple one that directs them in the knowledge of several things, which possibly they distinguish less by their Sight, than we imagine. For I have been credibly informed, that a Bitch will nurse, play with, and be fond of young Foxes, as much as, and in place of her Puppies. And those animals, which have a numerous brood of young ones at once, appear not to have any knowledge of their number.25

According to Locke, comparing and compounding ideas is "the Prerogative of Humane Understanding," an activity that animals simply do not share in; again, a difference not in degree, but kind.

Locke does not grant any intellectual faculties to animals. Although at times he succumbs to the temptation of attributing a small degree of reason to brutes, in Book IV he describes reason in a way that excludes this faculty from the animal kingdom. Reason, he says, "stands for a Faculty in Man, That Faculty, Whereby Man is supposed to be distinguished from Beasts, and Wherein it is evident he much surpasses them."26 The four degrees of reason that Locke details are not shared by animals: "the first and highest, is the discovering, and finding out of Proofs; the second, the regular and methodical Disposition of them, and laying them in a clear and fit Order, to make their Connexion and Force be plainly and easily perceived; the third is the perceiving their Connection; and the fourth, the making a right conclusion."27

It is only by equivocation that the terms 'reason,' 'thinking' and 'knowledge' can be applied to animals. At times Locke reserves such terms for spiritual or immaterial processes and faculties, yet, unlike Descartes, he has no hesitation to apply them to strictly mechanical processes that occur in animals as well as human beings. There is no evidence in the Essay to indicate that he attributes a rational or spiritual soul to animals. Locke does not think of animals as inanimate extension, but then neither does Descartes. "I do not deny life to animals," Descartes says, "since I regard it as consisting simply in the heat of the heart; and I do not deny sensation, in so far as it depends on a bodily organ."28

Although Locke claims to have suspended any "physical consideration of the mind," in Book II he proceeds to discuss the physical and physiological processes inherent in perception. "If it shall be demanded," he says, "When a Man begins to have any Ideas? I think the true Answer is, When
Sensation is described as follows: "all Sensation being produced in us, only by different degrees and modes of Motion in our animal Spirits, variously agitated by external Objects, the abatement of any former motion, must as necessarily produce a new sensation, as the variation or increase of it; and so introduce a new Idea, which depends only on a different motion of the animal Spirits in that Organ." When Locke says that animals have simple ideas, he is describing exactly the physical process of sensation that Descartes grants to animals. It would, of course, make a great difference had Locke described ideas as mental. However, because the real essence of mind and matter is not known, he remains consistently sceptical concerning the ontological status of ideas.

In Book IV, Locke suggests that matter might be given the power of thinking:

We have the Ideas of Matter and Thinking, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material Being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own Ideas, without revelation, to discover, whether Omnipotency has not given to some systems of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance: It being, in respect to our Notions, not much more remote from our Comprehension to conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking; since we know not wherein Thinking consists, nor to what sort of Substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that Power.

The important point of disagreement between Descartes and Locke may not so much concern the nature of animals, but rather, the nature of man. For Locke, it is conceivable that human beings are nothing more than machines, that thinking is a physical process; for Descartes, this is outside the realm of possibility.

It appears, then, that Locke felt perfectly comfortable in applying terms such as 'thought,' 'idea,' 'reason' and 'knowledge' to physical processes such as sense perception and to certain types of behavior, whereas Descartes preferred to limit this terminology to spiritual processes. In essence, Locke agrees with Descartes that animals are not rational beings. Where the two philosophers disagree is primarily in their definition of thought.

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29 Essay, 2.1.23.
30 Essay, 2.8.4.
31 Essay, 4.3.6.
32 Descartes to More.
Descartes states that his opinion "is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to men--at least to those who are not given to the superstitions of Pythagoras--since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals.\textsuperscript{32} As Bayle points out, Descartes' hypothesis is "of very great advantage to the true faith, and this is the only reason that keeps some people from giving it up."\textsuperscript{33} One would expect, with the rise of the natural sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that the similarities observed between men and animals would lead to a new morality and a non-exploitive view of the animal world. However, both rationalism and empiricism supported the Christian doctrine of human dominion.

Locke's epistemological position with regard to animals did not, as Brumbaugh suggests, usher in a common sense attitude of respect and kindness toward non-human life. The "historical split" between Descartes and Locke, says Brumbaugh, "explains certain current inconsistencies. The attitude of a medical experimenter is going to be Cartesian, while that of a bird-watcher or pet owner will be Lockean, and the two just do not coincide."\textsuperscript{34} A sweeping generalization of this sort is not warranted. A particular type of morality towards animals does not logically follow from the philosophical methodology of Cartesianism, nor from that of empiricism. As Skotdal points out, mechanistic philosophy was compatible with the new empiricism and "while the royalty, particularly in England, were viewing bloody bear and bull baiting in the great arenas, the scientists were ripping apart live animals on the vivisection table in the name of science . . . the air-pump became to the vivisector what the whip was to the bear baiter. Many sloppy attempts at blood transfusion became popular as well as experiments on the effects of poisoning, length of time under water, loss of blood, skinning, pulling out of eyes, and the manipulation of exposed nerves. Attempting to capture the tempter of the times, Harwood says, 'when Cartesianism and scientific curiosity both ran mad, animals were butchered ruthlessly in a seventeenth century version of a Roman holiday.'"\textsuperscript{35} Neither Descartes nor Locke objected to using animals as a means to the end of human welfare, be it in terms of entertainment, recreation, or physical well-being.

In the Second Treatise of Government, Locke states that the right to private property issues from God's decree that men subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing.\textsuperscript{36} Man's dominion over the earth

\textsuperscript{32}Bayle, pp. 215-16.


\textsuperscript{34}Nicki M. Skotdal, The Humane Movement as a Movement of Thought, published by The American Anti-Vivisection Society, 1963, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{35}John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, edited by Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963), Second Treatise, pr. 25.
and all non-human animals is absolute. Locke does not accord animals or any other aspect of the environment any rights whatsoever. For Locke, God's decree justifies treating all "inferior" creatures as "possessions" or property, to be exploited for man's pleasure and comfort, for the benefit and convenience of human life.\(^{37}\) I conclude that the similarities between Descartes and Locke are more significant than the differences.

\(^{37}\)Locke, *Second Treatise*, pr. 32.