

THOUGHTFUL BRUTES

The Ascription of Mental Predicates to Animals in Locke's *Essay*

KATHLEEN SQUADRITO

In the *Discourse* Descartes 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.”¹ He admits to Henry More that no one can prove that animals do not have thoughts, for “the human mind does not reach into their hearts.”² Nonetheless, he regards animal mechanism as the “most probable” hypothesis. 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.³

Locke was drawn into the controversy of animal automatism by his comment in 4.3.6 of the *Essay* that matter might be given the power of thinking by God.⁴ As Aaron notes, the doctrine that animals are thoughtless machines was in fact “most distasteful to Locke.”⁵ Unlike Descartes,

¹ Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, translated by Haldane and Ross, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), Part V, p. 118. Subsequent references to the *Discourse* are to this edition.

² Descartes to More, 5 February, 1649, in Descartes, *Philosophical Letters*, translated and edited by Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). Subsequent references of Descartes to More are to this letter.

³ *Discourse*, pp. 116–117.

⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁵ Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 11.

Locke applies a full range of mental predicates to animals. Animals are said to think, reason, know, remember, recognize, feel pain, and express emotions. This predication is somewhat awkward since at the same time he defines reason, knowledge, recognition, and other cognitive terminology in such a way as to prohibit reference to animals. Given this ambivalence, Locke's view is variously interpreted as being Cartesian (Yolton) or radically departing from cartesianism (Aaron, Rosenfeld, Brumbaugh). In this paper I attempt to clarify the respect in which Locke's view does differ from that of Descartes.

According to Descartes, language or "real speech" is the "only certain sign of thought hidden in a body."⁶ The behavior of animals cannot be taken as evidence that they are conscious. In *The Passions of the Soul* he recommends that the term 'thought' be used in the widest sense possible to include not only reasoning, but emotions as well.⁷ The behavior of animals is not the result of thought, but of 'the disposition of their organs' and is to be explained in terms of the laws of physics that govern other material bodies. It is a remarkable fact, says Descartes, "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 lack of organs which accounts for this difference, "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."⁸ Descartes may, as Malcolm contends, construe pain as thought and thought as propositional. Malcolm states: "If every human sensation includes thought, and if thought is propositional content together with propositional attitude, then at the center of every sensation of ours there is a proposition. Animals do not have propositional thoughts and therefore do not have sensations in the human mode."⁹

Unlike Descartes, Locke seems to take non-linguistic behavior as evidence of thought. In 2.11.11 of the *Essay* he contends that if animals

⁶ Descartes to More.

⁷ *Discourse*, p. 340.

⁸ *Discourse*, pp. 116–117.

⁹ Norman Malcolm, "Thoughtless Brutes," in *Proceedings and Addresses: American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 46, 1972–73, p. 7.

“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.” 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, that they do so” (2.1.19). Further, he points out, “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” (2.10.10).

Rosenfeld credits Locke with attacking both the scholastic and Cartesian view of animals; “it would be expected,” she says, that Locke’s “opinion of animals would differ from Descartes’, inasmuch as their conceptions of matter and knowledge were so much at variance.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, Locke does not spell out the implications of such conceptions to his view concerning animal awareness. It is questionable whether Locke has grounds for attributing mental predicates to animals at all. Like Descartes, he usually describes conscious activity, especially knowing, as propositional. Locke tells us in no uncertain terms that only propositions can be affirmed or denied. Knowledge, he contends, “consists in the perception (i.e. apprehension) of the truth of affirmative, or negative, proposition.”¹¹ Although he often speaks about arriving at knowledge of ideas, facts, or things, in his letters to Stillingfleet he apologizes for using the term ‘knowledge’ in such a loose way. The variable y in “ x knows y ” takes as values exclusively propositions, for it is, he says, propositions that “can be framed as the object of our knowledge;” and “everything which we either know or believe, is some proposition.”¹² Objects of knowledge (ideas, things) are not propositional, but what we know about such objects is.

In the context of knowledge, Locke’s view of thought and sensation appears to be very close to Descartes’ position that human sensation includes thought and that thought is propositional content together with propositional attitude. Throughout the *Essay* he insists that for there to

¹⁰ Leonora Cohen Rosenfeld, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 190.

¹¹ John Locke, “Elements of Natural Philosophy”, in *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1824), Vol. II, p. 439.

¹² “Mr. Locke’s Reply to the Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to his Second Letter”, in *The Works of John Locke*, Vol. III, p. 357.

be any knowledge, some type of belief apprehension, judgment, or, at least a certain psychological attitude, is necessary on the part of the knower towards some proposition. Thinking and knowing are active psychological processes which involve perceiving connections and relations, putting ideas together, separating, making abstract ideas, etc. Thinking, "in the propriety of the *English Tongue*," he says, "signifies that sort of operation of the Mind about its Ideas, Wherein the Mind is active; where it with some degree of voluntary attention, considers any thing."¹³ Locke expresses a great deal of scepticism with regard to the ability of animals to compare ideas one with another "in respect of Extent, Degrees, Time, Place, or any other Circumstances."¹⁴ If they have this capacity, he says, "I imagine they have it not in any great degree," for even though they have several distinct ideas, "yet it seems to me to be the Prerogative of Humane Understanding, when it has sufficiently distinguished any *Ideas*, so as to perceive them to be perfectly different, and so consequently two, to cast about and consider in what circumstances they are capable to be compared."¹⁵ Thinking and knowing involve reasoning. Locke defines 'reason' as a "Faculty in Man, That Faculty, whereby Man is supposed to be distinguished from Beasts, and wherein it is evident he much surpasses them."¹⁶

Locke attributes particular ideas to animals. To those who question whether animals 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."¹⁷ Abstraction involves a sophisticated mental process of stripping off from among the simple observable qualities which characterize a particular object 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. The "having of general ideas," Locke contends, "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

¹³ *Essay*, 2.9.1.

¹⁴ *Essay*, 2.11.4..

¹⁵ *Essay*, 2.11.5.

¹⁶ *Essay*, 4.17.1.

¹⁷ *Essay*, 3.3.6-10.

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.”¹⁸ In general, Locke speaks of thinking, memory, and recognition in the context of abstract ideas. The recognition of a particular object *as* a bone or cat, for example, requires that one have an abstract idea of such objects. Like Descartes, Locke does not impute such disabilities to the 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.”¹⁹

Why would Locke want to apply mental predicates to animals when his view is so similar to Descartes? In a strict sense of ‘know,’ animals do not have knowledge. In a strict sense of ‘thinking,’ animals do not think. In a strict sense of ‘reason,’ animals do not reason.²⁰ In 3.4.16 he contends that “*Rationality* being left out of the complex *Idea* of *Man*, makes it agree with Brute, in the more general *Idea* and name of *Animal*.” It is possible that Locke at times confuses reason with knowledge or memory. The term ‘reason,’ ‘thinking,’ and ‘sensation’ are generally used in a loose way. There is a type of knowledge that Locke can, with consistency, attribute to animals. According to Locke, sensitive knowledge is simply the perception of the existence of particular things. It is based not on the apprehension of the connection between ideas, but on sensation, the passive reception of ideas from causes external to the subject. Sensitive knowledge, whether the subject is human or animal, does not meet his strict definition of knowledge, but is considered by Locke as sufficient to pass by that name. Sensitive knowledge, which is not propositional, is that which differentiates humans and animals from plants.

Locke finds mechanism an appropriate explanatory model for plants, “the inferior parts of Nature,” for “however Vegetables have, many of them, some degree of Motion, and upon the different application of other Bodies to them, do very briskly alter their Figures and

¹⁸ *Essay*, 2.11.10 (Italics mine).

¹⁹ *Essay*, 2.11.11.

²⁰ Locke discusses four degrees of reason, none of which apply to 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 Connection and Force be plainly and easily perceived; the third is the perceiving their Connection; and the fourth, the making a right conclusion”.

Motions, and so have obtained the name sensitive Plants, from a motion, which has some resemblance to that, which in Animals follows upon Sensation: Yet, I suppose, it is all bare Mechanism; and no otherwise produced, than the turning of a wild Oat-beard, by the insinuation of the Particles of Moisture; or the short'ning of a Rope, by the affusion of Water. All of which is done without any Sensation in the Subject, or the having or receiving any *Ideas*.”²¹ Animals are like people in the sense that they receive particular ideas and, more importantly, have the capacity to remember ideas: “This faculty of laying up, and retaining the *Ideas*, that are brought into the Mind, several other Animals seem to have, to a great degree, as well as Man.”²²

The type of awareness and mental life that Locke attributes to various animals is comparable to that which he attributes to the fetus and young children. In this case, the ideas received by sensation include hunger, warmth, light, and pain. He contends that we will find “few Signs of a Soul accustomed to much thinking in a new born Child, and much fewer of any Reasoning at all.” The mind is furnished with ideas gradually; “After some time, it begins to know the Objects, which being most familiar with it, have made lasting Impressions. Thus it comes, by degrees, to know the Persons it daily converses with, and distinguish them from Strangers; which are Instances and Effects of its coming to retain and distinguish the Ideas the Senses convey to it.”²³ Qualitatively, the mental life of a fetus is comparable to that of an oyster or to vegetables. He who considers this, says Locke, “will, perhaps find Reason to imagine, That a *Foetus in the Mother's Womb* differs not much from the *State of a Vegetable*, but passes the greatest part of its time without Perception or Thought.”²⁴ He is willing to attribute some perception (ideas) to the fetus and limits this to ideas relating to hunger and warmth.

Qualitative distinctions between humans and animals are based on degrees of perception, memory, and corresponding mental *activity*. Locke does not hesitate to express the view that some humans lead a life which is qualitatively lower than some animals. Some elderly people and those considered to be idiots are compared to oysters. Of oysters, Locke says, “I cannot but think, there is some small dull perception,

²¹ *Essay*, 4.17.2.

²² *Essay*, 2.11.10.

²³ *Essay*, 2.1.21–22.

²⁴ *Essay*, 2.1.21; 2.9.5.

whereby they are distinguished from perfect Insensibility,” and, he says, even in mankind itself we have plain instances:

Take one, in whom decrepid old Age has blotted out the Memory of his past Knowledge, and clearly wiped out the *Ideas* his Mind was formerly stored with; and has, by destroying his Sight, Hearing, and Smell quite, and his Taste to a great degree, stopp'd up almost all the Passages for new ones to enter; or, if there by some of the Inlets yet half open, the Impressions made are scarce perceived, or not at all retained. How far such an one... is in his Knowledge, and intellectual Faculties, above the Condition of a Cockle, or an Oyster, I leave to be considered. And if a Man had passed Sixty Years in such a State, as 'tis possible he might, as well as three Days, I Wonder what difference there would have been in any intellectual Perfections, between him and the lowest degree of Animals.²⁵

According to Locke, idiots have dull perceptions, retain few ideas, do not compound or abstract ideas, do not judge, think, “make very few or no Propositions, and reason scarce at all.”²⁶

Unlike Descartes, Locke is contending that some human sensation does not include thought and is not propositional. Given this account of sensation and knowledge one may claim that animals experience pain, pleasure, joy, sorrow, etc. even if they do not think or reason about such experiences. The mental life of higher animals would be similar to that of a child who has not yet compounded ideas. Descartes describes the activity of a dog that recognizes its master in mechanical terms, whereas Locke describes such activity in terms of mental predicates such as knowledge. 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 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.”²⁷ Locke does use the term ‘thinking’ in a general and loose

²⁵ *Essay*, 2.9.14.

²⁶ *Essay*, 2.11.12–13.

²⁷ *Essay*, 2.11.7.

sense to include the retention or memory of ideas, an activity referred to as "contemplation".²⁸

Nonetheless, the difference in degree of conscious life between man and animal is so great for Locke that it is not unreasonable to regard his view of animals as Cartesian. With regard to personal identity, he often compares animals with machines:

The Case is not so much different in *Brutes*, but that any one may hence see what makes an Animal, and continues it the same. Something we have like this in Machines... For Example, what is a Watch? 'Tis plain 'tis nothing but a fit Organization, or Construction of Parts, to a certain end, which, when a sufficient force is added to it, it is capable to attain. If we would suppose this Machine one continued Body, all whose organized Parts were repair'd, increas'd or diminish'd, by a constant Addition or Separation of insensible Parts, with one Common Life, we should have something very much like the Body of an Animal, with this difference, That in an Animal the fitness of the organization, and the Motion wherein Life consists, begin together the Motion coming from within; but in Machines the force, coming sensibly from without, is often away, when the Organ is in order, and well fitted to receive it.²⁹

Yolton comments that "few in Britain objected to Locke's strong endorsement of this Cartesian understanding of animals, but it may have influenced some to take the next step in predicating human consciousness and reason of organized matter in motion."³⁰

Neither Descartes nor Locke regard animals as inanimate extension. "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."³¹ The important difference between Descartes and Locke is illustrated in one instance by Descartes' contention that it is more probable that worms, flies, and caterpillars move mechanically than that they have immortal souls. Descartes restricts the word 'soul' to man's rational soul, a thinking, spiritual (immaterial) entity. For Descartes, it is important to retain the Christian

²⁸ *Essay*, 2.10.1.

²⁹ *Essay*, 2.27.5.

³⁰ See John Yolton's excellent study, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.. 35.

³¹ Descartes to More.

doctrine of the primacy of man's soul; granting any degree of thought to animals would be equivalent to granting them immortality. Locke does not consider speculation about the soul, whether human or animal, to be central to the ends of religion or philosophy. He argues that it is not a contradiction for God to grant immortality to life forms that are not immaterial.

In Book IV, Locke contends that it is conceivable that humans as well as animals may be nothing more than material beings. We have, he says:

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 Substance the Almighty has been pleased to give that Power.³²

The distinction between man and animal of interest to Locke's contemporaries is one predicated on natural kinds or real essences, expressed by the question: What is the real nature of animals? Locke denies that this type of question can be answered.

Locke defines the real nature or essence of objects as their internal or atomic constitution, an essence which he regards as unknown. According to Locke we cannot classify species of things by real (unknown) essences. Classification of things into kinds or species is therefore determined by the observable characteristics that certain objects share. The definition of a dog is not based on natural or internal real essences, but on observable properties that dogs share. This definition is regarded as the nominal essence (also referred to as an abstract idea) of dog. We cannot reasonably think, says Locke, "that the *ranking of things under general Names was regulated by* those internal real Constitutions, or anything else but *their obvious appearances*, Since

³² *Essay*, 4.3.6.

Languages, in all Countries, have been established long before Sciences."³³

For Locke, the nominal essence of human beings includes the following predicates: rationality, power of speaking, power of laughing, living, upright posture, two legs, and a face usual to the species.³⁴ On the other hand, the nominal essence of animals is usually described as including not more than the predicates of life, sense, and spontaneous motion. He points out that nominal definitions are arbitrary and depend on the interests of the classifier, the criterion of convenience and utility playing an important role in determining species. Since we do not know the real essence of either man or animal, we must differentiate them by observable characteristics. The nominal essence of man and animal contain different kinds of predicates, consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that for Locke, man and animal differ in kind. If one wishes to include the predicates of thinking and reasoning in the nominal essence or abstract idea of certain animals, as Locke often does, then it would follow that some animals differ from man in degree rather than kind, with respect to those properties only.

Locke's scepticism with regard to the real nature of the soul prevents him from drawing an *absolute* distinction between humans and animals. This in turn undercuts the notion that animals should be totally excluded from human moral consideration. Descartes, for example, 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."³⁵ Locke does not share this general attitude. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* he points out:

One thing I have frequently observed in children, that, when they have got possession of any poor creature they are apt to use it ill; they often torment and treat very roughly young birds, butterflies, and such other poor animals, which fall into their hands, and that with a seeming kind of pleasure. This, I think, should be watched in them; and if they incline to any such cruelty, they should be taught the contrary usage; for the custom of

³³ *Essay*, 2.3.6.25.

³⁴ Draft A of the *Essay*, in *An Early Draft of Locke's Essay Together With Excerpts from his Journals*, edited by R. Aaron and J. Gibb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 27.

³⁵ Descartes to More.

tormenting and killing beasts will, by degrees, harden their minds even towards men; and they who delight in the suffering and destruction of inferior creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate or benign to those of their own kind.

Locke recommends that children be raised "in an abhorrence of killing or tormenting any living creature," and that "people should be accustomed, from their cradles, to be tender to all sensible creatures."³⁶

As Brumbaugh suggests, the ascription of mental predicates to animals may have "ushered in a common sense attitude of respect and kindness toward non-human life."³⁷ However, for Locke, the similarities between man and animal do not go far enough to include animals in a political framework of rights.

Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne

³⁶ John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, in *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1923), Vol. IX, § 116.

³⁷ Robert S. Brumbaugh, "Of Man, Animals, and Morals," in *On The Fifth Day*, edited by Richard Morris and Michael Fox (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1978), p. 17.