

Descartes Letter to More

LETTER FROM DESCARTES TO ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER
AND POET HENRY MORE (1614-1687) IN WHICH
HE MAKES EXPLICIT THE DOCTRINE THAT ANIMALS
ARE NO MORE THAN VERY COMPLEX MACHINES.

(Compare Descartes similar remarks in *Levi Meditation*.)

To More, 5 February 1649

5. But there is no preconceived opinion to which we are all more accustomed from our earliest years than the belief that dumb animals think. Our only reason for this belief is the fact that we see that many of the organs of animals are not very different from ours in shape and movement. Since we believe that there is a single principle within us which causes these movements—namely the soul, which both moves the body and thinks—we do not doubt that some such soul is to be found in animals also. I came to realize, however, that there are two different principles causing our movements: The first is purely mechanical and corporeal, and depends solely on the force of the spirits⁴³ and the structure of our organs, and can be called the corporeal soul. The other, an incorporeal principle, is the mind or that soul which I have defined as a thinking sub-

stance. Thereupon I investigated more carefully whether the movements of animals originated from both these principles or from one only. I soon perceived clearly that they could all originate from the corporeal and mechanical principle, and I regarded it as certain and demonstrated that we cannot at all prove the presence of a thinking soul in animals. I am not disturbed by the astuteness and cunning of dogs and foxes, or by all the things which animals do for the sake of food, sex, and fear; I claim that I can easily explain all of them as originating from the structure of their bodily parts.

But though I regard it as established that we cannot prove there is any thought in animals, I do not think it can be proved that there is none, since the human mind does not reach into their hearts. But when I investigate what is most probable in this matter, I see no argument for animals having thoughts except this one: since they have eyes, ears,

⁴³I.e., the "animal spirits" described in footnote 41 above. ED.

tongues, and other sense-organs like ours, it seems likely that they have sensation like us; and since thought is included in our mode of sensation, similar thought seems to be attributable to them. This argument, which is very obvious, has taken possession of the minds of all men from their earliest age. But there are other arguments, stronger and more numerous, but not so obvious to everyone, which strongly urge the opposite. One is that it is more probable that worms, flies, caterpillars and other animals move like machines than that they all have immortal souls.⁴⁴

In the first place, it is certain that in the bodies of animals, as in ours, there are bones, nerves, muscles, animal spirits, and other organs so arranged that they can by themselves, without any thought, give rise to all the movements we observe in animals. This is very clear in convulsions when the mechanism of the body moves despite the mind, and often moves more violently and in a more varied manner than usually happens when it is moved by the will.

Second, since art copies nature, and people can make various automatons which move without thought, it seems reasonable that nature should even produce its own automatons, much more splendid than artificial ones—namely the animals. This is especially likely since we know no reason why thought should always accompany the sort of arrangement of organs that we find in animals. It is

⁴⁴Descartes has adopted an all-or-nothing meaning of "soul" here: *Either animals have the human kind of soul—immaterial, immortal (capable of existing without a body) and thinking—or they are soul-less machines. Life has nothing to do with soul in Descartes' theory; it is a purely mechanical function (in animals it is primarily a matter of the heart working as a heat engine pumping "spirits" through a circulatory system). This meaning of "soul" was restrictive by seventeenth-century standards. Some of Descartes' contemporaries attributed to animals a subrational soul that bestowed not only life but also sentience (consciousness or awareness without thought); while others gave the word a material interpretation (cf. Descartes' description, in the *Second Meditation*, of how he formerly understood the soul as "something tenuous, like a wind or fire or ether, which permeated my solid parts").* ED.

much more wonderful that a mind should be found in every human body than that one should be lacking in every animal.

But in my opinion the main reason for holding that animals lack thought is the following. Within a single species some of them are more perfect than others, as humans are too. This can be seen in horses and dogs, some of which learn what they are taught much better than others; and all animals easily communicate to us, by voice or bodily movement, their natural impulses of anger, fear, hunger and so on. Yet in spite of all these facts, it has never yet been observed that any brute animal has attained the perfection of using real speech, that is to say, of indicating by word or sign something relating to thought alone and not to natural impulse. Such speech is the only certain sign of thought hidden in a body. All human beings use it, however stupid and insane they may be, even though they may have no tongue and organs of voice; but no animals do. Consequently this can be taken as a real specific difference between humans and animals.

For brevity's sake I here omit the other reasons for denying thought to animals. Please note that I am speaking of thought, and not of life or sensation. I do not deny life to animals, 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.⁴⁵ Thus my opinion is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to human beings—at least to those who are not given to the superstitions of Pythagoras⁴⁶—since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals.

⁴⁵"Insofar as it depends on a bodily organ," sensation is unconscious; it is merely the brain event mediating stimulus and response in a purely mechanical sequence such as the withdrawal reflex. ED.

⁴⁶Pythagoras was a Greek philosopher of the sixth century B.C.E. He and his followers were supposed to have believed that the souls of humans could migrate, at death, into the bodies of animals. For that reason, it is said, the Pythagoreans forbade the killing of animals and the eating of meat. ED.