

IS THE 'MONSTROUS THESIS' TRULY CARTESIAN?

¿ES LA 'TESIS MONSTRUOSA' VERDADERAMENTE CARTESIANA?

RODRIGO ALFONSO GONZÁLEZ FERNÁNDEZ*

Departamento de Filosofía, Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, Universidad de Chile,
rodgonfer@gmail.com

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RESUMEN ABSTRACT

Según Kemp Smith, Descartes creía que los animales carecían de sentimientos y sensaciones. Esta creencia se denomina la 'Tesis Monstruosa', la cual exploro aquí en vista de dos aproximaciones Cartesianas a los animales. En primer lugar, analizo su tratamiento original en función de una aproximación metafísica temprana de Descartes, i.e., todos los fenómenos naturales deben explicarse en función de puro escrutinio mental. Como el dolor solo existiría en el entendimiento, y los animales carecen de entendimiento y de alma, Descartes habría considerado que ellos no sufrirían. En segundo lugar, examino el naturalismo tardío Cartesiano; específicamente, en relación con cómo los animales son considerados como máquinas que *podrían* sufrir. Por último, concluyo que la 'Tesis Monstruosa' no es verdaderamente Cartesiana, pues los animales son máquinas *con* sentimientos y sensaciones. Sin embargo, la actitud indulgente de Descartes hacia los humanos que comen y matan animales, supone que la *empatía* por seres que podrían sufrir no es necesaria. Esto da lugar a dudas acerca de *otra* 'Tesis Monstruosa'.

According to Kemp Smith, Descartes believed that animals lacked feelings and sensations. This belief is called 'monstrous thesis' which I explore here in the light of two Cartesian approaches to animals. In the first place, I analyze their original treatment based on an early metaphysical approach of Descartes, for example, every natural phenomenon must be explained in terms of pure mental scrutiny. As pain would only exist in the understanding, and the animals lack understanding and souls, Descartes would have considered that they did not suffer. In the second place, I examine the Cartesian late naturalism, specifically in relation to how animals are considered as machines that *could* suffer. Lastly, I conclude that the 'Monstrous Thesis' is not truly Cartesian because animals are machines *with* feelings and sensations. However, Descartes' indulgent attitude towards humans who kill and eat animals, supposes that *empathy* for beings who could suffer is not necessary. This gives rise to doubts about *another* 'Monstrous Thesis.'

PALABRAS CLAVE KEY WORDS

Animales, máquinas, dolor, la 'Tesis Monstruosa'

Animals, machines, pain, the 'Monstrous Thesis'.

*  orcid.org/0000-0001-9693-0541



Introduction

Some commentators of Descartes' philosophy tend to swiftly reach, what they believe to be, a *logical conclusion*. They claim that, as Descartes' treatment of animals is simple and straightforward, the French philosopher would have maintained that animals were machines that do not think. And, as sensation is a form of thought, he would have concluded that animal-machines neither felt pain nor were aware of being in pain.

This *logical conclusion* is supported by these three assumptions:

1. Animals are machines;
2. Sensation is a form of thought;
3. Machines neither feel pain nor have minds;

Based on 1, 2 and 3, many philosophers have wrongly concluded that Descartes denies thought *and* sensation to animals. Take, for example, this quote:

Descartes notoriously proposed that (non-human) animals are mere machines, devoid of sensation or feeling. This proposal, which in itself seems ludicrous, becomes intelligible when seen within Descartes' larger philosophical scheme. In this scheme, sensation and feeling can arise only in a mind: an immaterial substance, distinct from matter. For various reasons, Descartes denied minds to animals, and, on that basis, he denied them feeling. (Hatfield 404)

The denial of feeling is connected to what Kemp Smith (136 and 140) calls the 'monstrous thesis,' that is, the alleged claim that Descartes did not care for the mistreatment of animals. In this vein, Hatfield adds that 'Descartes proposed that animals lack sentience, feeling and genuinely cognitive representations of things' (405).

Given the complexity of Descartes' philosophy, and the accusation that he justifies cruelty to animals (Regan and Singer 5), this article aims to show whether the 'monstrous thesis' is truly Cartesian. In order to accomplish this task, I explore the complications related to Descartes' original denial of feelings and sensations to animals. Moreover, I analyze what consequences follow from the falsity of the monstrous thesis.

This essay is divided into three sections. In the first one, I will emphasize how Descartes' early metaphysical approach is essential for understanding why all natural phenomena have to be elucidated in terms of *mental scrutiny*. In light of this original view, Descartes would have held that pain *only* existed in the understanding, the origin of all mistakes in relation to animals. In the second section, I will concentrate upon examining how the French philosopher adopts a standpoint that is, again, oversimplified by most commentators. In particular, I will show that, given Descartes' naturalism, animals *may* feel pain for all we know. Finally, the third section deals with Descartes' assumption that animals are mere machines, but with physiological processes that cause sensations. In addition, sensation, or *sensus*, is different from thought, or *cogitare* (Cottingham 227). Despite this, Descartes partially agrees with Augustine and Aquinas' anthropocentric views, which hold that the human being is at the pinnacle of the creation; accordingly, animals, which were created for the use of humankind, can be eaten or killed (Sorajbi 198). As I argue, it is this what fleshes out the main supposition of the 'monstrous thesis': given their superiority, humans need not have empathy for beings that may suffer like us.

1. Descartes' first approach to animals: a metaphysical view inspired by the *cogito*

Broughton (5) asserts that, among other important aims, Descartes attempts to provide the foundation of philosophy. In fact, the goal of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* has not caused major disagreement, at least among most scholars. In order to refute the skeptic, a type of philosopher who holds that knowledge is either impossible or doubtful, Descartes seeks to find the bedrock of knowledge, the core of certainty. Considering the skeptic's view, both the old and his contemporary, the French philosopher aims to pin down the archimedical point, that is, the piece of evidence that is beyond the challenge of the skeptic's method. For this reason, the final reply to the skeptic can be summed up as follows: even if a deceiving god existed, and one was deceived by him all the time, one would by force have to exist. As one needs to exist to doubt, one needs to exist in order to be deceived; therefore, if a deceiving god tricked one all the time, it would necessarily follow that one existed. Leaving some details aside, this is the essence of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, the core of what I dub *the metaphysical approach*.

In relation to this approach, Descartes reaches the *cogito* via his criterion of truth, which fleshes out how he is willing to 'concede' to the skeptic. And he does so in two ways.

On the one hand, he deems all doubtful ideas to be false, as refuting them one by one is utterly unnecessary. Regarding old opinions as false, even those entertained by the ancient philosophers, is totally sufficient. The Cartesian reason for this move is clear: old opinions might be false, because they can be doubtful. In other words, opinions must be regarded as false, at least for the sake of finding certainty and the bedrock of knowledge.

On the other hand, clear and distinct perception of an idea indicates its truth; for the mind clearly perceives, without confusion, a true idea (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 35, 24). Take, for example, the idea of the square triangle, the angles of which are half the angle of a square. By contrast, confused ideas divert one from truth and, thus, they are not reliable in that they provide no *certainty* whatsoever. For instance, a confused idea such as the perception of a dot on the horizon may turn out to be a tall building from a closer distance. Accordingly, confused ideas are always doubtful (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 145, 103), and they can be regarded as mere falsities. In other words, truth can be clearly perceived whereas falsities involve confusion.

The Cartesian analysis and its attempt to reply to the skeptic lead to complex problems, especially from the point of view of metaphysics. As Descartes doubts the senses, the existence of his own body, the difference between the real world and dreams, he concludes that the mind, the *res cogitans*, is easier to know than the body, the *res extensa*. More specifically, in the Second Meditation he remarks that certain attributes of the *cogito* are clearly and distinctly perceived. A thing that thinks is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions' (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 28, 19).

For the sake of confining the discussion to animals, it seems necessary to leave out some details of the debate between Descartes and the skeptic, such as the manner in which God guarantees knowledge. In view of the present analysis, however, it is sufficient to say that, given the scope of the Cartesian doubt, which extends as far as the paradigm of certainty, that is, mathematical truths, it is necessary to exclude the possibility

that a deceiving god has wrongly wired the human cognitive system. This is indeed the source of the so-called evil genius doubt (Carriero 27). Had a deceiving god wrongly wired the human cognitive system, one would never be certain about anything at all. For perceptions of the mind, even if they are clear and distinct, could have been caused by unreliable processes that lead to falsities.

Descartes remarks this point in the following excerpt:

And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving god at all, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one. But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, *it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else.* (Descartes, *Meditations AT VII 36, 25, my emphasis*).

Clearly, and despite what some interpreters have argued (Gewirth 79-100), the existence of God plays a major role in the arguments against the new pyrrhonians, an issue that has to be considered with regard to the Cartesian treatment of animals as well. According to Descartes, certainty is at stake if one cannot prove God's existence, an issue that will have some consequences for whether or not animals can be considered mere soulless automatons devoid of feeling and sensation. I will discuss further this topic below.

For now, it is more relevant to address the wax thought experiment. Although the wax may change all its perceivable accidents (the color, odor, and so on), its essence is *only* grasped by one's mind, because the essence of the wax is assessed by pure *mental scrutiny*. As to this claim, it is worth noting how Descartes' idealism is crucial to understand what the essence of the wax finally is. Extension is not grasped by the imagination, because the many imaginable variations of the wax would not allow one to understand what remains of it. On the contrary, the extension is clearly and distinctly grasped by reason, and more precisely, by the mere scrutiny of the mind. One may identify the wax by means of thinking hard about its essence, which is far more evident when it comes to the wax in general.

Now, the relation between the *res cogitans* and the material things is indeed relevant to explain why animals are *only* automatons. Descartes emphasizes this idea as follows, when explaining how words can be deceitful:

[...] We say that we *see* the wax itself, if it is there before us, *not that we judge* it to be there from its color or shape; and this might lead me to conclude without more ado that knowledge of the wax comes from what the eyes see, and not from the scrutiny of the mind alone. But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind. (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 32, 21, *original emphasis*)

Undoubtedly, this view is consistent with Descartes' metaphysical idealism, because it makes the essence of material things depend upon reason and, more importantly, judged by the scrutiny of the mind. In other words, the essence of material things is judged by the mind, or by *pure mental scrutiny*. Indeed, those men that Descartes sees through the window are judged as such not by the senses, as it happens with the accidents of the wax, but by scrutiny of the mind. The way in which one infers that is in presence of men rather than automatons is crucial to understand Descartes' first stance towards animals, which are regarded as soulless automatons.

Animals are considered to be mere automatons, a thesis that had been advanced by the French philosopher in *The Discourse*, in 1637. By then, he focused on whether or not a machine can be programmed to use conventional linguistic signs, but in an unlimited fashion, like human beings. Since machines are based upon mechanisms, and these are finite and physically limited, they cannot produce infinite answers, and nor can animals behave in light of reason, which is considered to be the universal instrument by the French philosopher. Offering the argument in these well-known quotes, Descartes distinguishes between human beings and animals thus:

I made special efforts to show that if any such machines had the organs and outward shape of a monkey or of some other animal that lacks reason, we should have no means of knowing that they did not possess entirely the same nature as these animals; whereas if any such machines bore resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions as closely as possible for all practical purposes, we should still have two very certain means of recognizing that they were no real men. The first is that they could never use words, or put together other signs, as we do in order to declare our thoughts to others. [...]

Secondly, even though such machines might do some things as well as we do them, or perhaps even better, they would inevitably fail in others, which would reveal that they were acting not through understanding but only from the disposition of their organs. For whereas reason is a universal instrument which can be used in all kinds of situations, these organs need some particular disposition for each particular action [...]. (Descartes, *Discourse* 139-40)

The use of language needs the use of conventional linguistic signs. Unlike natural signs, like smoke, conventional signs cannot be used by animals; they are totally constrained by the disposition of organs. In addition, they *are* machines, because they only act in terms of causes and effects, and for this reason they do so *only* in virtue of the disposition of their organs. These allow animals to react, mechanically, to external stimuli, unlike human beings, who think and have insights about their actions. In other words, animals causally react to environmental stimuli, as they are programmed to do so by the disposition of their organs; the mechanical character of such reactions, which are determined and finite unlike reason, a universal instrument, precludes machines, and thereby animals, from speaking and thinking.

What I have so far examined shows the dominance of the Cartesian metaphysical approach: the importance of the *cogito* leads to a reduction of all natural phenomena to pure mental scrutiny. Note that the emphasis upon the *cogito* does not entail that the 'monstrous thesis' is true. Instead, the metaphysics of the *cogito* is *consistent* with the truth of such a thesis. This is so because sensations are regarded as phenomena which can be reduced to mere mental scrutiny: their existence is *only* acknowledged by reason. Given this metaphysical early approach, it seems that no real

feeling of pain exists in animals; only pain behavior is displayed, a point that some commentators have repeatedly stressed in order to show that the 'monstrous thesis' is the core of Descartes' treatment of animals.

In the second section, I will attempt to show that, besides the metaphysical approach, the French philosopher holds a naturalistic view of sensations. As a consequence, animals *may* feel pain, as their bodies resemble human bodies.

2. Descartes' naturalistic approach to animals

Descartes embraces, especially at the end of the Meditations, a naturalistic approach. The teachings of nature turn out to be very important as to the causes of certain sensations. For example, pain, hunger, thirst, sexual arousal and the like show that the body is closely *joined* and *intermingled* with the mind, which in turn encourages Descartes to put forward an argument by dis-analogy, i.e., the famous sailor and the ship, in the Sixth Meditation. He asserts that, were the mind completely separated from the body, one would not *feel* that pain is unpleasant; rather, one would perceive the tissue damage by means of the intellect alone, in like manner a sailor perceives by means of sight the damage of his ship. But the situation is rather the opposite: pain is not experienced by the intellect; instead, the mind *and* the body feel pain. Therefore, the mind and the body are closely joined, to a degree that pain is felt by the senses *and* the intellect. Consider how Descartes advances the argument of dis-analogy thus:

There is nothing that my own nature teaches more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on. So I should not doubt that there is some truth in this.

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needed food or drink, I should have an explicit understanding of the fact, instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst.

For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body. (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 81, 56)

This intermingling has important consequences for the issue of animals, and especially for whether or not they feel pain. Again, there are interesting things that nature teaches. For example, the body, which is like a clock, comprises bones, nerves, muscles, blood and skin (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 84, 70). Emphasizing how the body is *only* a machine, an issue that is decisive for the problem of animals, he focuses on pain as follows:

I observe, in addition, that the nature of the body is such that whenever any part of it is moved by another part which is some distances away, it can always be moved in the same fashion by any of the parts which lie in between, even if the more distant part does nothing. [...]

When I feel pain in my foot, physiology tells me that *this happens by means of nerves distributed throughout the foot*, and that these nerves are like cords which go from the foot right up to the brains. When the nerves are pulled in the foot, they in turn pull on inner parts of the brain to which they are attached, and produce a certain motion in them; *and nature has laid it down that this motion should produce in the mind a sensation of pain*, as occurring in the foot. (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 87, 72, *my emphasis*)

All this anticipates the *grand finale* of the *Meditations*. In light of the nature of the body, and God's perfection, Descartes clarifies the aim of the metaphysical doubts he had had in the first two *Meditations*. In the end of the sixth *Meditation*, Descartes seems to have changed his mind in two ways. On the one hand, he asserts that the senses, which usually reveal the truth instead of falsehoods, help the human being regarding how health needs to be maintained. On the other hand, he claims that the metaphysical *early* doubts must be considered *hyperbolic*, that is to say, they are only a means to refute the skeptic (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII 89, 74). As a result, the focus of the discussion gradually changes from the refutation of the skeptic, and the foundation of knowledge, to what nature teaches. All this shows a transition from a metaphysical to a naturalistic approach, which is crucial to the analysis of the issue of animals and, certainly, of pain.

What Descartes holds at the end of the *Meditations* inspires one to hypothesize that he finally finds his way to naturalism, which is confirmed by the fact that the metaphysical approach seems to have been a means to refute the skeptic, and thus to seek certainty and knowledge. The way he compares the human body with the animal physiology also supports my hypothesis about the existence of the two aforementioned approaches, that is, the metaphysical and the naturalistic. His view, in 1647, is consistent with a shift towards naturalism: 'Indeed, we have all at some time or other seen various animals cut open, and been able to look at the shape and arrangement of their insides, which very much resemble our own'. (Descartes, *Description* AT XI 226, 315). Concentrating on how impressions are created, he adds the following ideas:

[...] the parts of the blood that are most agitated and lively are carried to the brain by the arteries coming directly from the heart in the straightest line of all; these parts of the blood make up a kind of air or very fine wind which is called the 'animal spirits.' These dilate the brain and make it ready to receive impressions both from external objects and from the soul; and in receiving these impressions the brain acts as the organ or seat of the 'common' sense, the imagination and the memory. (Descartes, *Description* AT XI 226, 316)

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the early metaphysical approach fleshes out how animals cannot feel pain like humans, because they lack understanding, the *only* place in which pain exists. Consider this excerpt from a letter, one that is crucial to realize why the phenomenon of pain can support the assumption that animals are mere soulless automatons:

I do not explain the feeling of pain without reference to the soul. For in my view pain exists *only in the understanding*. What I do explain is all the external movements which accompany this feeling in us; *in animals it is these movements alone which occur, and not pain in the strict sense...* (Descartes, *Correspondence* AT III 85, 148, *my emphasis*).

This view, which precedes the *Meditations*, is consistent with Descartes' first metaphysical approach, as it is possible to infer that animals neither have souls nor *feel* pain; the rationale seems obvious to the French philosopher: as animals lack language, they have neither *understanding* nor souls (Hatfield 408). As a consequence, animals only have the behavior that accompanies the feeling of pain. This Cartesian

behaviorism explains why animals are machines that lack souls. The same thesis is advanced in the following thought experiment:

As for brute animals, we are so used to believing that they have feelings like us that it is hard to rid ourselves of this opinion. Yet suppose that we were equally used to seeing automatons which perfectly imitated every one of our actions that it is possible for automatons to imitate; suppose, further, that in spite of this we never took them for anything more than automatons; in this case we should be in no doubt that all the animals which lack reason were automatons too. For we should find that they were different from us in all the same respects, as I wrote in the *Discourse on the Method*. (Descartes, *Correspondence* AT III 122, 149)

Descartes, then, appears to follow this line of reasoning:

- I) Animals have no souls (animals are machines that cannot think);
- II) The feeling of pain only lies in the understanding;
- III) Animals behave as though they feel pain;

Animals do not feel pain as humans do.

Thus, Descartes' first approach to animals seems to be quite straightforward, especially in light of his early metaphysical theses, some of which seem to provide foundation for considering that the French philosopher does not care for animal mistreatment (Regan & Singer 4).

Still, it is worth taking into account the Cartesian shift between the metaphysical view and the naturalistic turn. Even though the latter has been overseen by some interpreters, others do not neglect it. They emphasize how the French philosopher claims that animals lack thought, but not *sensus* (Cottingham 227), since sensation depends upon bodily organs (Hatfield 423)¹. In addition to the sailor and the ship dis-analogy,

¹ The possession of thought (*cogito*) and sensibility (*sensus*) are thus in a metaphysical sense independent: it is possible for something to have both, either or neither. Descartes hesitates to say that angels have sense-perception or are corporeal or not (*Correspondence*, AT V 402, 380). In the human case, where individuals have both, this gives rise to problem which runs parallel to that of mind-body interaction: how do thoughts refer to sensations in empiric judgement, if they belong to different kinds? What we call in a broad sense our (mental) life is the result of the intermingling of both dimensions, so 'thought' can be taken in two senses. First, as the operation of the intellect only, and second, as the operation of both the intellect and sensibility.

the details about sensation that Descartes himself expresses later support the hypothesis that there is a shift in the Cartesian philosophy. Whether Descartes' late philosophy is incompatible with cruelty to animals is analyzed in the last and final section of this essay.

3. The 'monstrous thesis' is not Cartesian

After 1646, Descartes seems to take a clear standpoint about animals. By then, he insists on the following view: although some animals are stronger than us, and there may be some capable of deceiving human beings, they cannot think, that is, brutes do not have *any* understanding whatever. Animals cannot think because, when performing actions, they are not guided by thought at all. On the contrary, they mechanically react to different stimuli, in the same fashion a machine gives the same output to a given input. Such outputs, both in animals and machines, can *only* imitate the behavior of humans. But neither animals nor machines have *cogito*, which is the foundation of action in rational beings. Indeed, the *cogito* provides reasons for actions, unlike automatons.

In a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, Descartes puts forward an argument to show that animals cannot think and are automatons, as follows:

I cannot share the opinion of Montaigne and others who attribute understanding thought to animals. I am not worried that people say that *human beings have absolute dominion over all other animals*: for I agree that some of them are stronger than us, and I believe that there may also be some animals which have a natural cunning capable of deceiving the shrewdest human beings. But *I consider that they imitate or surpass us only in those of our actions which are not guided by thought*. (Descartes, *Correspondence AT IV 565, 300, my emphasis*)

It is clear, then, that Descartes claims that animals cannot think like humans, as they are devoid of understanding. However, after the naturalistic turn, he acknowledges that animals and humans are similar in relation to the physiological processes that cause, for example, pain. Thus, animals may have sensations like the human being, despite the fact that they cannot think. For this reason, he concludes that while human intelligence enables humans to develop actions guided by thought and understanding, animals merely react to the environment, and they do it causally in like manner of machines.

The naturalistic turn has other important consequences, not only for the issue of pain in animals, but also for the physical causes of thought. In fact, it is not correct to maintain that Descartes believes that physical things do not influence the mind *at all*: He himself replies in a letter to Cleselier that even though the soul recognizes itself as something abstract and immaterial, *praecise tantum*, there might be something corporeal involved, unbeknownst to one. Descartes replies to Cleselier in the following terms:

I said in one place that while the soul is in doubt about the existence of all material things, it knows itself *praecise tantum* – in the strict sense only – as an immaterial substance. And seven or eight lines further down I showed that by the words ‘in a strict sense only’ I do not mean an entire exclusion or negation, but only an abstraction from material things. For I said that in spite of this we are not sure that there is nothing corporeal in the soul, even though we do not recognize anything corporeal in it. (Quoted in Clarke 183)

This clarification *also* supports the hypothesis about the shift of Cartesian approaches towards animals. Indeed, there is nothing in animals that we can recognize as thought, since they lack language. However, given the fact that Descartes has changed his mind in relation to understanding as the only place where pain exists, which is very clear in the quoted disanalogy, it also remains hard to prove there is no thought whatsoever in animals. Moreover, it is not easy to show that animals lack the ability to feel pain, especially in view of their physiology, which is similar to that of the human being’s. If animal physiology and human physiology are somehow similar, there is no room to deny that animals are alive, and thus that they *may* feel pain.

The letter to More is indeed relevant to pin down how he carries out the aforementioned shift, in the 1640’s:

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, 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 attributed to them [...]

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, which are much more splendid than artificial ones –namely the 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 even deny sensation, in so far as it depends on a bodily organ. 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 suspicions of Pythagoras– since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals. (Descartes, *Correspondence AT V 277-9, 365-366, my emphasis*)

Firstly, Descartes holds that there exists no *clear* reason to maintain that animals are devoid of sensations, even if *no one can reach into their hearts*. Once again, since animals possess organs that resemble very much those of the human being's, and since such organs causally explain the existence of sensations, it is quite likely that animals feel sensations as humans do. Moreover, Descartes accepts that the senses cause confused modes of thought (Descartes, *Meditations AT VII 234, 163*); thus, although one can *attribute* 'thought' to animals, they do not perceive clearly like humans.

Secondly, by insisting that he is not denying life or sensation to animals, Descartes seems to avoid a common-sense objection: it seems obvious that lifeless machines are incapable of feeling pain. Incidentally, the stress upon life or sensation shows the core of Descartes' shift in relation to animals: even though there is no *compelling* evidence that animals do not think, as one cannot reach into their hearts, they have life and sensation because their bodies resemble ours. Note that, as Cottingham remarks (227 and 231), Descartes explicitly distinguishes in this quote between *cogito* (thought) and *sensus* (sensation); then, he denies the former, but not the latter to animals. Why Descartes would not deny sensation to the brutes? It would be totally *inconsistent* to do so when he has explicitly held that sensation is a product of bodily organs, and of the working of mechanisms. The human body is *also* considered by Descartes a machine, which is very similar to the animal body, another machine. Since such

machines are similar in different respects, denying sensation to animals would be as inappropriate as denying sensation to humans.

Thirdly, it is possible to conclude, upon this basis, that Descartes' metaphysical approach to animals does not entail the 'monstrous thesis,' even though it seems compatible with it. And the reason is the following: according to the Cartesian metaphysical approach, animals lack soul and understanding, two conditions for feeling pain like humans. Thus, Descartes' beliefs about pain existing *only* in the understanding, an idea that is couched in his metaphysical view of the cogito, entitle some commentators to conclude that, if animals are mere automatons, they do not feel like humans. This conclusion is very important because, pace Cottingham, Descartes' metaphysical theses are compatible with the 'monstrous thesis.' At least, it cannot be denied that Descartes' first approach is compatible with animals devoid of feeling or awareness of any kind.

Nevertheless, the two different approaches that I have emphasized here gives room to argue that Descartes' naturalist philosophy, rather than encouraging one to treat animals like lifeless machines, favors their treatment as biological machines that have sensations (more about this below). Descartes' way to determine whether one is in presence of men or automata is very relevant with regard to this point. Indeed, as with the wax, it is not the senses which provide evidence that one is in presence of men rather than automatons, since we *judge* them to be humans; we do so, independently of the appearance men have.

Fourthly, behavior is not sufficient to declare that machines and animals are intelligent. Suppose, in fact, that animals imitated human behavior in every respect. By doing so, they would perform and imitate human behavior to a degree that, by *only* seeing such automatons, it would not be possible to assess, with certainty, whether they are mere machines. However, Descartes insists that such automatons would not act in virtue of thoughts. Neither would they speak. Therefore, if one *only* trusted the senses, one would be deceived by such automatons, which would make one wrongly believe that they are humans.

The shift of approaches is also in line with the dis-analogy of the sailor and the ship. This argument illustrates that pain is a mental state that involves a, say, 'basic' type of thought. After recognizing the importance of the brain and the nervous system, that is, when describing their

connections by a system of cords, Descartes is ready to acknowledge that animals are machines, and as the human body is also a machine; thus, humans *and* animals have life and sensation. That is, if the conclusion depends upon the connection between mechanism and sensation, it seems unlikely that animals lack sensations.

Pain is experienced as a physiological process which causes a specific type of sensation. This Cartesian thesis is consistent with the argument according to which mind and body are closely joined and, as it were, intermingled. Such substances are metaphysically different, as they are not identical; the proof is rather simple and elegant: they can be distinguished by what can be conceived. This metaphysical argument is very different from Descartes' naturalism, in which the nervous system and the brain cause sensations, for example. For this reason, if animals share the same physiological processes of the human being's, or at least sufficiently similar, humans and animals seem to be capable of feeling hunger, thirst, heat and, certainly, pain.

However, a final complication arises from Descartes' naturalism, which has been overseen by most commentators. The French philosopher claims that one is *justified* in killing and eating animals. This odd claim complicates again the meaning of the 'monstrous thesis.' One can be indulged when eating or killing animals, because they are only machines, an argument that comes from Augustine and Aquinas, who hold that animal-machines are created for the use of humankind (Sorajbi 198).

According to this anthropocentric view, humans are justified in having absolute dominion over all animals. Despite the fact that beasts may feel like humans, as they also have sensations, they cannot be compared with us, especially in light of the reasons given in *The Discourse*. Thus, given the human being's superiority over all animals, humans need not concern about killing and eating the latter. This, I claim, may amount to raise doubts as to another 'monstrous thesis,' because humans need not have empathy for beings who may suffer like us, that is, for animals.

Conclusion

Descartes is one of the most important philosophers of all time. Nevertheless, his views on animals and pain are as complex as compelling, even for those who are regarded as reputed scholars. Unlike some of them, in this article I have argued that Descartes' treatment of

animals depends upon two quite different approaches, namely, an early metaphysical and a late naturalistic. While the former stresses how pain is reducible to pure *mental scrutiny*, or to mere behavior in the case of animals, the latter shows that pain is *caused* by certain physiological processes which are similar in humans *and* in animals. In fact, Descartes asserts that the mind and the body are closely joined and, as it were, they are intermingled to a degree that they can *only* be separated by God, and by what can be clearly and distinctly conceived.

Against this background, I have analyzed the 'monstrous thesis.' It is clear, after the analysis carried out here, that the 'monstrous thesis' is not truly Cartesian in the end. According to the French philosopher, animals are *not* lifeless machines which are devoid of sensations and feelings. The 'monstrous thesis' is false, since his naturalism holds that animals do have life, sensations and feelings.

However, if Descartes had held the naturalistic view without saying that humans are indulged when eating and killing animals, the 'monstrous thesis' would be false *simpliciter*. But his indulgence towards humans, as they need not have empathy for beings who may suffer like us, raises doubts as to another 'monstrous thesis.' It must be noted, however, that this *new* 'monstrous thesis,' is quite different from the one that has been wrongly attributed by Smith and others. For Descartes' anthropocentric view, which is similar to Aquinas and Augustine, holds that humans are at the pinnacle of creation; accordingly, there can be indulgence towards them, even if they are doing something morally wrong. In fact, this anthropocentric view is stressed when Descartes himself puts forward a distinction of kinds of love one may have according to the esteem which we have for the object we love. He asserts that

[...] when we have less esteem for it than ourselves, we have only simple affection for it; when we esteem it equally with ourselves, that is called 'friendship'; and when we have more esteem for, our passion may be called 'devotion'. Thus, we may have affection for a flower, a bird, or a horse; but unless our mind is very disordered, we can have friendship only for persons. (Descartes, *Passions* AT XI 390, 357)

And humans should feel no remorse when eating or killing animals, since:

Remorse of conscience is a kind of sadness which results from our doubting that something we are doing, or have

done, is good. It necessarily presupposes doubt. For if we were wholly certain that what we are doing is bad, we would refrain of doing it, since the will tends only towards objects that have some semblance of goodness. (Descartes, *Passions* AT XI 464, 392)

In summary, if one is pressed to answer whether Descartes held that animals were devoid of feelings and sensations, the answer is *Yes and No*. Unlike Cottingham, it is *Yes* concerning Descartes' metaphysical approach, while it is *No* concerning his late naturalism. And, if somebody asks whether Descartes had *empathy* for animals, the answer is *No*: the superiority of humans is far more important than the suffering of the brutes.

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