

DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF FEELING OF PAIN IN ANIMALS

Emre Arda ERDENK*

ABSTRACT

Rene Descartes is considered by many philosophers of ethics as the main figure of the view that animals do not feel pain, so we can inflict pain to them by killing, eating and experimenting. However, in this paper, I will give an interpretation of Descartes' arguments concerning this issue and will conclude that on the contrary to the orthodox view, he gives credit to the idea that animals do feel pain. By means of this, this paper is going to deal with the issue of natural automaton, 'language argument' and the mind-body issue concerning sensations. Ultimately, I will show that, according to Descartes animals have sensations and they feel pain.

Key Words: *Descartes, Animal Rights, Automaton, Mind-Body, and Dualism.*

(Descartes'a Göre Hayvanlarda Acı Hissi)

ÖZET

Rene Descartes'in, ahlak felsefesi alanındaki birçok felsefeci tarafından hayvanların acı hissetmediğini ve dolayısıyla da öldürülebilir, yenilebilir ve üzerlerinde deney yapılabilir olduğunu iddia ettiği görüşü kabul edilmektedir. Bu makalede Descartes'in bu iddia ile ilgili argümanlarını değerlendirip, ortaya konulan görüşün aksine bu argümanlarla Descartes'in hayvanların acı hissetmediği sonucuna ulaşmadığını ortaya koyacağım. Bu amaçla, bu makale 'doğal otomaton', 'dil argümanı' ve duyumlarla ilgili zihin-beden problemi sorunlarıyla ilgilenecektir. Sonuç olarak, Descartes'e göre hayvanların duyumları olduğunu ve acı çekebildiklerini iddia edeceğim.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Descartes, Hayvan Hakları, Otomaton, Zihin-Beden, ve İkicilik.*

* Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Bölümü öğretim elemanı
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Introduction

When we see a dog yowling on the street, we immediately attribute a pain state to the dog and easily say that the dog is in pain. Since this attribution is very intuitive and obvious to us, claims such as “animals are mere automatons” or “animals don’t feel pain” are both counter-intuitive and appalling to our understanding in our *Zeitgeist*. However, in 17th Century Europe, such claims were appealing for certain reasons. The issue that I will consider in this paper is Rene Descartes’ account for the feelings of animals and especially the feeling of pain. According to some philosophers¹, Descartes claims that animals are like automatons and thus animals are without any feeling at all. In this paper, I will show that this is a wrong interpretation of Descartes’ account of animal sensation and feeling. What I will do instead is to show the incorrectness of this interpretation by giving an adequate interpretation, by which I will claim, first, that Descartes’ explanation of the physiology of the human body does not involve anything depending on mind and for Descartes both the animal and the human body are natural automaton. Second, for Descartes, having no language does not indicate having no feelings or sensations. Finally, I will claim that, for Descartes, soul is not a necessary condition to have sensations and feelings. Ultimately, by virtue of these interpretations, I will conclude that animals can feel or have sensations by being mere natural automaton.

Descartes’ Animals: Biological Automata

The aim of this section is to show that, first, according to Descartes the analogy between automatons and animals does not directly entail the claim that animals do not feel pain, and second, the distinction between sensation (*sensus*) and pain (*affectus*) plays an important role both in Descartes’ metaphysics and in physiology. Thus, I will conclude in this section that Descartes does not say that animals are without any pain but the pain state of an animal is different from the pain state of a man. In order to support the thesis of this section, let us now see what Descartes really says about animals throughout in his writings.

In order to understand Descartes’ concern with the analogy between automatons and animals we need to consider, first, one of Descartes’ most important contributions to intellectual history, namely, the claim that animal body is a machine and his elimination of the soul from the explanations of the functions of the animal body in general. In *Discourse of Method Part V* he says that the animal body, “As a machine which, having been made by the hand of God, is incomparable better ordered . . . than any of those . . . invented by human beings”². Here Descartes clearly holds the idea that animal as machines, cannot

¹ For the discussions see. T. Regan and P. Singer (eds.). *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976). A. Boyce Gibson, *The Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Methuen, 1932), p. 214. Paola Cavalieri. *The Animal Debate: A Reexamination*. In Singer, 2006, pp. 54-69. Peter Singer. *Animal Liberation*. (New York: Avon, 1975)

² AT VI 56, CSM I 139. ‘CSM’ = J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (editors and translators), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vols. I. and II.* (Cambridge:

be comparable with automaton (machines invented by human beings) in terms of their physiology. It is at least because God is infinitely more powerful than human beings and its creation, from this self-evident premise, should be better than the creation of the hand of human kind. Then, the idea that animals are machines reflects Descartes' general position in his account of physiology. Accordingly, all animal behavior can be explained by physiological laws and nothing miraculous can be seen in the animal body. Thus, all these animal behavior and the physiological laws can be derived from the mathematical principles. This is explicit when he says, "all the motions of animals originate from the corporeal and mechanical principle"³.

From all of these, we can only see that animal body for Descartes is a machine, which can be explained by mere physiological laws and mathematical principles. However, we need to see whether Descartes considers human body as an animal body as well, or he solely talks about animals, while excluding humans. Descartes is explicit on this issue. In his conversation with Burman he says, "God made our body like a machine, and he wanted it to function like a universal instrument, which would always operate in the same way in accordance with its own laws."⁴ The machine analogy is also present here, but it is still confusing to decide whether the laws that Descartes refers cover only the physiological laws of the body or something more is included in order to emphasize the universality claim. I think this place is where Descartes is confusing and inadequate. In the latter sentences of the conversation Descartes talks about the soul, which is informed by the body when the body is in good health or in bad health, and this gives awareness to the soul about the body. However, as we know (and I will come to it later) Descartes does not attribute soul to animals. So here, I think, we can only say that the universality claim is unique to the humans because it requires a kind of relation between the soul and the body and this relation produces awareness for the soul to be informed by the body.

Postponing the discussion of the soul for a while, up to that point we can be clear about the idea that animals are just like machines and, secondly, they are natural automaton. This latter claim is explicit in Descartes' *letter to More*. He says, "It seems reasonable since art copies nature, and man can make various automata which move without thought, that nature should produce its own automata much more splendid than the artificial once. These natural automata are the animals."⁵ As we see here, Descartes considers animals as natural automata. This is very important. In the last paragraph the claim that the machine analogy works for both humans and animals was not adequately supported. However, his use of "natural automata" leads us to another passage

Cambridge University Press 1984). 'AT' = Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Ouvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin/CNRS 1966-76). 'CSMK' = J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny (editors and translators): *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol. III*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991). For the rest of the paper these abbreviations will be used in order to refer to those books.

³ Letter to More of 5 February 1649, AT V 276, CSMK 365.

⁴ AT 5 163-4, CSMK 346; Cf. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes's Conversation with Burman*, p. 29

⁵ AT V 277, CSMK 366

where Descartes considers the human body as a natural automaton as well. He describes the human body in the beginning of *Man* by appealing to the same analogy:

We see clocks [*des horloges*], artificial fountains, mills, and other such machines, which, although only man-made, have the power to move of their own accord in many different ways. But I am supposing this machine to be made by the hands of God, and so I think you may reasonably think it capable of a greater variety of movements than I could possibly imagine in it, and of exhibiting more artistry than I could possibly ascribe to it.⁶

I think, all these concerns about the animal body (including human body) show that he wants to explain its functions and characteristics by appealing only to the material nature (*res extensia*) and excluding the use of soul in such explanations. So, what can we infer from this first claim about the animals; that animals are natural automaton? I think the general inclination that flows in discussions about this claim is an unfortunate misunderstanding. This general attempt is to conclude that Descartes' meaning of natural automata yields to say that animals do not feel pain. However, I think this conclusion cannot be drawn from none of Descartes' arguments related to the machine analogy. It seems to me that this consideration is influenced by an intuition about the informal characteristics of the machines and the automatons. If we look at automaton or machines in general we would not attribute any pain state. This is because we think that such states require highly complex mental capabilities. However, 'automaton' does not reflect any such meaning from its definition. Cottingham points out this in *Cartesian Reflections*⁷:

But the inference from 'X is an automaton' to 'X is incapable of feeling' is a mistaken one. Webster's⁸ dictionary gives the primary meaning of 'automaton' as simply 'a machine that is relatively self-operating'; and neither this nor the subsidiary meaning ('creature who acts in a mechanical fashion') automatically implies the absence of feeling.

To conclude the discussion of the automaton and animals as mere natural automata, it seems quite clear to me that Descartes does not claim that animals do not feel pain because of being natural automata. This is an important point and should be elaborated a bit more here. If the former is the case, then we have two possible ways to follow. First of all, it may be the case that being automaton does not exclude having a pain state and we can say that feeling pain is not merely an immaterial attribution that comes directly from the soul. Secondly, it might also be the case that, animals do not feel pain, but this is because of some other reason than the former one. However, Descartes does not issue such reason. In this case, because humans are also natural automata having the pain state might be the result of both the body and the soul or only the body;

⁶ AT XI 120, CSM I 99

⁷ Cottingham, John. *Cartesian Reflections: Essays on Descartes's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 180.

⁸ In Cottingham 2008: *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1963)

hence the first reason seems more reasonable to accept. So, in the following sections I will specify Descartes' position on this issue. Now, let us continue with another argument related to our issue; namely the language argument.

Dogs are Barking, Men are Talking

So far we have seen that for Descartes the mere distinction between an automaton and a natural machine, which is an animal, lies on the word 'natural' and this naturalness is because of the reason that animals are products of God, whereas automaton are produced by man. Then, the question to answer here is what makes an animal a natural machine and how to distinguish them from men. To start answering this we can first look at the *Meditations*, where Descartes discredits self-movement as a characteristic attributed to the soul only. He says, "according to my judgment, the power of self-movement, like the power of sensation or of thought, was quite foreign to the nature of body; indeed, it was a source of wonder to me that certain bodies were found to contain faculties of this kind"⁹. This kind of bodies that Descartes refers is indeed automaton. In this case, self-movement cannot be the distinguishing feature of the natural machines.

Considering this realization of Descartes, we can see this in *Discourse Part V*, where Descartes considers language as a distinguishing feature of man contrasting with both automaton and other animals. He says:

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. For we can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words, and even utters words, which correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs. But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do¹⁰.

Three things are important in this passage. First, Descartes considers that automata and animals lack of the ability to express thought by communication. This is clear in the first sentence. So we can say that for Descartes, thought expression by communication (words or signs) is one of the unique capabilities of humans. Secondly, he also holds the idea that communication can only be possible if and only if utterances are meaningful. Finally, and I think most importantly, he thinks that all men including the dullest of all have this ability as well¹¹. Ultimately if we want to state the

⁹ AT VII 26, CSM II 18

¹⁰ *Discourse*, Part V AT VI 56-7, CSM I 140

¹¹ Two important remarks can be made here. First, Descartes is probably unaware in his time that autism is the disability to communicate with other people. In this case, even he holds that all humans have the ability to communicate; simply autistic people do not have this ability. In this case, in an anachronistic framework one can blame this criterion of language by considering the autistic people. Secondly, I think the common name for this

communication criterion explicitly (bypassing the part of dullest man), this will be the following: *One of the unique characteristics of man is to produce meaningful speech in order to express his thought and to respond to other's speech accordingly*. This capacity of communication shows for Descartes that it is not a mere bodily capacity but it is a mental capacity, which is a conduct of reason and the rational soul. This is explicit in his *letter to More*: "Speech is the only sure sign of thought hidden in the body"¹². Of course, because Descartes is so explicit on the mental aspect of speech, this leads many philosophers to conclude that animals cannot feel as well as they think or talk.

However, I think this is again a wrong interpretation. At the face value of the criterion it seems that in order to talk, one need a rational soul but this is a necessary condition of speech and this is, I think, indeed true for Descartes. However, my worry is due to the idea that considering animals incapable of talk and having no mind entails that they do not feel as well. Here what we need to examine is Descartes' account of feeling. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task to cope with in Descartes' writings. However, briefly, I will try to explain it.

To start, I think, it seems true in many places that Descartes holds the idea that feeling pain is a 'special or confusing mode of thinking'. In addition to this, again in many places, he explicitly says that this special mode is a product of the *intermingling* of the mind and the body. Thus, in order to feel pain both the mind and the body are needed. In *Principles of Philosophy* he says:

But we also experience within ourselves certain other things which must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone. There arise, as will be made clear later on, in the appropriate place, from the close and intimate union of our mind with the body. ... This list includes ... all the sensations, such as those of pain, pleasure, light, colours, sounds, smells, tastes ...¹³

So here it is explicit that pain is a kind of sensation, which can be experienced by mind-body. In this paper, I will not deal with the issue of Cartesian Dualism, but it is important for our purpose to have a clear idea about the situation of pain. In this case, as Katalin Farkas pinpoints, the problem here is derived from the union of mind and body¹⁴. So, how should we understand this union of mind and body?

Descartes has a clear answer for this question in the *6th Meditation*. He thinks that the experience of feeling of pain can be adequate if they are the confused modes of thinking and mere confused sensations:

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 intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needed

criterion "language argument" is misleading. I think Descartes only considers language in use of communication and nothing else. Thus, for instance logic, algebra, etc, cannot be in the domain of this criterion.

¹² Letter to More of 5 February 1649, AT V 278, CSMK 366

¹³ AT VIII A 23, CSM I 208-9

¹⁴ Farkas, Katalin. "The Unity of Descartes's Thought", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22/1 (January 2005) pp. 17-30.

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.¹⁵

In this passage, we can see a clear distinction between feeling (*affectus*) the pain and sensing (*sensus*) the pain. What we can infer from this passage is, for Descartes, that a complete feeling of pain requires the union of mind and body and in the case of mere body any such feelings cannot be obtained. What is obtained in that case is just a bodily realization of the material state of the pain, hunger, etc. If this is the case, then we are one step behind the accurate understanding of Descartes' concern of the feeling of pain. What is missing here is the unclear explanation of this accurate feeling of pain and its deviation from the sensation of pain. In order to approach to this question another passage from *Principles* is needed:

The result of these movements being set up in the brain by the nerves is that the soul or mind that is closely joined to the brain is affected in various ways, corresponding to various different sorts of movements. And the various different states of mind, or thoughts, which are the immediate result of these movements are called sensory perceptions, or in ordinary speech, sensations.¹⁶

Here Descartes, again, emphasizes the need for the union of mind and body for the having of sensations. According to this passage, we can understand that body (different sorts of movements in the brain) is the necessary condition of these immediate thoughts in the mind. If we combine this to the inference that I have made in the previous passage, then we can say that these movements themselves can cause a confused sensation, but this confused mode is not sufficient alone to have the awareness of that sensation. So it seems to me that this forces us to think that there are two kinds of accounts for sensation one of which is an incomplete and the other of which is a complete mode of sensation.

The last thing concerning this issue is to see what is additional in the case of full sensation or feeling, which is lacking in the case of bodily sensation. Cottingham points out the failure that interpreting 'thinking' as simply 'experiencing'. According to him, for Descartes thinking (*cogitatio*) involves more than experiencing. He refers to Descartes by saying, "If understood as *de visione* (of vision) it is not a good premise for inferring one's existence; but if understood 'concerning the actual sense or awareness of seeing' it is quite certain, since it is in this case referred to the mind which alone feels or thinks it sees"¹⁷. The contribution of mind to sensation and feeling is the awareness of seeing and feeling. So, as Cottingham concludes, thinking does not include sensation and feeling but it is the awareness of them. This is called the *conscientia*, which is 'to be aware is to think and to reflect on one's thought'¹⁸. Ultimately, we can conclude that the union of mind and body is not the

¹⁵ AT VII 8 I, CSM II 56

¹⁶ AT VIII A 316, CSM I 280

¹⁷ Cottingham, 2008, p. 168 (see footnote 22 in the text for references to the quoted parts)

¹⁸ Conversation with Burman, AT V 149, CSMK 333

necessary condition to feel pain but the body is the necessary condition of it. However, body alone cannot be the sufficient condition to feel pain fully but it can be sufficient to have a 'confused' sense of feeling.

In order to support this claim a bit more, two important passages can help us to see some positive evidences for my claim. In his *letter to Newcastle* Descartes mentions how this feeling without any thought involvement is possible. He says, "If you teach a magpie to say good-day to its mistress when it sees her coming, all you can possibly have done is to make the emitting of this word the expression of one of its feelings. For instance it will be an expression of the hope of eating."¹⁹ It is clear in this passage that Descartes attributes feelings to animals. Furthermore, Descartes also clearly attributes sensation to animals as well and also remarks on the ethical implications of his account concerning animals. He says:

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 superstitions of Pythagoras — since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals²⁰.

I think it is now certainly clear that, for Descartes, animals feel pain. However, this passage brings another discussion. Descartes here explicitly suggests that his account allows killing and eating animals. Peter Singer uses this phrase in order to show the wrongness of Descartes' account. He emphasizes:

Some philosophers, including Descartes, have thought so important that while humans can tell each other about their experience of pain in great detail, other animals cannot ... But as Bentham pointed out long ago, the ability to use language is not relevant to the question of how a being ought to be treated²¹.

As I have showed in this section –specifically, putting Descartes in this sanction is a misleading interpretation. So, contrary to what Singer says, in my opinion this is not what Descartes tells us in the language argument.

Summing up what I have said in this section, I will emphasize two crucial steps of my claim that having no mind does not mean having no feelings. Firstly, I have showed that the language argument concludes that animals have no mind and no thinking. Secondly, I have claimed that, for Descartes, thinking does not include full account of feeling and sensation. Instead, Descartes claims that union of mind and body can enable full sensation and feeling. In this case, body can enable a confused sense of feeling and sensation but these feelings and senses are lack of self-awareness of the agent, which entails an adequate understanding of the felt and sensed state of the body. However, the crucial claim that I have made here is that in order to feel something mind is not a

¹⁹ AT IV 574, CSMK 303 (See also the letter to *More 5 February 1649* for a similar explanation.)

²⁰ AT V 278, CSMK 366

²¹ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 14

necessary condition and without mind or a rational soul the body can have feelings.

Conclusion

In this paper I have claimed that neither the language argument, nor the account of natural automata entails the claim that animals do not feel pain. I claimed that for Descartes animals do feel pain but their feeling of pain is a mere confused sensation and by having no mind animals cannot be aware of their pain-states. I have supported this claim by arguing (1) both animals and humans are natural automata and mind plays no role in explaining both the human and the animal body as natural machines; and (2) having a mind is not the ultimate cause of feelings, but it provides self-awareness of these sensations. So this conclusion provides objections to the common interpretation, which holds these two accounts as sufficient textual evidence to conclude that Descartes is one of the first antagonists of animal rights. For the orthodox reading because animals are natural machines and have no mind, they cannot have feelings as well. However, this condition only shows that they cannot be aware of what they feel. Feeling and the awareness of feeling are two different things.

However, one can still think that even in my interpretation the lack of awareness of the pain-state in animals provides us reasons to say that we have no duty towards animals. This attempt would be a far cry from being one of Descartes' positions. Descartes never makes this conclusion and hence cannot be accused of what he never said before. I think this common mistake relies on the intuition that to be a moral agent one needs intentionality. However, at least in these arguments, Descartes never exposes his account of the relation between intentionality and ethics. It is at least unclear whether he accepts this requirement of intentionality or not. Hence, an independent inquiry concerning this issue might bring out Descartes' full account of animal rights. Until then, Descartes is innocent.

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