

# Why Can't Animals Imagine? Berkeley on Imagination and the Animal–Human Divide<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I present and analyze Berkeley's sporadic claims on the animal–human divide, concentrating on his early works, especially his *Notebooks*. Before drawing our attention to the importance of imagination, I start by contextualizing Berkeley's views on animal cognition more generally. More specifically, I aim to clarify that though he verbally agrees with Descartes that animals cannot imagine like we do, Berkeley's view is motivated by fundamentally different considerations. What he ultimately denies is that animals can imagine in a sense that requires the sort of spontaneous and creative activity we share more with God than animals.

In many respects, Descartes and Berkeley are contrasting figures of early modern philosophy. But there is a perhaps surprising agreement that interpreters rarely mention, let alone dwell on: they both thought that (non-human) animals—or, as they called them, brutes or beasts—cannot imagine, at least not in the way we do. Indeed, both thought that this fact tells us something important about the animal–human divide, constituting one of the ways humans can be set apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. As I aim to clarify in this essay, though he verbally agrees with Descartes, Berkeley's view is motivated by fundamentally different considerations. The fact that animals cannot imagine, for Descartes, is simply an incidental implication of a much deeper, ontological, difference: animals do not imagine because they are mere physical mechanisms and hence are incapable of any cognitive mental state whatsoever. Berkeley's point, by contrast, is not that they do not have minds or can have sensory experiences like we do. What he denied is that animals can imagine in a sense that requires the sort of spontaneous and creative activity we share more with God than animals. As such, he not only has something else in mind than Descartes when denying imagination to animals, but for him, it indeed tells us something *specific* about what differentiates human cognitive abilities from animal capacities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Most commentators ignore the question of animal cognition in Berkeley, perhaps due to their (implicit) agreement with Cummins's summary that “neither the question do nonhuman animals have consciousness, nor the question are they capable of reasoning, is addressed in *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision, A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, or Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*” [Philip D. Cummins, “Berkeley on Mind and Agency,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190]. The most important exception who discusses the issue of animal cognition in Berkeley is Sébastien Charles, “The Animal according to George Berkeley,” in *George Berkeley: Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Silvia Parigi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 189–199. See also Sébastien Charles, “Berkeley et l'imagination,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 135 (2010), 97–108. As we will see, while he recognizes the particular importance of imagination, I disagree with various details of his reading, including the question whether, for Berkeley, the difference between human and animal imagination is merely a difference in degree. As we will also see, Stephen H. Daniel, *George Berkeley and Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), especially 96–97, touches on related issues as well. But in line with his unique and controversial interpretation of Berkeley on minds, he focuses

## 1. Animal Cognition in Berkeley

Before turning to imagination more specifically, let me start by contextualizing Berkeley's views on animal cognition. Animal cognition, as well as its difference to human cognition, was a hot topic in the early modern period, widely debated even before Descartes, let alone in the aftermath of his provocative "animal-machine" thesis. As is clear from the objections to Descartes' *Meditations* as well as his subsequent correspondence, many agreed with (earlier) skeptical authors such as Montaigne and Charron in holding that human and animal cognition differ only in degree. Indeed, they argued, animals not only perceive as we do but are also capable of reasoning and making basic inferences.<sup>3</sup> In Berkeley's more immediate context, Bernard Mandeville is an important example who follows this tradition. But many in his time reacted to such views by sticking to the Scholastic position that animals differ from us in kind, insofar as their souls completely lack our minds' higher capacities (e.g., reasoning). Specifically, most held that animals do not share with us a spiritual (and immortal) intellect capable of abstract thought or self-reflection.<sup>4</sup> Descartes and many of his followers, infamously, went even further and adopted the view that all the operations of animals, including their lower-level cognitive processes, can be explained in the same way as the blind or non-conscious mechanism of a clockwork or an automaton. Even if the processes and hence the explanations are much more complex in the case of the former, it does not warrant the attribution of any sort of (immaterial) soul or non-mechanistic principle to animals. Of course, animals are not merely complex beings but also living organisms; but as Descartes suggests, life itself, with all its complexity, can be explained in mechanistic terms. Simply put, animals are mere "automatons" who do not have "any real feeling or emotion" (AT 2: 41, CSMK 100; see also AT 3: 85, CSMK 148).<sup>5</sup> In contemporary terms, while they might make use of physical representations, it is not only that they cannot think and reason, but there's no phenomenal quality to any of their "cognitions."<sup>6</sup>

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on the active aspect of human cognition. Consequently, on his reading, imagination does not really play a special role: even the way human beings perceive their surroundings is completely transformed by the higher cognitive (discriminatory, conceptual and linguistic) activities animals lack.

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful overview of the seventeenth-century skeptical and the Cartesian views on animals, see Peter Harrison, "The Virtues of Animals in Seventeenth-Century Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998): 463–484.

<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Locke is an obvious example when it comes to abstract thought. Nonetheless, he also thinks that "if we will compare the Understanding and Abilities of some Men, and some Brutes, we shall find so little difference, that 'twill be hard to say, that that of the Man is either clearer or larger" (*Essay* IV.16.12, 666). Moreover, he famously entertains the possibility that human consciousness is a property of our bodies superadded by God. In any event, many of Berkeley's contemporaries think that animals lack our spiritual intellect and its higher faculties much more unambiguously, including critics of Locke (e.g., Stillingfleet and Andrew Baxter). The anonymous author of "Two Dissertations Concerning Sense, and the Imagination" (London, J. Tonson, 1728)—which is traditionally (but probably falsely) attributed to Zachary Mayne—also argues that sensory cognition, both in humans and animals, is completely independent from our uniquely human intellection or understanding. Interestingly, according to the author, the view "That Brutes have the same Powers or Capacities of Understanding, with Mankind [. . .] is a direct and immediate Consequence of Mr. Locke's Doctrine of Ideas" (*Two Dissertations*, Preface, 2). For others endorsing a similar position, see my note 7.

<sup>5</sup> Citations refer to the Charles Adam–Paul Tannery [AT] edition of the *Oeuvres de Descartes* (12 vols.; J. Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–1976), and *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 & 2, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [CSM] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–85); and vol. 3, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny [CSMK] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are dissenting views in the literature. The classic is John Cottingham, "A Brute to the Brutes? Descartes' Treatment of Animals," *Philosophy* 53 (1978): 551–59. In the face of the rather unambiguous textual evidence, these "revisionist" attempts have hardly been deemed successful by Descartes scholars.

By contrast, Berkeley never questioned the traditional view that animals perceive their environment by their “external” senses and use “internal” senses (e.g., memory, imagination) to keep and retrieve, associate and manipulate earlier experiences, dream, and, of course, feel sensations such as pain and pleasure just like we do. Indeed, some of his readers, such as the American Samuel Johnson—a rare follower of his idealism—worry about the opposite problem, namely that Berkeley might end up attributing too much to animals—specifically, a conscious mind that is immaterial and hence naturally immortal.<sup>7</sup>

At the outset, it is worthwhile to clarify that it is not due to his idealism that Berkeley did not accept the Cartesian “animal–machine” view. One might think that it is his idealism or immaterialism that pushes Berkeley away from such a position. But idealism does not preclude the possibility or even tenability of this doctrine insofar as animals could still be construed as machines or machine–like living beings, mere ideas in the world of perceptions but not genuine perceivers themselves. Interestingly, even though Berkeley talks about “the admirable mechanism in the parts of animals” and the “clockwork of Nature” (PHK 60), his view that they have minds and conscious experiences is a substantive, if hardly controversial, commitment on the idealist Berkeley’s part. Indeed, animal perception plays an important role in his argumentation for immaterialism, more precisely against the alternative of direct realism. For at a crucial juncture of the argumentation in the first of the *Three Dialogues*, he appeals to the old skeptical trope concerning perceptual relativity as attested to by different species, namely that certain animals perceive differently than we or other animal species do. This does not only apply to (Locke’s and others’) secondary qualities, such as colors—as Berkeley discusses in DHP 181—but the size (dimension of extension) of the objects too. As he memorably claims in DHP 188, mites perceive their own limbs to be larger than we do theirs. Since material objects are supposed to have fixed intrinsic natures, it follows that not all the different perceptions perceivers have of objects can be truthful representations of their mind–independent qualities. That is, not all the properties we perceive (or ones *like* those) can be instantiated by the external objects themselves. This famously leads to all sorts of skeptical worries Berkeley alludes to: not only that direct realism is untenable, but even for indirect realism the problem arises as to determining which of our ideas represent the object truly. Simply put, what could be a clear criterion or standard to adjudicate between these different, often incompatible, but apparently true perceptions or representations?<sup>8</sup>

One might think the argument from the species–relativity of perception is premised on the view that animals, just like us, have experiences with phenomenal quality—and hence on the rejection of the Cartesian animal–machine thesis. As I already indicated, while Berkeley shows no sympathy for such a view, it is far from clear that the animal–machine view is indeed incompatible with Berkeley’s appeal to the species–relativity of perception. Why

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<sup>7</sup> See Letter 197 in *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, ed. Marc Hight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 314; *Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (9 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons: 1948–57), 2: 289–90; cf. Charles, “The Animal,” 189–91). Johnson’s worry seems to be that Berkeley ends up having no argument for our natural immortality, as he cannot appeal to the claim that we, and only we humans, have a perceiving mind. The argument that attributing an immaterial soul to animals based on their ability to perceive is a slippery slope towards gifting immortality to them was widely circulated in the period. For instance, see Peter Browne, *The Procedure, extent and limits of the Human Understanding* (London: William Innys, 1728), 173. But Andrew Baxter, *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (London: James Bettenham, 1733), 242–43, defends this view by emphasizing that natural immortality is compatible with God destroying their souls after the death of the animal’s body.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of the relativity of perception, and species–relativity in his argumentation, see Melissa Frankel, “Revisiting Berkeley’s Perceptual Relativity Argument,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 30 (2013): 161–76 (esp. 168–69).

couldn't Descartes argue along similar lines invoking only physical representations or brain images in the animal case, which, as I suggested, can be reformulated in idealistic terms? In other words, it seems to me that Berkeley's argument from the species-relativity of perception does not need to presuppose that animal and human representations are ontologically similar. Even if one questions, as a matter of fact, that animals have perceptual experiences, the argument can be made in counterfactual terms: if they did have experiences, their physical or mechanical representations would make them experience different sensible qualities than those we perceive. Alternatively, if we were in their shoes (being as small as a mite, for instance), we would have those different experiences.

As for the textual evidence, one passage is of particular interest. In DHP 188, Berkeley clarifies that the function or role of perception for animals is the same as for us, namely the "preservation and well-being in life" enabling them "them to perceive their own limbs, and those bodies which are capable of harming them." This is why, as we have seen, their perceptions have to be relative to their sizes for instance. This still might be acceptable for Descartes and an idealist proponent of the animal-machine thesis, but as Sébastien Charles ("The Animal," 191–92) rightly emphasizes, for Berkeley the pragmatic aim of perception is closely connected to the laws of pain and pleasure God has established in nature for both humans and animals. In PHK 146, Berkeley speaks about "the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure" alongside "the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passion of animals." It seems, then, that, on the most natural reading, for Berkeley, animals navigate their environment in accordance with the pain and pleasure they actually *feel* (like we do) when trying to preserve their life as well as possible.

Interestingly, though, just before clarifying this practical function of perception, Berkeley seems to throw in the Cartesian view.

PHILONOUS. Have all other animals as good grounds to think the same of the figure and extension which they see and feel [i.e., that figure and extension "exist in the outward object"]?

HYLAS. Without doubt, if they have any thought at all. (DHP 188)

Now, one might be tempted to read Hylas as raising Descartes' animal-machine doctrine, given that in the period "thought" was often used to include all conscious mental states. If so, Hylas accepts Philonous's starting point only hypothetically: if they are not like mindless machines and have "any thought at all," then they have grounds to think that what they perceive is a true quality of mind-independent objects. Unfortunately, Berkeley does not explicitly address the antecedent of this conditional. He rather goes on to emphasize the same pragmatic purpose of animal and human perception, from which he derives that they perceive the world differently than us (according to their different size, for instance). It might be, as Charles ("The Animal," 194) seems to take it, that instead of raising the possibility of the Cartesian view, Hylas's qualification concerns the sort of *higher-order* thought or judgment humans have but animals possibly lack. The conditional Hylas raises, then, is the following: were they able to form judgments about external objects, they would justifiably infer, just as we do, based on their own perceptual experiences that the size they perceive is the real size of the object. Whether they actually have thought in this higher-order sense is something Berkeley does not address here, either. Indeed, despite his other, especially later, works emphasizing much more clearly the intellectual, spiritual and ethical differences between animals and humans,<sup>9</sup> it seems fair to say that he remained rather undecided about the

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<sup>9</sup> In *Alciphron*, he notes that animals are "without reflexion or remorse, without foresight, or appetite of immortality, without notion of vice or virtue, or order, or reason, or knowledge" (*Alc* II.14, 86–87) as

possibility, and the extent to which, some basic form of higher-order thought, reasoning, or inferential capacities could be attributed to animals. In any event, even if this exchange does not prove or rest on this conviction strictly speaking, we have no evidence to question that Berkeley thought that animals have first-order, phenomenally conscious experiences.

He draws some further analogy between animal and human perception. Animals not only perceive the size of objects, as well as their other intrinsic qualities (color, etc.), they also perceive visually their spatial features, including their distance from them:

We are not to think, that brutes and children, or even grown reasonable men, whenever they perceive an object to approach, or depart from them, do it by virtue of geometry and demonstration. (NTV 24)

Here Berkeley likens animal distance perception to human visual perception in order to illustrate that even we do not rely on innate geometry or demonstration to perceive the distance of objects through vision. As he makes clear in TVV, perception and (perceptual) judgment are different things, and our immediate perceptions of visible objects and the basic associative mechanisms accompanying them (suggesting tangible size, distance, position, or other sensory qualities that we have often experienced together with them) are similar to how animals perceive the world around them. One aspect of this similarity is that immediate perception is never conceptually saturated, and strictly speaking, humans (just like animals) perceive mere patches of colors and sounds (even in combinations and associative networks of ideas), as opposed to perceptual objects intrinsically unified under concepts such as apple or carriage. As Berkeley suggests, appealing again to the animal case, we definitely do not need to possess such lofty general ideas as unity or existence in order to perceive the particular qualities of objects.

Will any man say that Brutes have y<sup>e</sup> ideas, unity & Existence? I believe not. yet if they are suggested by all the ways of sensation, tis strange they should want them. (NB 746)

Just like the absence of geometrical reasoning or the possible lack of any higher-order thought and judgment, lacking these general concepts doesn't entail that animals do not perceive or have sensations like we do. Note, however, that what Berkeley attacks here is not a Kantian or conceptualist theory of perception, which holds that perception requires the application and hence possessions of concepts such as unity or existence. Berkeley indeed endorsed what Stoneham aptly called 'Pre-Kantian Innocence': on the basic level, there is no representation—as involved in perception, we are simply presented with the (God-) 'given' data.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, this comment from the NB actually targets (the empiricist) Locke's view that these general concepts are brought to us by every instance of sense perception (and of reflection on our mental processes). Similarly, in PHK 13, Berkeley criticizes the view that unity as a primary quality could belong to external objects, and that it supposedly accompanies all perceptions of both sensation and reflection. For Berkeley, unity is just another abstract idea we do not find in ourselves. A noteworthy difference between the two

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distinguishing human features animals lack. Unlike animals, humans also have free "will and higher principle; by virtue whereof he may pursue different or even contrary ends," and "Man alone of all animals hath understanding to know his God" (*Alc* V.28, 207). But even earlier, for instance in his essays and sermons, he mentions on various occasions that the "faculty of reason and understanding [...] placeth us above the brute part of the creation" (*W* 7: 222; see also 7: 96 and 7: 216). In *Siris* 251, animals, who do not observe and interpret the rules of the divine language that is nature, are compared to "a man who hears a strange tongue but understands nothing."

<sup>10</sup> See Tom Stoneham, "Some Issues in Berkeley's Account of Sense Perception," in *Berkeley's Three Dialogues: New Essays*, ed. Stefan Storrie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24–39.

passages is that the NB passage does not mention reflection, but only sensation as the alleged source of these general ideas. This omission seems to suggest that, even in his early works, Berkeley thought that animals do not have the capacity to reflect on their own mental operations and experiences, and hence, they might—but do not, after all—get the idea of unity (and existence) only from their sense perceptions.

To be sure, Berkeley does not think that we get these ideas from any experience (and even less so that they are innate). As he is clear in the introduction to the PHK, even humans are incapable of forming and entertaining abstract, that is, intrinsically general, concepts—and, arguably, unity and existence are among the most abstract ones. As such, the point Berkeley makes is not exactly, as Charles (“The Animal,” 193) puts it, that “complex ideas like unity or existence seem entirely to escape [animals].” Indeed, based on his anti-abstractionist criticism of Locke, he concludes in IN 11 that the capacity for abstraction and the possession of abstract ideas cannot constitute the difference between animals and humans for the simple reason that even we cannot do it.<sup>11</sup> But whether he thinks that animals cannot make use of their particular ideas in a general way by applying them to many things indifferently—as we humans can, despite our inability to abstract—is a different question, one he, again, does not give a definitive answer to. In other words, he clearly thinks animals have no abstract general ideas, just like us, but it is unclear if he thinks they do not even have general thoughts or representations, that is, they do not use particular ideas in a general way like we do.<sup>12</sup> Maybe he would deny it to most but not all animals. Perhaps he would accept the belief that primates or even dogs are capable of understanding general rules, since they seem to indicate it through their behavior and their ability to be trained while obviously having no abstract ideas of, say, treats and sitting. In any event, in sharp contrast to Locke, he does not spell out the human–animals divide in terms of the capacity for general, if not inherently abstract, thinking—not even when clarifying where the denial of human abstraction leads us with regard to this question:

If you take away abstraction, how do men differ from Beasts. I answer by shape. By Language rather by Degrees of more & less. (NB 594)

Berkeley lists three alternatives to the Lockean view: difference in shape, language, and “degrees of more and less.” These are, arguably, not mutually exclusive, but constitute a system of criteria. Language is pretty straightforward: it is, of course, one of the two tests Descartes famously relies on in his *Discourse on Method*. As is evidenced most clearly in *Alc* IV.12, 157, Berkeley also accepts this as a crucial distinction: animals use and understand signs (perhaps, with general content) but do not do so with the “articulation, combination, variety, copiousness, extensive and general use and easy application of signs [...] that constitute the true nature of language.”

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<sup>11</sup> Berkeley’s argument is too witty and sarcastic not to quote: “There has been a late deservedly esteemed philosopher, who, no doubt, has given it very much countenance by seeming to think the having abstract general ideas is what puts the widest difference in point of understanding betwixt man and beast. [...] I readily agree with this learned author, that the faculties of brutes can by no means attain to abstraction. But then if this be made the distinguishing property of that sort of animals, I fear a great many of those that pass for men must be reckoned into their number.” There are, of course, various interpretations of why Berkeley thinks that even humans cannot abstract—something that does not have to concern us here.

<sup>12</sup> *Alc* IV.12, 157 (see it partially quoted in the next paragraph) is cited by Charles, “The Animal,” 194 to suggest that the general use of ideas is a uniquely human capacity. But it is not completely clear to me if by “general use” Berkeley means to refer to the representational content of a particular sign or idea, as opposed to the regular nature of divine and human language as a sign system.

But what can shape mean in this context? It is helpful to look (again) at the anonymous *Two Dissertations Concerning Sense, and the Imagination*. In its preface, the text argues that by reducing the difference between animals and humans to only a matter of shape or figure, one makes us one of the animal kingdom, which is “a very dangerous and pernicious opinion which prevails almost everywhere” (*Two Dissertations*, Preface, 2). The problem comes from regarding sense perception and imagination as cognitive faculties that are *not* fundamentally different from understanding or intellection. If so, the fact that animals have these abilities entails that they have some form of intellection as well, and we are left with no essential or categorical distinction. On my reading, one way to understand this complaint is that if, as is generally accepted in the empiricist tradition, thinking relies on or perhaps is reduced to entertaining and associating images deriving from the senses, and animals have imagination as well as sense perception, then they can think at least in some basic sense. Hence, we are not different from them, only in our particular humanoid shape and the extent to which we can use these faculties. In NB 594, Berkeley seems to bite the bullet: we might categorically differ from animals in outward appearance only—and, apart from the use of language, anything else is simply a difference in degree.

Of course, in addition to the use of language, he *could* have mentioned, as we have also seen, (geometrical) reasoning, reflection or self-consciousness, and perhaps the general use of ideas. Maybe these things are not listed here as they are already included among the aspects in which we differ from animals only in degree. If so, Berkeley seems to think at this early stage of his career that we do not have any capacity animals do not have in some basic sense too. It is, then, only that we exercise them better: we reason *better*, for instance, with a geometrical accuracy and strictness or by extending reasoning to general notions; we can use signs in a *more* systematic, various etc. manner, that is, as a proper language; and we can turn our same ability to perceive not only outside but *also* inside, to our ideas themselves.

But what does it mean, as Charles’s reading suggests, that the difference is merely in degree when it comes to our sensory capacities, that is, sense perception and imagination? Do we perceive better than animals in any meaningful sense? As many in the period, Berkeley was surely aware that animals can perceive, see or smell with much more sharpness or in much more detail than we do. Don’t animals (like elephants) remember as well as we do, or even better in some cases? Cannot they make instinctive associations—almost like simple inferences—even quicker than we do, for instance when seeing a shape or hearing a sound that is associated with some good experience? Even Descartes acknowledged their superiority in many respects, suggesting that since they do not have a free will that could hinder their decision-making and action, making them vacillate and waste time on considering options and their potential outcomes, they can exercise their activities with so much perfection (see *Olympica* AT 10: 219; CSM 1: 5). The same perfection in acting could also show the perfection of their cognitive capacities underlying these actions. In any event, we do not have any textual reason to think that Berkeley believed that humans perceive and imagine better or more clearly than animals. Moreover, perhaps he would argue that none of us perceive “better” than the other, as the adequacy of one’s perceptual capacities can be measured only relative to the particular kind of being we are talking about and its particular needs for navigating its environment—in which case, a perfect match is guaranteed by God’s providence in all his creatures. Indeed, for Berkeley, every *instance* of perception is correct, and it is only our perceptual judgments (judgments animals perhaps do not make at all) that can be mistaken about what other perceptions we expect based on an allegedly “illusory” perception—as is the case with the famous and, in fact, straight oar looking crooked when

submerged into water.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, perhaps Berkeley thought that we do not surpass, or differ even in degree from, animals in terms of these bare sensory capacities, after all.

## 2. Why can't animals imagine?

But let us dwell on the case of imagination, which can be seen as a more complex phenomenon than perception and the basic (imaginative) associations that accompany our perceptions very closely and are often hardly noticeable. As Berkeley introduces it in PHK 1, imagination has two kinds which we might, respectively, call “creative” (involving the composition and division of ideas we perceived earlier) and “reproductive” imagination (when, as he puts it, we are “barely representing” ideas). While the latter arguably belongs to (some) animals as well, and arguably they can exercise it just as well as we can, the former is something they lack. As he writes in the *Notebooks*:

Qu: whether Composition of Ideas be not that faculty which chiefly serves to discriminate us from Brutes. I question whether a Brute does or can imagine a Blue Horse or Chimera. (NB 753)

Here the composition of ideas we perform in creative imagination is strongly suggested to be what “chiefly serves to discriminate us from Brutes.” In fact, such imaginative capacities seem to be an aspect of our cognitive lives where we *fundamentally* differ from animals. Accordingly, I propose that despite saying in NB 594 that we differ from animals “by Degrees of more & less,” what he seems to actually believe is that, on the one hand, some of our cognitive capacities might not differ from those of animals even in degree, and, on the other, we have more *kinds* of cognition, including at least and even most notably, a creative sense of imagination he emphatically denies to animals. It is, of course, similar to the imagination we share with them, insofar as both consist in the production of images of things not currently in front of us. But, for Berkeley (just as for many in the period, such as Descartes or Malebranche), imagination is not really a unified capacity that can be exercised to a higher (human) or lower (animal) degree, but encompasses a reproductive and a creative capacity to have images of things in the absence of a corresponding external stimulus. This creative imagination, which is said to be so important to our essence, is something animals *completely* lack, and hence it seems that the distinction between animals and humans is more than merely in degree. In other words, our cognitive repertoire includes more capacities than theirs—even when we only talk about sensory capacities, that is to say, even when we ignore the question of linguistic capacities, intellect or self-reflection that, according to his later remarks, they perhaps more obviously lack.

In the remaining part of this essay, I want to understand better what this creativity consists in, and why Berkeley thinks that animals cannot imagine in this sense. In other words, what is the difference between human and animal imagination? As we'll see, the creativity of imagination not only differentiates us from animals but, in Berkeley's view, allows for a comparison with divine activity, revealing the sense in which humans are similar to God. But first, it might be helpful to reiterate a few things we have already seen. Firstly, as opposed to Descartes, Berkeley clearly cannot claim that animals lack this sort of imagination simply because they lack all sorts of mental states. Secondly, and relatedly, Berkeley does not deny imagination to animals *as such*. He apparently thinks that animals can receive simple ideas, perceive what is in front of them, as well as keep, retrieve, and associate these ideas. What he

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<sup>13</sup> Though not exactly in this sense, the author of the *Two Dissertations* also thinks that “Brutes make no Discrimination between Appearance, and Reality” (46–47).



clearly denies is only that they cannot come up with new compositions of ideas, and, perhaps, they cannot divide them in interesting ways either.

A third point to keep in mind is that the issue is not about lacking some higher-order cognition. Animals cannot imagine in this creative sense not because they have no reason or intellect (at least, at the required level), or that they do not have abstract ideas, complex thoughts, or even perhaps, that they cannot think in general terms or organize their experiences in terms of meaning and linguistic concepts. Locke thought so, and even if Berkeley agrees to some extent, on my reading (in contrast to Daniel, *Berkeley*, 96–97), it is not his reason for denying creative imagination to animals. His claim is spelled out on a much more mundane level, referring simply to the fact that animals lack the creativity of our sensory imagination, which allows us to compose new combinations of ideas and thus think up things we've never seen before. This apparently has nothing to do with our higher intellectual or linguistic capacities that, as Berkeley's later works tend to emphasize, animals lack.

Hence, my reading differs from Daniel's, who thinks that the "inability of animals to imagine an idea of a blue horse is thus simply an indication of their inability to think of the world as intentional and open to semantic realignments (NB 753)" (Daniel, *Berkeley*, 97). According to him, animals cannot perceive the (divinely ordered) intentionality and meaning of the ideas they sense purely passively because they do not have the prerequisite linguistic understanding to actively discriminate and interrelate objects. While it might be the proper reading of Berkeley's later views, endorsed in *Alciphron* and *Siris*, it does not seem to be what Berkeley had in mind in his *Notebooks*, nor does it align very well with his insistence on the passivity of human perception (see NB 301, 378 and 706, as well as DHP 196–97). But even in the later works, Berkeley does not claim (explicitly, at least) that the human mind differs from animal cognition in terms of anything else but our higher, intellectual faculties, without any suggestion that these somehow penetrate our sensory perception, making the human form of sense perception fundamentally different from how animals perceive the world around them.<sup>14</sup> Daniel's reading also entails that animals, being unable to recognize the meaning of their ideas and organize them linguistically, do not have minds in the sense human beings are minds. This reading, in my eyes, extends the gap, almost in a Cartesian manner, much more than what Berkeley's occasional notes suggest to me. Nonetheless, I agree that, for Berkeley, even in the early stage of his thinking, the distinction with regard to imagination is categorical and hence bigger than what claims by Charles let us believe, such as that animals have a "weak and limited imagination" (Charles, "The Animal," 193). It does not seem to be a weakness and limitation of imagination, but rather a complete lack of creativity that sets animals apart from us.

In trying to unpack what Berkeley exactly had in mind, it is helpful to start discussing a closely related phenomenon, "that strange mystery" he mentions in his *Notebooks*:

Mem: to enquire diligently into that strange Mystery viz. How it is that I can cast about, think of this or that Man, place, action w<sup>n</sup> nothing appears to Introduce them into my thoughts. w<sup>n</sup> they have no perceivable connexion w<sup>th</sup> the Ideas suggested by my senses at the present. (NB 599)

We might call this strange phenomenon "the mystery of spontaneity." How come that we can just think up or imagine things independently of what we actually perceive around ourselves?

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<sup>14</sup> In his sermons and in later works, he speaks about "the corporeal part with the senses and passions which we have in common with brute beasts" (W 7.96, see also W 7.216 and 7.222, cf. my footnote 9).

Though Berkeley does not explicitly connect this issue to the question of the animal–human divide, I propose he thought that we differ from animals in this respect. Unlike us, they seem to be only reactive in their cognitive states, and moved by their perceptions and affections not only in their movements but also their cognitive states, being limited to what is directly present to their senses or what is associated with those due to their earlier experiences. They can remember but perhaps only when and what the present outside stimuli (through the complex net of associated ideas) make them remember. Say, a dog can imagine or remember the taste of a treat if it sees one. But arguably, they cannot just think up a random person, place, or event in their past. Just as they cannot create new compositions of ideas, why would they imagine random things out of the blue? As such, it is reasonable to think that they lack the creativity of our imagination because they lack the perhaps more basic spontaneity our imaginative exercises (whether reproductive or creative) often display. Rather, animals are merely passive perceivers of their environments, being limited in their imaginative exercises by their sense perceptions and what has been associated with them in their (reproductive) imaginations.

Note that the problem is not exactly that animals cannot initiate any mental act at their own will. This might simply be the difference for Descartes, but for Berkeley, the issue is not merely that our spontaneous and creative use of imagination is a *mental* activity. Though he agrees with Descartes that this sort of imagination requires a will and an understanding, including the consciousness of what one wills, he has no principled objection to attributing those to animals—especially because, his concept of “understanding” is not as “pure” as Descartes’ more intellectualist one, but rather relies on the use of sensory images we acquire through perception. Animals have a faculty of will, and some of them, presumably, even consciously, if not self–consciously, know what they will. Indeed, Berkeley has to accept that they are active at least in some sense, because for him, having a soul with a will (and understanding) is basically identical with being an active entity, as opposed to the passivity of ideas or perceived objects. And why wouldn’t animals be able to remember or imagine in the reproductive sense intentionally, just like they can apparently move their bodies volitionally. So, for Berkeley, it is not simply the lack of volitional activity that is the reason why animals cannot imagine like we do in a spontaneous and creative way. It is not that they cannot will their own mental states, and exercise their imagination, but that they cannot do so *spontaneously*—exercising their will to create images independently from the outward stimuli and the associative and psychological processes they trigger in their minds. We can conjure up ideas of anything regardless of what we actually perceive or where we are.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, it is the spontaneity of our acts of imagination specifically, as opposed to the mere exercise of our volitions that makes human cognizers unique. Nonetheless, as other passages indicate, the unique exercise of our imagination lies not only in our spontaneous capacity to come up with ideas that are not in any observable relation to the things actually perceived by us, but in our ability to create contents that transcends all of our earlier experiences. Descartes himself tends to speak about active, human imagination in terms of imagining things that do not exist, like a chimera or other factitious ideas he mentions in the Third Meditation as “inventions of my own imagination,” such as “sirens, hippogriffs” (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 26). Indeed, he claims that we do not “simply jumble up the limbs of different animals” to imagine sirens and satyrs; we might also “manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before—something which is therefore

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<sup>15</sup> Compare it to PHK 28: “I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy: and by the same power it is obliterated, and makes way for another. This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active.”

completely fictitious and unreal” (AT 7: 20, CSM 2: 13). For Berkeley, this is the ultimate difference: animals cannot imagine blue a horse or a chimera, not because they do not have the required cognitive faculties (i.e., a will and an intellect); nor it is merely that they are not spontaneous or free from outside stimuli in exercising their volitions. The latter is true, but for Berkeley, the difference lies also, if not primarily, in the *creativity* of our imagination—that is, in our capacity for putting things together and composing ideas in a novel and unique way.<sup>16</sup>

I propose that the clue to understanding why Berkeley denies this creativity to animals is not only that it requires the spontaneity they seem to lack. But, even more importantly: this sort of imagination is almost divine territory, and it is where our similarity to God is perhaps the most conspicuous and perspicuous.<sup>17</sup>

Why may we not conceive it possible for God to create things out of nothing. Certainly we ourselves create in some wise whenever we imagine. (NB 830)

To repeat, this sort of imagination separating us from animals testifies not merely to our volitional or intentional activity (which animals might equally have), and not even to our unique spontaneity in willing our mental states, but more so to our capacity for creating ideas almost *ex nihilo*. It is, of course, only “in some wise” like God’s creativity, because what we can create is limited to our own minds, and as Berkeley famously specifies the differences in his published works (for instance, *Three Dialogues* 235), our ideas of imagination are much vaguer and more irregular than the ideas of sense created by God. Moreover, our imagination relies on our previous experiences as the basic constituents it can work on, unlike God’s completely self-sufficient and spontaneous creation out of nothing. In fact, we might not even create new tokens of ideas, but only compose new content by merging two existing or pre-given ideas into one, and hence do not create any new idea in the same way God creates the world of our perception.<sup>18</sup> In any event, the most important aspect of the creativity of our imagination, I believe, is that it nonetheless produces new content—content that we have not encountered in that exact form before.

If so, Berkeley emphatically goes further than what he himself suggested in an earlier entry of the *Notebooks*, namely that we only differ from animals in shape, language and in degree

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<sup>16</sup> A similar reading is presented in Charles, “Berkeley et l’imagination,” 102–104, but he does not seem to disentangle creativity from spontaneity in the way I have done. Rather, he seems to collapse the latter into the former. According to my reading, spontaneity (i.e., the ability to form volitions that are not suggested by our current sense perceptions) is different from creativity (i.e., the ability to transcend all our previous sense perceptions)—but just as distinctive of human imagination. More specifically, spontaneity is a necessary requirement for creativity, but ultimately the latter indicates our higher cognitive abilities more clearly. Another important difference is that while spontaneity characterizes both our creative acts and some of our reproductive acts of imagination, creativity is a unique feature of the former type of imagination. In Charles, “The Animal” (193), the distinction between animal and human imagination is simply said to lie in the “capacity of men to elaborate upon sensible ideas.”

<sup>17</sup> Apart from Charles (“The Animal” and “Berkeley et l’imagination”), only a few commentators mention the analogy between divine cognition and human imagination even generally when they highlight how, in both cases, the perceiving mind is active as opposed to our sense perceptions. For example, see Jonathan Dancy, *Berkeley: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 53, 59; and Samuel Rickless, “Berkeley’s Argument for the Existence of God in the *Three Dialogues*,” in *Berkeley’s Three Dialogues: New Essays*, ed. Stefan Storrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 99.

<sup>18</sup> By contrast, Charles (“Berkeley et l’imagination,” 103–104) identifies the difference between human and divine production of ideas as concerning merely its scope: *human* imagination cannot grasp and work with intellectual notions but only sense perceptions. For me, the difference concerns more fundamentally the limited sense and way in which humans can “create” new (sensory) ideas.

when it comes to our cognitive capacities. While, in this early stage, he conspicuously avoids any reference to lofty intellectual capacities only humans have (suggesting perhaps that he was unsure if those are not just other examples where we differ only in degree), he ultimately identifies a categorical distinction between animals and humans even with regard to our sensory capacities. As I argued, this crucial divide is displayed by our spontaneous and creative use of imagination. But as I also noted, he did not depict this uniquely human capacity as unlimited in comparison to its divine counterpart, placing our cognitive capacities firmly between those of animals and God.

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