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Thinking Other-Wise

Cognitive Science, Deconstruction and the (Non)Speaking (Non)Human Subject

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CARY WOLFE

I want to begin with a story—a dog story, in fact.

It's a story about a recent experiment on a canine's signifying abilities that appeared on 11 June 2004 in my hometown newspaper, *The Houston Chronicle*, which was a reprint of an article that appeared that same day in *The Washington Post*, which in turn was courtesy of the Associated Press, which in turn was about the lead article in the magazine *Science* for the 11 June 2004 issue. The *Post* story carried the title "Common Collie or Uberpooch: German Pet's Vocabulary Stuns Scientists." But I prefer my hometown headline, "Dogs May Be as Smart as Owners Think They Are,"[1] because it unwittingly directs us towards a question that I will insist is essential to addressing these kinds of issues, one that definitively separates how cognitive science (represented here by Daniel Dennett) and deconstruction (in the person, here, of Jacques Derrida) understand what language is and how it is related to the question of subjectivity—both of which depend upon very different assumptions about what *knowledge* is and the kinds of knowledge we can have of ourselves and of others—in this case (the hardest case, perhaps) nonhuman others (represented here by the taxonomy *canis familiaris*).

It is tempting to call that question that divides cognitive science and deconstruction simply "Theory," but in the current, supposedly "post-theoretical" climate that would only invite a reified understanding (which would also be a "strategy of containment," to use Fredric Jameson's well-known phrase) of "Theory" as a specialized set of epistemological obsessions carried out in a second-order, cosmetic operation, after the real work

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of cultural studies and historicism (whether new or old) and the sociology of knowledge is over with, and we have nothing better to do than sit around and ask, what do we *really* mean when we say "dog"? So let me be more specific: the issue that separates cognitive science and deconstruction is, as we shall see, one that goes all the way down, both epistemologically and ethically: whether or not knowledge—including knowledge of our own subjectivity and that of others—is *representational* (Dennett) and, within that, how we are to construe the relationship between epistemological and ontological questions.

This might sound at first blush like an overly complicated way of marking the difference between what is traditionally called "realism" (associated, so the story would go, with cognitive science) and "idealism" (with deconstruction), but as Richard Rorty has pointed out with characteristic economy and clarity, "the representationalism-vs.-antirepresentationalism issue is distinct from the realism-vs.-antirealism one, because the latter issue arises only for representationalists.... For representationalists," Rorty continues, "'making true' and 'representing' are reciprocal relations: the nonlinguistic item which makes *S* true is the one represented by *S*. But antirepresentationalists see both notions as equally unfortunate and dispensable."[2] He concludes,

> Antirepresentationalists need to insist "determinacy" is not what is in question—that neither does thought determine reality nor, in the sense intended by the realist, does reality determine thought. More precisely, it is no truer that "atoms" are what they are because we use "atom" as we do than that we use "atom" as we do because atoms are as they are. *Both* of these claims, the antirepresentationalist says, are entirely empty.[3]

Part of what I will be trying to bring out in what follows is that this apparently purely epistemological quibble is far from purely epistemological; indeed, I want to suggest that understanding its full implications is crucial to our ability to think about nonhuman subjects in a rigorous and clear-headed way—a contention whose irony will emerge here in due course, I trust, because cognitive science typically reserves for itself the mantel, precisely, of rigour and clear-headedness (as scientific discourses are wont to do), while the charge of paradoxical incoherence and/or conceptual static is typically laid at the feet of deconstruction (with John Searle's response to Derrida's critique of J.L. Austin in "Signature Event Context" being only the most well-known example). To put it telegraphically, then:

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paradoxically, the only way to represent nonhuman subjectivity (or *any* subjectivity) is to be antirepresentational, and (a corollary) the only way to address the ontology of nonhuman beings is to be post-ontological.

The sort of intervention I am attempting here is of a particular moment, I think, because Dennett's work is often regarded as a more philosophically referenced version of what is taken to be a core feature of cognitive science generally: that it is thought to be, in its "functionalism," resolutely post-ontological and post-representational in precisely this way. In this light, Dennett's work presents itself as a less reductive and more nuanced version of what Terrence Deacon, in *The Symbolic Species*, characterizes as "materialistic reductionism," which offers in theories of mind and consciousness "the dominant alternative to the Cartesian perspective." It is "exemplified," he writes, "by the theoretical claim that the mind is like the sort of 'computation' that takes place in electronic computers. In simpler terms, minds are software (programs) run on the hardware (neural circuits) of the brain." The "strong" version of this claim (or the weakest) is called "eliminative materialism," which holds that

> notions such as mind, intention, belief, thought, representation, and so on will eventually be eliminated in discussions of cognitive processes in favor or more mechanistic synonyms that refer to chemical-electrical signaling processes of the brain. Mentalistic terms, it is suggested, are merely glosses for more complex brain processes that we at present do not understand.[4]

With those contexts in mind, let us return to the story of Rico the Überpooch, if he is one. According to the various reports, a nine-year-old Border Collie living in Germany with his human companions has recently been shown in "a series of careful studies" carried out by Julia Fischer, a biologist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig (a good pedigree, I'd say!), to have "a stunningly large vocabulary of about 200 words" that correspond to a collection of toys, balls and the like, a range comparable to that of great apes, dolphins and parrots who have undergone extensive training in language experiments.[5] In the experiments, Rico and his owner were placed in one room, while ten of the dog's toys were placed in another. The dog was then instructed by his owner to retrieve two randomly selected objects named by the owner, while the owner remained secluded in the separate room to avoid any chance of Clever Hans activity. In forty tests, Rico was accurate thirty-

seven times. Even more impressively, in the next phase of the study, the researchers put seven of his toys in the room along with one he had never seen before. The owner then called out the unfamiliar name of the new toy, and Rico was correct in seven out of ten tries. Finally, in the last phase, researchers tested Rico a month later, and he still remembered the name of the new toy three out of six times without having seen it since the first test—a rate equivalent to that of a human three-year-old.[6]

The key finding of the study, we are told, is that Rico is apparently capable of a process called "fast mapping"—an ability to instantly assign a meaning to a new word, a strategy human toddlers use to learn language at a prodigious rate, and a skill thought to be exclusively the province of humans. Rico apparently "can do something scientists thought only humans could do: figure out by process of elimination that a sound he has never heard before must be the name of a toy he has never seen before."[7] According to the authors of the study, all of this suggests "that mammals developed abilities to understand sounds before humans learned to speak,"[8] and Rico's remarkable learning abilities "may indicate that some parts of speech comprehension developed separately from human speech." "You don't have to be able to talk to understand," Dr. Fischer observes. And Sue Savage-Rumbaugh—whose language acquisition work at Georgia State University with the Bonobo Kanzi is well known—goes even further in a commentary published in the same issue of *Science*, suggesting that "if Rico had a human vocal tract, one would presume that he should be able to say the names of the items as well, or at least try to do so."[9]

Of course, we might well add to this appendix of scientific commentary that appears alongside the publication of the study in *Science* the remarks of Daniel Dennett (the director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University), whose books *Consciousness Explained* and *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness* would seem to shed light not only on what we have discovered here about the cognitive abilities and mental life of our Überpooch but also on the ethical implications thereof. Indeed, from Dennett's point of view, it is hard to overstate how much it matters, in ethical terms, that we are able to be as specific as possible about the cognition and consciousness of particular beings. "What makes a mind powerful," he writes, "indeed, what makes a mind conscious—is not what it is made of, or how big it is, but what it can do. Can it concentrate? Can it be distracted? Can it recall earlier events?…When such questions as these are answered, we will know everything we need to know about those minds in order to answer the morally important questions."[10] As he puts

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it, "Membership in the class of things that have minds provides an all-important guarantee: the guarantee of a certain sort of moral standing. Only mind-havers can care; only mind-havers can mind what happens."[11]

As I have already suggested, Dennett's functionalist approach to questions such as "what is a mind-haver?"—not "what is it?" but "what can it do?"—is perhaps what he is best known for, but what I want to argue now is that Dennett's apparent functionalism and materialism are unable to escape the spell of the very philosophical tradition—whose most extreme expression is Cartesian idealism—that he supposedly rejects. In *Kinds of Minds* and throughout his work, Dennett rightly rejects the idea that "some central Agent or Boss or Audience"[12]—what he also sometimes calls a "Cartesian puppeteer"[13]—takes in and "*appreciates*" the information produced by the neural networks and uses it to "steer the ship" of subjectivity.[14] In what he debunks as "the Myth of Double Transduction," the nervous system first transduces input from its environment (light, sound, temperature, etc.) into neural signals, and then, in a second moment, "in some special central place, it transduces these trains of impulses into some *other* medium, the medium of consciousness!... The idea that the network *itself* could assume the role of the inner Boss and thus harbor consciousness seems preposterous," he continues, but that is exactly what happens, he argues, in the distributed networks in both brain and body from which consciousness arises.[15] To ask for something more—to assume that "what *you* are is something *else*, some Cartesian *res cogitans* in addition to all this brain-and-body activity"—is to "betray a deep confusion," because what you are "just *is* this organization of all the competitive activity between a host of competences that your body has developed."[16] To ask for more is to remain captive to what he calls "the Cartesian theater," the specter of a disembodied, free-floating "central knower" or "self" who stands aside from and above these processes, at once the product and appreciator of them.

Dennett's apparently robust, materialist account of embodied consciousness and mentation, buttressed by an impressive understanding of neural networks, evolutionary processes, perceptual mechanisms and the like, would seem to find an apt accompaniment in an understanding of language within the context of a larger prosthetics of signifying systems in all their technicity and exteriority, one that would seem quite consonant with contemporary theorists in the humanities and social sciences from Derrida and Kittler to Bateson and Luhmann.[17] The source of our greater intelligence when compared to our mammalian relatives, he argues, is not the size of our brains but rather "our habit of *off-loading* as much as

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possible of our cognitive tasks into the environment itself—extruding our minds (that is, our mental projects and activities) into the surrounding world, where a host of peripheral devices we construct can store, process, and re-present our meanings, streamlining, enhancing, and protecting the processes of transformation that *are* our thinking"—a process that "releases us from the limitations of our animal brains."[18] And "thanks to our prosthetically enhanced imaginations," he continues, "we can formulate otherwise imponderable, unnoticeable metaphysical possibilities."[19]

This seems perfectly correct, of course, as far as it goes. Few would argue with Dennett's observation that "there is no step more uplifting, more explosive, more momentous in the history of mind design that the invention of language," through which *Homo sapiens* "stepped into a slingshot that has launched it far beyond all other earthly species in the power to look ahead and reflect."[20] But the problem is that Dennett's notion of language—even while it appears to understand language as prosthesis and as tool that not only "requires intelligence" but "*confers* intelligence"[21]—is a fundamentally representationalist one that reinstalls the disembodied Cartesian subject at the very heart of his supposedly embodied, materialist functionalism. "The free-floating rationales that explain rudimentary higher-order intentionality of birds and hares—and even chimpanzees—are honored," he writes, "in the designs of their nervous systems, but we are looking for something more: we are looking for rationales that are *represented* in those nervous systems."[22]

The problem here is not—as he argues in an essay contemporaneous with *Kinds of Minds*, entitled "Animal Consciousness: What Matters and Why"—his insistence that we should be "analyzing patterns of behavior (external and internal—but not 'private'), and attempting to interpret them in the light of evolutionary hypotheses regarding their past or current functions."[23] The problem is that this "something more" turns out to be another version of the very "user-illusion" that Dennett wants to reject, and it becomes more and more fatefully tethered to a particular notion of language. Dennett argues that "the sort of informational unification that is the most important prerequisite for *our* kind of consciousness is not anything we are born with, not part of our innate 'hard-wiring,' but in surprisingly large measure is an artifact of our immersion in human culture." So far, so good. But then Dennett's formulation takes a bizarre turn indeed:

> What that early education produces in us is a sort of benign "user-illusion"—I call it the Cartesian Theater: the illusion that there is a place

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> in our brains where the show goes on, towards which all perceptual "input" streams, whence flow all "conscious intentions" to act and speak. I claim that other species-and human beings when they are newborn—simply *are not beset* by the illusion of the Cartesian Theater. Until the organization is formed, there is simply no user in there to be fooled.[24]

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Here again, the problem is not the contention, familiar from earlier texts such as *Consciousness Explained*, that "in order to be conscious—in order to be the sort of thing it is like something to be—it is necessary to have a certain sort of informational organization that endows that thing with a wide set of cognitive powers"; nor is it even his contention that "this sort of internal organization does not come automatically with so-called 'sentience.'"[25] The problem is rather the simultaneous insistence upon and disavowal of the central importance of the "user-illusion" that (illusory though it may be) definitively and, for all practical purposes, ontologically and ethically separates "us" from "them." But how, one might ask, is this insistence really any different from the Cartesianism Dennett rejects, particularly when we remember his insistence above on the difference between "the free-floating rationales that explain rudimentary higher-order intentionality of birds and hares" that are a product of "the designs of their nervous systems" and the "something more" of human intentionality and consciousness, "rationales that are *represented* in those nervous systems" and are indeed *anchored* (to stay with Dennett's metaphor) by those representations. This problem is only made more acute in *Kinds of Minds*, in other words, because the production of that illusion is tethered more and more tightly to a representationalist understanding of language and how it bears upon questions of phenomenology, which in turn leads Dennett down the blind alleys of the very metaphysical tradition he had hoped to surpass.

Take, for example, the tortured trajectory of the following argument: "Many animals hide but don't think they are hiding. Many animals flock but don't think they are flocking,"[26] Dennett argues. They have "know-how," as he puts it, but not "represented knowledge."[27] Eventually, some creatures began

> off-loading problems into the world, and just into other parts of their brains. They began making and using representations, but they didn't know they were doing so. They didn't need to know. Should we call this sort of unwitting use of representations "thinking"? If so, then we would have to say that these creatures were thinking, but didn't know they were thinking! Unconscious thinking—those with a taste for "paradox-

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> ical" formulations might favor this way of speaking, but we could less misleadingly say that this was *intelligent but unthinking* behavior, because it was not just not reflective but also not reflectable-upon.[28]

As an example of such "intelligent but unthinking behavior," Dennett offers the "distraction display" among some species of low-nesting birds, who, when predators approach their nest, put on an ostentatious show of feigned injury, captivating the predator's attention and promising an easy kill that the predator, now drawn away from the vulnerable eggs, is never quite able to make.[29] Such behaviours among nonhuman animals are quite abundant and well-known, but none of them, Dennett argues, manifests what he calls the workings of a "third-order intentional system":

> An important step toward becoming a person was the step up from a *first-order* intentional system to a *second-order* intentional system. A first-order intentional system has beliefs and desires about many things, but *not* about beliefs and desires. A second-order intentional system has beliefs and desires about beliefs and desires, its own or those of others. A third-order intentional system would be capable of such feats as *wanting* you to believe that it *wanted* something.[30]

If this has a familiar ring to it, it should, because it is exactly the strategy that Jacques Lacan famously uses—in his essay of 1960, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious"[31]—to juridically separate the human from the animal as that being, alone among the living, who can *lie by telling the truth*. The animal, in Lacan's terms, can pretend, but not *pretend to pretend*—only the human, as "subject of the signifier," can do that. As Jacques Derrida summarizes Lacan's position in a recent essay—and here the distance between Dennett's discourse and Lacan's will become absolutely minimal:

> There is, according to Lacan, a clear distinction between what the animal is capable of, namely, strategic pretense ... and what it is incapable of and incapable of witnessing to, namely, the deception of speech [*la tromperie de la parole*] within the order of the signifier and of Truth. The deception of speech ... involves lying to the extent that, in promising what is true, it includes the supplementary possibility of telling the truth in order to lead the other astray, on order to have him believe something other than what is true (we know the Jewish story recounted by Freud and so often quoted by Lacan: "Why do you tell me that you are going to X in order to have me believe you are going to Y whereas

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> you are indeed going to X?"). According to Lacan, the animal would be incapable of this type of lie, of this deceit, of this pretense in the second degree, whereas the "subject of the signifier," within the human order, would possess such a power and, better still, would emerge as subject, instituting itself and coming to itself as subject *by virtue of this power*, a second-degree reflexive power, a power that is *conscious* of being able to deceive by pretending to pretend.[32]

As I have already suggested, one of the ironies of Dennett's discourse is that even as it promises a rigorous, clear-headed view of these complexities—"Don't confuse ontological questions (about what exists) with epistemological questions (about how we know about it)!" as we are admonished in the opening pages of *Kinds of Minds*—it reproduces *in detail* the Cartesian position it claims to move beyond, and does so, moreover, precisely because it is unwilling or unable to pursue the full implications of the "'paradoxical' formulations" (such as "intelligent but unthinking behavior") that it indulges but doesn't think through.

As Derrida's later work makes clear, that Cartesianism rests on two fundamental points: (1) the assertion that animals, however sophisticated they may be, can only "react" but not "respond" to what goes on around them. And this is so because (2) the capacity to "respond" depends upon the ability to wield concepts or representations, which is in turn possible only on the basis of language—and this, very precisely in the sense voiced by Dennett when he writes, "No matter how close a dog's 'concept' of cat is to yours extensionally (you and the dog discriminate the same sets of entities as cats and noncats), it differs radically in one way: the dog cannot consider its concept.... [N]o language-less mammal can have a concept of snow in the way we can, because a language-less mammal has no way of considering snow 'in general' or 'in itself.'"[33]

And on this point, of course, Dennett's putatively materialist account of embodied consciousness falls in line not just with the work of Descartes but even more conspicuously with that most *disembodied* of philosophical humanisms, the work of Martin Heidegger, whose characterization of the animal as that which "has a world in the mode of not-having" depends, as Derrida argues in *Of Spirit*, on the inability of the animal to "have access to entities *as such* and in their Being" because of a lack of language which is "not primarily or simply linguistic," but rather, as Derrida puts it, "derives from the properly *phenomenological* impossibility of speaking the phenomenon."[34] In light of Derrida's critique, then, Dennett's discourse takes it

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place in a long line of philosophers from Aristotle to Lacan, Kant, Heidegger and Levinas, all of whom "say the same thing: the animal is without language. Or more precisely unable to respond, to respond with a response that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction.... Even those who, from Descartes to Lacan, have conceded to the said animal some aptitude for signs and for communication," Derrida continues, "have always denied it the power to *respond*—to *pretend*, to *lie*, to *cover its tracks* or *erase* its own traces"[35]—hence the fallback position we find here in Dennett and Lacan, when more explicitly metaphysical versions of humanism are no longer available: the difference between communication and metacommunication, signifying and signifying *about* signifying, thinking and *knowing* you're thinking, and so on.

But the problem with this position, as Derrida points out, is that "it seems difficult in the first place to identify or determine a limit, that is to say an indivisible threshold between pretense and pretense of pretense.... How could one distinguish," he continues,

> for example in the most elementary sexual parade or mating game, between a feint and a feint of a feint? If it is impossible to provide the criterion for such a distinction, one can conclude that every pretense of pretense remains a simple pretense (animal or imaginary, in Lacan's terms), or else, on the contrary, and just as likely, the every pretense, however simple it may be, gets repeated and reposited undecidably, in its possibility, as pretense of pretense (human or symbolic in Lacan's terms).... Pretense presupposes taking the other into account; it therefore supposes, simultaneously, the pretense of pretense—a simple supplementary move by the other within the strategy of the game. That supplementarity is at work from the moment of the first pretense.[36]

And the distinction between the inscription of the trace and its erasure as the means by which to juridically separate the human from animal fares no better. As Derrida argues in that same essay

> *and this is why so long ago I substituted the concept of trace for that of signifier*, the structure of the trace presupposes that to trace amounts to erasing a trace as much as to imprinting it.... How can it be denied that the simple substitution of one trace for another, the marking of their diacritical difference in the most elementary inscription—which capacity Lacan concedes to the animal—involves erasure as much as it involves the imprint? It is as difficult to assign a frontier between pretense and pretense of pretense, to have an indivisible line pass through

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> the middle of a feigned feint, as it is to assign one between inscription and erasure of the trace.[37]

The point here, as Derrida argues, is

> less a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power … than of asking whether what calls itself human has the right to rigorously attribute to man … what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the *pure*, *rigorous*, *indivisible* concept, as such, of that attribution. Thus, were we even to suppose—something I am not ready to concede—that the "animal" were incapable of covering its tracks, by what right could one concede that power to the human, to the "subject of the signifier"?[38]

What Derrida helps us to see—and we can *only* see it if we have the "taste for 'paradoxical' formulations" typically associated with deconstruction, the sort that Dennett's analytical style blithely suggests we ignore—is that just because a particular discourse operates within parameters and conventions that we think of as "scientific," or presents itself as a materialist rendering of the problem of consciousness in relation to embodiment, *does not mean that that discourse is not metaphysical.* In the terms sketched by Rorty at the outset of this essay, the problem with such a discourse is that its apparently scientific, materialist surpassing of metaphysical idealism (whose extreme form is positivism or, in the more contemporary terms used by Deacon, "eliminative materialism") actually shares a deeper identity with that very idealism, because *both* are framed by a prior, more fundamental commitment to *representationalism*. As a methodological and theoretical consideration for such discourse, language appears as a rather unimportant, second-order phenomenon whose job is to be as transparent as possible to the concepts (and beyond that, the objects) they represent (which is why the eventual goal for "materialistic reductionism" can be to eliminate it all together). At the same time, paradoxically, this apparently insubstantial thing called language constitutes the phenomenological and indeed ethical divide between human and nonhuman subjectivity, but precisely because it *is* rendered insubstantial; paradoxically, it constitutes the phenomenological specificity of the very being who then, in an idealist abstraction if ever there was one, rises above it to deploy it literally at will—or, in Dennett's terms, by "intention."

Indeed, what Derrida writes about Austin and speech act theory in "Signature Event Context" applies even more pointedly to the recovery and maintenance of the humanist subject in Dennett, as what Derrida

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there calls "a free consciousness present to the totality of the operation, and of absolutely meaningful speech [*vouloir-dire*] master of itself: the teleological jurisdiction of an entire field whose organizing center remains *intention*"—an intention that expresses itself, for instance, in the difference between pretending and pretending to pretend, thinking and knowing you're thinking, and so on.[39] And this, as I've already suggested, has far-reaching consequences for the "rigour" and "objectivity" of the knowledge that we think we can have of ourselves and of other nonhuman beings, a rigour and objectivity that analytical philosophy and cognitive science have typically reserved for themselves over and against the "merely epistemological" quandaries of poststructuralist philosophy. For as Derrida points out, "it is not certain that what we call language or speech acts can ever be exhaustively determined by an objective science or theory"; indeed, "it is more 'scientific' to take this limit ... into account and to treat it as a point of departure for rethinking this or that received concept of 'science' and of 'objectivity.'"[40] Now all of this might be viewed as "merely theoretical," if you like, were it not for the fact that Dennett himself insists that the ethical stakes of determining which creatures have minds—a determination that depends, in turn, on a quite specific relation to language—are dire indeed. On the one hand, Dennett argues that "the ethical course is to err on the side overattribution, just to be safe" when considering the possibility of nonhuman minds, because the ethical consequences of being niggardly and then later being found wrong could be grave.[41] At the same time, however, he writes: "'It may not be able to talk, but surely it thinks!'—one of the main aims of this book has been to shake your confidence in this familiar reaction."[42] But because a deeply flawed theory of "talking" is central to a representationalist notion of "thinking" in Dennett's work, and because only things that think (that is to say, both think *and know* they are thinking) have minds, and because only things that have minds (and, we might add, *know* they have minds!) merit ethical consideration, Dennett is forced to embrace ethical implications that, despite his generous gestures to the contrary, would seem to run directly counter to the supposed point of his entire project, which is, of course, to take seriously the status—epistemologically and ethically—of different "kinds of minds."

Take, for example, Dennett's rendering of the difference between pain and suffering, which unwittingly reproduces the very Cartesianism that Dennett has time and again declared the enemy. Dennett writes that "we might well think that the capacity for suffering counts for more, in any moral calculations, than the capacity for abstruse and sophisticated reasoning."[43]

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But on this point, Dennett follows Descartes almost to the letter. Descartes—who is often misunderstood on this point—insisted *not* that animals do not feel those sensations we call "pain," but only that they do not *experience* them as suffering because there is "no one home," no subject of the *cogito* to do the experiencing; and thus, the pain is not morally relevant.[44] Similarly, Dennett argues that "for such states to matter—whether or not we call them pains, or conscious states, or experiences—there must be an enduring subject *to whom* they matter because they are a source of suffering."[45]

My point here, of course, is not that human and nonhuman animals all experience the same kinds or levels of suffering; even the most ardent animal rights philosophers, such as Peter Singer, agree that they do not.[46] My point is that the difference between "pain" and "suffering" in Dennett turns out to be not just a difference in degree but a difference in *kind*, an *ontological* difference, and one that simply reproduces on another level the difference between thinking and knowing you're thinking, having thoughts and having represented thoughts, and so on.[47] The problem, in other words, is with the unwitting Cartesianism of Dennett's "enduring subject," which in turn leads him (not surprisingly) to embrace some ethical conclusions that should, I think, give us pause. For example, when Dennett attempts to draw out the ethical consequences of his contention that "human consciousness . . . is a necessary condition for serious suffering,"[48] he ends up suggesting that "a dissociated child does not suffer as much as a non-dissociated child."[49] And just as different forms of being *human* in the world are rewritten, as they are here, in terms of a homogeneous Cartesian ideal, *nonhuman* beings, in all their diversity, are now rendered not as fully complete forms of life that are radically irreducible to such a thin, idealized account of what counts as "subjectivity," but rather as diminished or crippled versions of that fantasy figure called "the human"—the Cartesian *cogito* now rewritten as the "user-illusion" *qua* "enduring subject." Nonhuman animals are now seen as "creatures that are *naturally* dissociated—that never achieve, or even attempt to achieve, the sort of complex internal organization that is standard in a normal child and disrupted in a dissociated child."[50]

The problem here is not the ethical foregrounding of pain and suffering. The problem is that Dennett's ontological distinction between pain and suffering is based upon a set of phantom abilities, anchored by but not limited to language and its imagined representational capacities in relation to the world of things, that *no subject, either nonhuman or human*,

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possesses in truth. We can get an even sharper sense of this by reference to Derrida's very different approach to the question of nonhuman suffering, which takes place, ironically enough, by way of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who anchors the animal rights philosophy of Peter Singer. The relevant question here, Bentham asserts, is not "can they talk," or "can they reason," but "can they *suffer*?" For Derrida, putting the question in this way "changes everything," because "from Aristotle to Descartes, from Descartes, especially, to Heidegger, Levinas and Lacan"—and, we might add, to Dennett—posing the question of the animal in terms of either the capacity for thought or language "determines so many others concerning *power* or *capability* [*pouvoirs*], and *attributes* [*avoirs*]: being able, having the power to give, to die, to bury one's dead, to dress, to work, to invent a technique."[51] What makes Bentham's reframing of the problem so powerful is that now "the question is disturbed by a certain *passivity* . . . a not-being-able. . . . What of the vulnerability felt on the basis of this inability?" he continues, "what is this non-power at the heart of power? . . . What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us?" It concerns us very directly, in fact, for "mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this non-power."[52]

From this vantage—to return now to the story with which we began—we can derive from the exploits of Rico the Uberpooch an unexpected lesson whose ethical as well as epistemological resonance we are now in a position to appreciate: that even though thinking about the consciousness, intelligence and emotional and mental lives of nonhuman animals in terms of their linguistic abilities has historically been a crucial means for getting such questions on the table *at all*,[53] it may not be the best way, and it is certainly not the only way, of approaching these questions. From this vantage, Rico's prodigious signifying abilities may be only one sign among many others—and only the one most readily legible to *us*, as language-dependent creatures—of a thinking (if that's what we want to call it) that we ought to be interested in not because it is a diminished or dim approximation of ours, but because it is part of a very different way of being in the world that calls upon us to rethink, ever anew and vigilantly so, what we mean by "person," "mind," "consciousness"—that entire cluster of terms and the ethical implications that flow from them. In this light, as Derrida suggests, "it would not be a matter of 'giving speech back' to animals, but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it

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might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation."[54]

NOTES

1 Rob Stein, "Common Collie or Uberpooch? German Pet's Vocabulary Stuns Scientists," *The Washington Post*, 11 June 2004, A1; and **author**, "Dogs May Be as Smart as Owners Think They Are," *Houston Chronicle*, 11 June 2004: **<pages?>**

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2 Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2–4. Emphasis in original.

3 Ibid., 5.

4 Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997), 442. Though I cannot make the argument within the confines of this essay, of course, I would suggest that Deacon's work is, if anything, more Cartesian than Dennett's. This becomes clear in the final chapter of the text which, even as it attempts to argue for a substantial continuity between the mental lives and human and nonhuman animals, reinstates, via the terms "representation" and "experience," the quintessentially Cartesian distinction we will see Dennett run aground on below—namely, the distinction between sensations and the *experience* of sensations (possibly only for beings who operate with symbolic representations) that anchors Descartes infamous position on the ethical irrelevance of pain in nonhuman animals. See in particular Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*, 448–50, where we find such question-begging formulations as the following: "We live most of our concrete lives in the subjective realm that is also shared with other species, but our experience of this world is embedded in the vastly more extensive symbolic world."

5 Stein, "Common Collie or Uberpooch?"

6 Tony Czuczka, "Study Shows Dogs Can Remember Words," *Associated Press Wire Report*, 10 June 2004, 2. Available online at http://customwire.ap.org.

7 Stein, "Common Collie or Uberpooch?" A1.

8 Czuczka, "Study Shows Dogs Can Remember Words."

8 Stein, "Common Collie or Uberpooch?" A1.

10 Daniel C. Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 158.

11 Ibid., 4.

12 Ibid., 73.

13 Ibid., 80.

14 Ibid., 73.

15 Ibid., 72–73.

16 Ibid., 155–56.

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17 Relevant texts here would be, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972); Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Friedrich Kittler, *Essays: Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: OPA, 1997).
18 Dennet, *Kinds of Minds*, 134–35.
19 Ibid., 146.
20 Ibid., 147.
21 Ibid., 99.
22 Ibid., 131.
23 Daniel C. Dennett, "Animal Consciousness: What Matters and Why," in Arien Mack, ed., *Humans and Other Animals* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 296.
24 Ibid., 292.
25 Ibid., 293.
26 Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, 119.
27 Ibid., 154.
28 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
29 Ibid., 121–22.
30 Ibid., 120. Emphasis in original.
31 In *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).
32 Jacques Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded?" trans. David Wills, in Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 130. Emphasis in original.
33 Ibid., 159.
34 Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 53. See also my discussion of these questions in Derrida's work in "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal" in *Zoontologies*, 1–57.
35 Jacques Derrida, "The Animal that therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002), 48–49. Emphasis in original.
36 Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded?" 135–36.
37 Ibid., 137. First emphasis added.
38 Ibid., 137–38. Emphasis in original.
39 It is the "intentional stance" that gives one of Dennett's most well-known books its title. See Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), the contours of which are summarized in chap. 2 of *Kind of Minds*.
40 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber et al., ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 118.

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41 Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, 6.

42 Ibid., 159.

43 Ibid., 162. This approach is central, of course, to the argument of animal rights philosophy, whose articulation I take up in detail in *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See especially chap. 1 and the conclusion.

44 See Tom Regan's clarification of this point in his discussion of Descartes in *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). See also in this connection a footnote by Derrida that makes clear the connection of this point in Descartes to the capacity for language, in Derrida's "And Say the Animal Responded?" 143n1.

45 Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, 161.

46 See my discussion of this body of work in *Animal Rites*, chap. 1.

47 See in this connection the self-disintegration of the distinction between "pain" and "suffering" at the end of Dennett's essay "Animal Consciousness," which evinces quite well an understanding of language that hamstrings his every move: "When I step on your toe . . . the pain, though intense, is too brief to matter, and I have done no long-term damage to your foot. The idea that you 'suffer' for a second or two is a risible misapplication of that important notion, and even when we grant that my causing you a few seconds pain may irritate you a few seconds or even minutes—especially if you think I did it deliberately—the pain itself, as a brief, negatively-signed experience, is of vanishing moral significance" (298).

48 Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, 165.

49 Ibid., 164.

50 Ibid.

51 Derrida, "The Animal that therefore I Am . . . ," 396, 395.

52 Ibid., 396.

53 As in the well-known work with the great apes Washoe, Kanzi, Koko and others, but also with birds, as in Irene Pepperberg's research. The literature at this point is extensive, but for an overview, one might consult the section "Conversations with Apes," in Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri, ed., *The Great Ape Project* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 27–79; the essays by Duane Rumbaugh and Colin McGinn in Mack, ed., *Humans and Other Animals*; and the section "Language" in Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles, eds., *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997).

54 Derrida, "The Animal that therefore I Am," 416.

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