

E-LOGOS

ELECTRONIC JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY
ISSN 1211-0442 15/2009



University of Economics
Prague

Is the Human Distinguishable from the Animal by being a Rational Animal?

In Principles of Nature and Grace, Section 5, By G. W. Leibniz

Alexandra Dobra



Abstract

The present paper aims to proceed to a succinct analysis of Leibniz's Principles of Nature and Grace (section 5), by exploiting the cardinal arguments acquainted in it – namely, is the human distinguishable from the animal thanks to his capacity of being endowed with rationality? Henceforth, for answering this question, the herewith paper obeys to a linear analysis and presents a corpus structured in three main parts. The first two parts aim to highlight the text, through furnishing explanations on the main concepts and concerns, while the third part of the corpus offers at prima facie a criticism towards the Leibnizian principle – according to which humans are rational – in order to finally strengthen this latter principle, by emphasizing that there are no solid disparagements (confutatio) towards it.

Keywords: Leibniz; Rational Animal; Rationality; Human; Animal; Connectedness; Necessary or Eternal Truths; Mind; Reason; A Priori Logic.

Introduction

"It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this." Bertrand Russell.

"Man is a rational animal", dixit Aristotle, this sentence recovers two domains of abilities - of qualitative capacities. It expresses the fact that first, the human is an animal, in the sense that he is able to move himself and second - beyond this physical capacity and anatomical characteristic - the human is also capable of thinking, of reasoning and is *ipso facto* endowed with a *mind*. To use the Cartesian terminology, to the extend to which the human is able to move, through being endowed with a material *corpus*, this latter constitutes the human's *res extenso* part, while with regard to the capacity of affording to cogitate, through being endowed with reason, this latter constitutes the human's *res cogitans* part. Furthermore, the human's rational character and rationality comes from the way he founds the knowledge. Indeed, each human's knowledge is based on the reason, in opposition to the experience, "the characteristic of the reason's movement and intelligence is to give its limit to itself and to be never overcome by senses and instinct" (Aurèle 1999).

Throughout the section number five of *Principles of Nature and Grace* [1], Leibniz enumerates the existing differences between the human and the animal, differences which put forward the fact that the human is a *homo rationalis*. Now, the aim of the herewith paper is to critically explore and explain the principal issues surrounding the provided arguments, by Leibniz, in order to sustain the *differentia* between humans and animals and *de facto* prove the affirmation of the human being a rational animal.

1. Analogy between the perceptions of animals and the reasoning of humans

The animals, entities equipped with an apparatus of reasoning or with just a simple primitive draft?

"The perceptions of non-human animals are interconnected in a way that has some resemblance to *reason*. But it differs from reason because it is grounded only in the memory of facts or *effects*, and not at all in the knowledge of *causes*. That is what happens when a dog shrinks from the stick with which it has been beaten because memory represents to it the pain the stick has caused." [1]. Through the observation that there is an analogy between the perception of animals and the reason of humans, animals are thus not identified to a kind of machines which are living only in the present moment. Consequently, does the Leibnizian *connectedness* reveal the presence of a conscience or the presence of the reason, of the *mind*?

In the case of animals, what are connected are perceptions and no ideas. Thanks to the connections, the perceptions of these animals do not remain insulated each from another, but are forming a coherent ensemble which leads to a pertinent behaviour. If for instance A is calling his cat to come, this cat will come (if of course, the material and contextual conditions were met: the cat must be in proximity etc...). However, it would be wrong to say that through this process animals are able to afford reasoning, because first the animals are not conscious of this process and subsequently, they are not able to direct and control it: what is a conscious process for the human beings is not for the animal. To sustain it, an example might be useful: a group of sheep is followed by a wolf. This latter feels the danger and in order to escape it, the leader of the group will throw itself in a river all the others will do the same. Here the cheeps obey to a gregarious spirit and to connections between perceptions (the fear, the wolf, and the escape) but they do not analyse the case in which they find themselves, they just physiologically react. They can react only physiologically and only in a same kind of way, because their perceptions are derived from their experience, thus because of the limitation of the latter, their reactions will be predictable but not reasoned. (We might predict that the sheeps will try to escape the wolf, but the way they have chosen is irrational, because this way leads to the death too.)

Thus, although there is a resemblance between these connected perceptions and the reasoning, the resemblance lies in the external behaviour and not in the clarification of a conscious reasoning. The dog will run away when he will see the stick only because there is an unconscious representation of the senses and of the imagination. The dog proceeds to connections between perceptions (the view of the stick, the angry voice of the master) which will remind him (the dog) to a previous situation such as this one - there is a mark in the memory which leads the dog to adopt mimicry with regard to itself. (The dog knows that in the previous four cases (except the first one) he run away, so it will do exactly the same action, it will imitate its own past actions.) It appears that the memory provides a consecution to the animals which imitate the reasoning of the humans, but animals can only imitate this reason, offering an *analogon rationis*. Animals are thus passing from a present image to an impression of which effect still subsists, without the intermediation of objective nexuses.

The Humans, entities which principally use the perceptions of animals, when they undertake actions, and which neglect the use of reasoning, or beings which are enough rational in order to choose the appropriate "tool" for the appropriate "action"?

"In fact human beings, to the extent that they are empirics - which is to say in three quarters of what they do - act just like non-human animals." [1]. There is an extension of the animal behaviour to the human one: most of the situations in front of

which a human finds himself do not require reasoning. For instance when I am fitting my shoes, am I reasoning in which shoe to put my left feet? No, because there is a mechanical action. So, most of the occurring situations call fast answers and diagrammatic connections of ideas. Although, most of the time humans will act as animals - by using the perceptions and by proceeding to unconscious gestures/actions - this does not imply that humans are not rational beings. On the contrary, the fact that they might choose the best *apparatus* for the occurring situation can be interpreted as showing that even in such cases where they use perceptions - and it seems that they don't use reasoning - they use reason in fact. Indeed, the fact that in a fraction of seconds, the human being will know what to do, in order to maximise the profit, underlines the rationally constructed reason with which humans are endowed. Nevertheless, in actions such as previously listed, the reflexive rationality of actions is hidden by the practical rationality of the satisfaction of the need.

The astronomer and the ordinary individual, a differentiation in the used "tool" which leads to a primal characterization of what reason is?

"An 'empiric' is someone who goes by obvious superficial regularities and similarities without asking 'Why?' about any of them. For example, we expect there to be daylight tomorrow because we have always experienced it that way; only an astronomer foresees it in a reasoned way (and even *his* prediction will prove wrong some day, when the cause of daylight goes out of existence)." [1]. The comparison between the astronomer and the ordinary individual highlights two points. First it underlines that a scientist passes the bridge from the practice to the reasoning - to the knowledge of the causes. Although this *passing the bridge action*, a relativization of the rationality of the astronomer's knowledge occurs - owing the fact that his knowledge is based on transitory causes. The second point focuses on the fact that the astronomer *foresees* whereas ordinary humans do *expect*. This underscores the dissimilarities between the objective undertake of the astronomer and the subjective attitude of the ordinary individual - the scientist founds his prevision on a whole theory, on the Cartesian *longues chaînes de raison*, whereas the ordinary individual founds his attempt on the practice, thanks to the memory of the facts. This comparison also conduces to a first definition of the reason: perception, memory, reasoning, all these three terms are constituents of a first characterization of the reason, which constitutes an intrinsic human activity.

2. Reason, a main characteristic which differentiate Humans from animals

Reason, perception and necessary or eternal truths, an inseparable triangular combination?

“But genuine *reasoning* depends on necessary or eternal truths like those of logic, arithmetic and geometry, which make indubitable connections between ideas and reach conclusions that can't fail to be true.” [1]. The content of the propositions of the scientist is true but applies to a given moment and a given context, thus this content remains relative to this moment and context because the world is constantly changing (the studies on the climate done 60 years ago are for most of them no longer valid). So, a purely rational statement must have an absolute value with a universal aiming, thus remaining true independently of the moment or the context. “Water boils at 100°C” is a scientific statement because it is valid everywhere on the earth. The logic structure of the reasoning is making part of these eternal truths - a logical proposition (the non-contradiction for instance) will preserve its value of true whatever the moment or the context. Thus, rationality and reason are due more to the form of the procedure, of the approach rather to their informative content. In addition, the reason, the perception and the *necessary or eternal truths* are strongly united and in fact, reason corresponds to the capacity of perceiving these *necessary or eternal truths*.

The eternal truths, the emergence of the distinction between human beings and animals?

“Animals that never think of such propositions are called ‘brutes’; but ones that recognise such necessary truths are rightly called *rational animals*, and their souls are called *minds*.” [1]. The knowledge of eternal truths is crucial for applying the *distinguo* between human beings and animals. Thanks to this knowledge, human beings are raised to the knowledge of themselves - to the *cogito ergo sum* - and this is what is called *minds*. These eternal truths are enabling us to proceed to reflexive acts. By reflexive acts (or acts of reflexion) it is insinuated that the human has to connect the problem he/she faces with former assets. The act of reflexion refers to the building of a connection between a present evocation - the problem - and a former evocation - the previous knowledge.

So, the privilege of *rational animals* is their power of making these connections, their power of reasoning. The applied connections corresponds to virtual propositions in report to which the *rational animals* can situate their actions. Confer the example with the cheeps. If the cheeps would be *rational animals*, than they would make a connection between their presently perceptions, they would be able to place them in a new context, into which they would situate their actions: the wolf, the fear, the escape and the river. However, the escape doesn't mean anything else than the wolf. Thus if these cheeps would be rational, they would be able to weigh the data in front of which they find themselves. Thus, a *rational animal* is rational if he/she is able to proceed to a calculation of consequences (what if, I throw myself in the river, owing the fact that I do not know how to swim?). In conclusion, animals are not rational and thus have not *minds*, or even if they would be endowed with *minds*, they

would not be confusable with the humans' *minds*, because their faculties and possibilities are barely lower.

From the intuition to the abstraction and consequently the passage from the man as an "animal" to the man as a "rational animal"?

"These souls are capable of reflective acts - acts of attention to their own inner states - so that they can think about what we call 'myself', substance, soul, or mind: in a word, things and truths that are immaterial. This is what renders us capable of science, or of demonstrable knowledge." [1]. The intuition refers to the immediate perception without the recourse to reason, whereas, the abstraction implies the recourse to reason. The abstraction recovers the following points: first, the abstract is the separated by opposition to the whole, abstracting is making a separation. For instance, I can consider a window, abstraction made of what I can see through it. Second, the abstract is the general in report to the particular. The abstract permits to seize common characteristics. For example, all the humans have something in common.

An animal as a human is provided with sensory organs thanks to which he can perceive. But as shown above, this animal can only perceive, without being able to make connections among and between his perceptions. Whereas, a human when he is rational, is able to proceed to this connections; his mind can interpose between his perceptions real connections. Thus, the abstraction is the result of an act of the mind and an animal is capable of intuition and a rational animal (a human) is capable of abstraction.

Furthermore, what shows that animals are incapable of proceeding to the abstraction might be illustrated through an example. To go back to the cheeps, these cheeps were incapable to proceed to the second point of the abstraction. In their case, there was a wolf and the river, these cheeps were incapable to seize the common characteristic between both, the common characteristic being the death (the first death consisted in being eaten by the wolf, the second consisted in being drown in the river).

3. Some real limits, or only seemingly limits to the Leibnizian principles?

The empirical perspective, a reason subjected to the experience and consequently a reason subjected to the perceptions?

In the empirical perspective, the knowledge is based on the experience and according to Hume, all our ideas proceeds from the experience. However, in such a case, is the human still distinguishable from the animal? Can we still claim that the human is rational?

Yes, we can. First, the humans are drawing *ideas* from their experience. Second, the realm of the experience is reduced because the human is not able to explore everything (can we explore the sun? Assuredly no, but it is not a synonymous of the fact that we do not know what the sun is etc), but the realm of the knowledge is vast. So, it proves that the human used empirical data, used his perception, in order to proceed to combinations, in order to make connections and thus, he used his reason. By using his reason, the human can access to what cannot be experienced. Thus, the reason is no more subjected to the experience and becomes a prolongation of it. This is illustrated through induction. The inductive inference consists in establishing a general hypothesis from a number of particular cases. Saying that every star is white is an induction, because there is a generalization of a regularity/main characteristic to a whole class of objects (the stars) of which most could not be observed.

The "à priori" logic, a final argument which leads to the support of the idea that "Human is a rational animal".

As demonstrated above, the human beings are interposing between their perceptions, connections. These connections refer to a *à priori* logic (which corresponds to a data formed before the experience, which doesn't base itself on the experience (Lalande, 2006)). So, if the human bases his connections on a *à priori* logic, subsequently he does not base them on the experience, on the perceptions. Thus, we might advance as argument that the human is rational, because in the absence of any past experience, he can afford to make combinations of ideas, to proceed to connections and henceforth to discover causes. There is no heteronomy of the reason, in the sense that this latter obeys to the external laws imposed by the experience.

After analyse of Leibniz's principle expressed in a *modus pensere*, it appears clearly that animals are not equipped with rationality (and even if it would be the case, their rationality would be so low and hidden by the practical desire of satisfaction of a goal, that it would not have any perspective of development), whereas the human beings are equipped with it. Through the transformation of his soul into a mind, and through the capacity to proceed to connections between the perceptions, the human acquires the statute of rational animal.

Nevertheless, there might be an objection to the idea that the "Human is a rational animal", indeed, when the human is in interaction with others, does he continue to be rational, doesn't his egoistic and particularistic desires override his rational character: "We know the human is a reasonable animal, but the humans are they?" (Aron, 1960).

Bibliography

Leibniz, G., W., 2003, *Principles of Nature and Grace*, section 5, in *Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, Montana: Kessinger Publishing.

Aurèle, M., 1999, *Pensées pour Moi-Même*, Livre VII, Paris : Flammarion.

Lalande, A., 2006, *Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de la Philosophie*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Aron, R., 1960, *Penser la Liberté, Penser la Démocratie*, Paris : Quarto Gallimard.