

Week 1: Seminar Questions on selection from Apes, Language and the Mind

Focus on the questions 1-3 in small groups (4 or 5 students per group). We will discuss questions 4-5 and any additional comments and questions that arise in the full seminar.

1. According to the author, what position did defenders the Great Chain of Being take on the question of animal intelligence versus human intelligence? (p. 80ff) What alternative position did Descartes take in positing of firm mind/body distinction (what is called by philosophers Mind/Body Dualism)? Which alternative seems more plausible to you? Why?
2. How, according to the authors, did the post-Cartesian defenders of the “principle of continuity” (the vitalists and the mechanists) respond to the bifurcation of mind and body (p. 82)
3. How does Descartes’ “radical thesis” (p. 86) relate to issues about animal language according to the authors? How persuasive do you find the “argument” against animal language the authors attribute to Descartes (p. 88 ff)
4. On the basis on the considerations raised in the selection, what features characterize speaking (using a language) in humans? Do you think that animals communicate using a language in this sense? What would count in favor and against the view that non-human animals speak a language, that is, for and against the view that language is uniquely human?
5. Cartesian Dualism puts forward a view of the human mind that treats it as a completely different kind of thing than body (including the brain)? What do you think we mean when we talk about the human mind? What are the strongest arguments you can think of to either support or undermine the claim that mind and body are radically different?