

## *The Language of Animals*<sup>\*</sup>

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Presumption is our natural and original disease. The most wretched and frail of all creatures is man, and withal the proudest. He feels and sees himself lodged here in the dirt and filth of the world, nailed and rivetted to the worst and deadest part of the universe, in the lowest story of the house, the most remote from the heavenly arch, with animals of the worst condition of the three; and yet in his imagination will be placing himself above the circle of the moon, and bringing the heavens under his feet. 'Tis by the same vanity of imagination that he equals himself to God, attributes to himself divine qualities, withdraws and separates himself from the crowd of other creatures, cuts out the shares of the animals, his fellows and companions, and distributes to them portions of faculties and force, as himself thinks fit. How does he know, by the strength of his understanding, the secret and internal motions of animals?—from what comparison betwixt them and us does he conclude the stupidity he attributes to them? When I play with my cat, who knows whether I do not make her more sport than she makes me? We mutually divert one another with our play. If I have my hour to begin or to refuse, she also has hers. Plato, in his picture of the golden age under Saturn, reckons, among the chief advantages that a man then had, his communication with beasts, of whom, inquiring and informing himself, he knew the true qualities and differences of them all, by which he acquired a very perfect intelligence and prudence, and led his life more happily than we could do. Need we a better proof to condemn human impudence in the concern of beasts? This great author was of opinion that nature, for the most part, in the corporal form she gave them, had only regard to the use of prognostics that were derived thence in his time. The defect that hinders communication betwixt them and us, why may it not be in our part as well as theirs? 'Tis yet to determine where the fault lies that we understand not one another—for we understand them no more than they do us; and by the same reason they may think us to be beasts as we think them. 'Tis no great wonder if we understand not them, when we do not understand a Basque or a Troglodyte. And yet some have boasted that they understood them, as Appollonius Tyanacus, Melampus, Tiresias, Thales, and others. And seeing, as cosmographers report, that there are nations that have a dog for their king, they must of necessity be able to interpret his voice and motions. We must observe the parity betwixt us: we have some tolerable apprehension of their meaning, and so have beasts of ours—much about the same. They caress us, threaten us, and beg of us, and we do the same to them.

As to the rest, we manifestly discover that they have a full and absolute communication amongst themselves, and that they perfectly understand one another, not only those of the same, but of divers kinds:

The tamer herds, and wilder sort of brutes,  
Though we of higher race conclude them mutes,  
Yet after dissonant and various notes,  
From gentler lungs or more distended throats,  
As fear, or grief, or anger, do them move,  
Or as they do approach the joys of love.

In one kind of barking of a dog the horse knows there is anger, of another sort of bark he is not afraid. Even in the very beasts that have no voice at all, we easily conclude, from the society of offices we observe amongst them, some other sort of communication: their very motions discover it:

As infants who, for want of words, devise  
Expressive motions with their hands and eyes.

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<sup>\*</sup> "An Apology of Raymond Sebond," in *The Works of Michel de Montaigne*, translated by William Hazlitt (1865).

And why not, as well as our dumb people, dispute, argue, and tell stories by signs? Of whom I have seen some, by practice, so clever and active that way that, in fact, they wanted nothing of the perfection of making themselves understood. Lovers are angry, reconciled, intreat, thank, appoint, and, in short, speak all things by their eyes.

Even silence in a lover  
Love and passion can discover.

... As to speech, it is certain that if it be not natural it is not necessary. Nevertheless I believe that a child which had been brought up in an absolute solitude, remote from all society of men (which would be an experiment very hard to make), would have some kind of speech to express his meaning by. And 'tis not to be supposed that nature should have denied that to us which she has given to several other animals: for what is this faculty we observe in them, of complaining, rejoicing, calling to one another for succour, and inviting each other to love, which they do with the voice, other than speech? And why should they not speak to one another? They speak to us, and we to them. In how many several sorts of ways do we speak to our dogs, and they answer us? We converse with them in another sort of language, and use other appellations, than we do with birds, hogs, oxen, horses, and alter the idiom according to the kind:

Thus from one swarm of ants some sally out,  
To spy another's stock or mark its rout.

Lectantius seems to attribute to beasts not only speech, but laughter also. And the difference of language which is seen amongst us, according to the difference of countries, is also observed in animals of the same kind. Aristotle, in proof of this, instances the various calls of partridges, according to the situation of places:

And various birds do from their warbling throats,  
At various times, utter quite different notes,  
And some their hoarse songs with the seasons change.