

# Introduction

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**A**s I write this Introduction, a longstanding and ongoing debate at the University of Oxford over the ethics of animal vivisection is reported to have reached unprecedented intensity. This debate has two sides: on the one are proponents of a new biomedical research facility that will house animals to be used for experimentation; on the other are protestors who have launched an all-out campaign to block construction of what they call the “primate lab.” Advocates of the facility have offered advancement-of-science arguments in support of their research, these buttressed by the contention that an animal, whether a rat or a rhesus monkey, does not rate as highly as a human on the vertical value scale. For their part, opponents of the lab have called public attention to the cruelty they say is entailed in this research where, for example, in experimentation related to Parkinson’s disease, electric rods are driven into primate brains. What surprised me about this difficult debate was the response made by some on the researchers’ side: that since such brains do not have pain receptors, the procedure cannot impose suffering on the animals involved. Does the response indicate the continuing persuasiveness of the *bête-machine* doctrine of René Descartes? Not only a philosopher, mathematician, physicist, and astronomer, but also an amateur anatomist, Descartes relocated from France to the Netherlands in 1629, just when the centre of anatomy was transferring from southern to northern Europe. In the Kalverstraat quarter of Amsterdam where he lived, Descartes frequented butcher stalls to procure specimens for dissection. And it may well be that back in his lodgings, in keeping with his resolve to acquire knowledge first-hand, Descartes ran his own equivalent of today’s vivisection lab. For instance, in describing his experiments on the circulation of blood, Descartes notes that “if you slice off the pointed end of the heart in a live dog, and insert a finger into one of the cavities, you will feel unmistakably that every time the heart gets shorter it presses the finger, and every time it gets longer it stops pressing it. This seems to make it quite certain

that the cavities are narrower when there is more pressure on the finger than when there is less" (117).

No wonder that Rachel Rosenthal hates Descartes! No wonder, at least, that she hates the idea of the *bête-machine*, which, as H. Peter Steeves points out in the essay that opens this issue, not only reduces animal screams to "the sounds of gears and springs," but also deprives animals from inhabiting roles, removes them from the stage. "Leave it to Rosenthal to put the horse before Descartes, to bring the animal and the human onstage in what is a mutual co-construction of Protean identity and fluid art," Steeves writes. For him, as for Rosenthal and her animals, "Being is acting."

How to inherit a tradition that refuses animals speech, the prime indicator of mind, and thus pain, performance, death, mourning, joy, response, respect, and a long list of other things? The essays collected here offer varied responses to this question and varied readings of traditional sources. Even on recurring topics such as anthropomorphism and sovereignty, the issue is rich in its differences, decidedly interdisciplinary—and too full to allow for a longer Introduction than this.

Look for the March 2007 *Mosaic*, a second special issue on "the animal."

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#### WORKS CITED

Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.