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Scientific Verses: Subversion of Cartesian Theory and Practice in the "Discours à Madame de La Sablière"

Russell Ganim

BACKGROUND AND DEFINITIONS

Study of the relationship between science and La Fontaine's *Fables* has a limited, but thought-provoking past. Beverly Ridgely asserts that while La Fontaine represents himself mainly as an "artist" and "moralist" concerned with depicting the irony and comedy of life, he "also had a genuinely studious and reflective side... [with] a real aspiration to write scientific philosophical verse in emulation of such ancient masters as Lucretius and Virgil" (180). Ridgely analyzes the influence of late seventeenth-century cosmic theory on *L'astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits* and *L'horoscope*. The two poems attack the concept of judicial astrology, which claimed to foretell the future through observation of the heavens. La Fontaine's complaint against judicial astrology, according to Ridgely, was that it constituted a "pseudo-science in which... [the poet] saw both an infringement on Divine Providence and an affront to common sense and experience—in short a striking instance of human presumption and folly" (182). My aim is to prove that La Fontaine, in his *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, accuses Descartes of the same presumption, and affront to common sense.

In the fables mentioned, La Fontaine bases his critique of both questionable and legitimate scientific theory on the works of Gassendi as summarized in François Bernier's *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* (1678).¹ Gassendi contends that any form of absolute knowledge is impossible. According to Richard Popkin, Gassendi argues that "the world of experience or appearance... [serves] as the sole basis for our natural knowledge" (101). Gassendi's relativism, then, contradicts Descartes's theories of certitude based on scientific reasoning and the existence of God. Ridgely, while discussing the influence of "gassendisme" on the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, briefly focuses on the central argument in the poem: that animals exercise some measure of thought and will and therefore do not, contrary to Descartes, comprise simple "machines." By mentioning the issue of "l'âme des bêtes," Ridgely evokes the debate sparked by René Jasinski and

Henri Busson in the 1930s over the origins of La Fontaine's views of the animal mind and soul. In general, Jasinski argues for the influence of Gassendi and Bernier, while Busson, and later Ferdinand Gohin, assert that La Fontaine's beliefs about animal intelligence stemmed from the Jesuit Gaston Pardies's *Discours de la connaissance des Bestes*, as well as the writings of J.-B. Du Hamel. Although a valuable source study of one of La Fontaine's most noted poems, the Jasinski-Busson debate raises and answers few questions.

The goal of this study is not to uncover additional works that La Fontaine may have consulted while formulating his theory of animal intelligence. Rather, I will examine further the poet's treatment of Cartesianism in the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*. La Fontaine's anti-Cartesianism extends far beyond disagreement over the nature of the animal mind. Specifically, his refutation of Descartes involves style, method, and structure, as much as theme. In effect, the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* can be read as a refutation to the *Discours de la méthode*⁴ in which La Fontaine purposely employs Cartesian procedure, language, and narrative point of view to undercut concepts fundamental to the geometer's argument.

What does one call this poem? La Fontaine offers four main possibilities, labeling his work at once a "louange" (v. 11), an "entretien" (vv. 15, 20), a "fable" (v. 25), as well as the "discours" of the title. In large measure, all of these terms apply, but I will argue that the expression "discours" is most appropriate, especially for understanding the philosophical dimension of La Fontaine's project. "Fable," which I will discuss at the end of the essay, deals more with the literary tradition to which the work belongs, thus resolving questions of genre rather than framing scientific debate. With respect to the first term, "louange," the text praises not only the poet's patron Madame de la Sablière (here addressed as "Iris"), but more importantly animals and their cognitive powers. Nonetheless, as the work develops into an attack on Cartesian theory, the critical aspect of the poem overtakes the laudatory, thereby diminishing the word's importance. Busson and Gohin, in their 1938 critical edition of La Fontaine's *Discours*, give no interpretation of "louange," but do attach large importance to the word "entretien," arguing that it best explains the substantive "Discours" in the title (59).

Unfortunately, Busson and Gohin give little indication as to what "entretien" meant in the seventeenth century. Furetière speaks of "entretien" primarily in terms of "la conversation," with the verb "entretenir" meaning "Discourir avec plusieurs personnes" (3:863). A second definition appears, relating "entretien" to the concepts of maintenance and preservation, i.e., "de la conservation, la dépense pour réparer une chose" (863). In this definition, "entretenir" signifies "tenir une chose liée, assemblée." If taken figuratively, the

equation of “entretien” with “réhabilitation” or “conservation” suggests a kind of custodianship with respect to ideas and objects. One could argue that while the meaning of “entretien” as “conversation” seems initially plausible, its meaning as “conservation” also applies since La Fontaine sees himself in this poem as the custodian of an intellectual tradition upholding the cognitive powers of animals. Collinet’s remark that the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* represents La Fontaine’s adaptation of the *Apologie de Raimond Sebond* lends credence to this idea (1239). La Fontaine’s preservation and development of this tradition becomes especially important in light of Descartes’s opposition to it.

Nonetheless, the definition of “entretien” as “conversation” warrants closer attention. On the one hand, the poem reveals very little in the way of strict dialogue, i.e., direct speech between two or more persons. On the other hand, the poem can be seen as a dramatic monologue in which the interlocutor’s reactions can be detected by the speaker’s movements and adaptations. I shall deal with the first scenario now, and the second in the next section. While one could posit that La Fontaine’s dedication to Madame de La Sablière and his subsequent appeal to “Iris” constitute a form of conversation with his patron, it should be noted that Iris never speaks. Although Iris is undoubtedly the narratee, neither she, nor the animals, possess language. When considering the most stringent definition of “entretien,” one remarks that the poet bestows language only upon himself, presenting a univocal work arguing a particular point of view. Granted, La Fontaine’s opposition to Descartes thrusts the poet into the scientific controversy of his day. Yet, the text’s expository format and rigor, coupled with the absence of direct discourse signals that a “entretien,” *au sens propre*, falls short in its application to La Fontaine’s poem. The term “discours,” however, if taken to mean a reasoned argument, gives the best description of the poem’s form, and especially its function.

Collinet’s edition sheds little light on the meaning of either “entretien” or “discours.” Nonetheless, the term “discours,” (J. Allen Tyler, *Concordance* 289) appears 58 times: 28 times in the *Fables*, 30 in the *Contes*. Two basic meanings of the term emerge: the first refers to a theory or thesis, “Se peut connaître au discours que j’avance” (1.19:21) (289), the second denotes overt speech or dialogue, “Est-ce à moi que l’on tient de semblables discours?” (12.5:15) (289). The expression “discours” appears in the title of only one other fable, the *Discours à Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld*. Like the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, this poem treats the subject of animal intelligence, drawing numerous parallels between human and animal behavior. The poet states that he will “prove” (v. 9) his contention that humans and animals share a kernel of common “esprit,” which he describes in verse 7 as “Quelque grain d’une masse où puisent les esprits.” He then cites several examples and/or observations to back his claim.

Pierre Michel and Maurice Martin note the use of the term "argument," interpreting it as a "raisonnement." The deductive process by which the poet draws his conclusions lends credence to their interpretation. Nevertheless, further analysis of the term will better illuminate its function in La Fontaine's project.

Busson and Gohin give a rather contradictory analysis of what the word "discours" means. In their introduction, they contend that the term signifies a "dissertation," or didactic writing (9). Busson and Gohin's notes, however, blur this definition by stating that "Discours n'a pas le sens actuel de développement oratoire, ni le sens fréquent du dix-septième siècle de traité" (59). While one can accept the reluctance to associate La Fontaine's poem with a speech, it is difficult to see the difference between "dissertation" and "traité." Furetière suggests that the terms are interchangeable, and defines "dissertar" as meaning "discourir" (3:180). Busson and Gohin's conclusion that "discours" most accurately signals an "entretien" (59), is debatable for the reasons already mentioned. The brevity of Busson and Gohin's remarks on the meaning of "discours" as well as the lack of other research on the subject prompts one to examine the text closely so as to derive La Fontaine's conception of the term.

Much of La Fontaine's language points to a conceptualization of "discours" as a "propos" or an "exposé" that operates particularly on a demonstrative level. At the core of this "exposé" is the aforementioned "raisonnement." Forms of the words "raisonner," "penser" and "réfléchir" (vv. 58-64) appear frequently in the text, with the poem's last image that of reason piercing through the darkness (vv. 234-37). This final image of light is consonant with the poem's demonstrative structure and tone. As I will show, the bulk of La Fontaine's *Discours* consists of observations which refute Descartes's theory that animals possess neither will nor thought independent of their physiology. The demonstration is largely deductive in that it starts with the general premise that animals have cognitive powers, and moves to specific examples which support the premise. La Fontaine reinforces the demonstrative, illuminative tone of the *Discours* through language that suggests visual means of perception. "Discours," then, in the sense of an "exposé" which brings thought to light, most accurately summarizes La Fontaine's project of revealing a truth which he feels has been clouded or obscured by Descartes's incorrect "exposition" on the subject.

OCULOCENTRISM AND IRIS AS NARRATEE

Perhaps the most salient example of the poem's emphasis on vision, or oculo-centrism, is La Fontaine's reference to Madame de La Sablière as Iris. Critics have done little to explain La Fontaine's sobriquet for his patron. Fumaroli and Collinet briefly discuss the mythological significance of the term indicating Iris as the Goddess of the Rainbow, while Busson and Gohin merely

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state that “La Fontaine aimait à donner un nom de Parnasse à ses protectrices” (59). However, I believe that the name bears larger significance when the different contexts of the poem are examined. Since the work debates a scientific question of the day, the fields of biology and physics provide a good point of entry into the name’s meaning. Long before the late seventeenth century, iris in French denoted the colored section of the eye surrounding the pupil. Furetière describes the iris as “un cercle qui est autour de la prunelle de l’oeil, & qui est de différentes couleurs, tantôt noir, tantôt bleu, tantôt vert. C’est un tissu de fibres disposées en rond, qui viennent de la tunique qu’on appelle ‘Uvée’ ou ‘choroïde’” (4:1566). Emphasis on the eye, especially at the beginning of the text, suggests that viewpoint and outlook weigh heavily in the poem’s interpretation. The poet’s repeated appeal to Iris, especially at the beginning or end of a specific point in his argument, underscores the Goddess’s and, by extension, the reader’s role as judge in the debate between La Fontaine and Descartes.

The role of judge or mediator provides leads into discussion of Iris as narratee. Gerald Prince defines the narratee as “someone whom the narrator addresses (7)” either directly or indirectly within the text. In La Fontaine’s case, Iris’s presence within the text is quite distinct, as her name is mentioned four times (vv. 1, 11, 61, 172). Prince outlines several functions and signals of the narratee, many of which can be applied to explain Iris’s role, as well as the poet’s relationship to her. Iris’s presence as a judge leads the reader to view her as a “listener” or “mediator” (19) who stands as “a relay between the narrator and the reader(s), or rather between the author and the reader(s)” (21). Prince goes on to describe this function: “Should certain values have to be defended or certain ambiguities clarified, this can easily be done by means of asides addressed to the narratee” (21). Indeed, at particular moments when the narrator tries to underscore his opposition to Descartes, he appeals to his arbiter:

Or vous savez, Iris, de certaine science,
Que, quand la bête penserait,
La bête ne réfléchirait
Sur l’objet ni sur sa pensée.
Descartes va plus loin, et soutient nettement
Qu’elle ne pense nullement.

(vv. 61-66)

In this, as well as other instances, Iris represents not only a mediator in the abstract, but the actual Madame de La Sablière whose salons fostered debate between Cartesians and “gassendistes” such as La Fontaine.

Appeal to a narratee of Madame de La Sablière's status also helps in the characterization of the narrator—another of Prince's functions of the narratee (22). A poetic, yet philosophical discourse directed to Madame de La Sablière raises the esteem of the narrator in the public's eye. If the poet's argument is worthy of admission to her salon, then the reliability and prestige of the one advancing the argument is increased manifold. The very notion that someone of Iris's status would entertain the poet's ideas already places the poet in high standing.

Along with the clear references to Iris, subtler allusions exist which suggest her participation. Here, the notion of dramatic monologue becomes important since in dramatic monologue, “[the poem] gains additional force from the fact that a silent auditor often constrains or controls the speaker's words” (Princeton Encyclopedia 799). Prince's “signals of the narratee” (11) include the suggested presence of the narratee “in the form of questions or pseudo-questions” (13-14). Here, questions in the narrative spring neither from a character nor the narrator (14). Rather, the questions, which often serve to advance an argument or provide information about the plot or characters, are ascribed to the narratee. These questions fall into the second category of signals distinguishing the narratee, those which inform the public that the narratee has shared similar experiences or feelings with the reader. Prince's example of this second category, taken from Flaubert's *Un cœur simple*, underscores the presence of the narratee by referring to Félicité's “confusion” in meeting M. Bourais as something “into which we are all thrown by the spectacle of extraordinary men” (12). The “we” calls upon the narratee to compare his experience to Félicité's, with the aim of finding commonality, if not empathy. In the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, a situation which summons the narratee through both questions and common experience occurs at the end of the poet's praise of the Ukrainian boubaks' military prowess:

Pour chanter leurs combats, l'Achéron nous devrait
Rendre Homère. Ah! s'il le rendait.
Et qu'il rendît aussi le rival d'Epicure,
Que dirait ce dernier sur ces exemples-ci?

(vv. 136-39)

Having Homer sing the conquests of the Boubaks gives Iris a point of reference by which to judge the animals' skill in war. “Nous” (v. 136), in its most immediate sense, designates the poet and Iris, with the allusion to Homeric epic suggesting a common, but sophisticated standard by which to represent the animals' might. However, the presence of the narratee becomes most evocative in the

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question that ends the passage, “Que dirait ce dernier sur ces exemples-ci?” (v. 139) The inquiry, while possibly a rhetorical device on the part of the narrator, can be explained as a contribution from the narratee. As Iris’s presence has already been implied in the word “nous,” it is not implausible to assume her participation in some manner. The question, in which “ce dernier” refers to Descartes, refocuses the *Discours* on La Fontaine’s opposition to the philosopher. After more than 60 lines of examples of animal intelligence, the original opposition has been reestablished, and Iris’s function as arbiter resumed. “Que dirait ce dernier sur ces exemples-ci” becomes her way of getting the poet to consider what kind of rebuttal his argument may encounter. The next two lines articulate the poet’s answer:

Ce que j’ai déjà dit: qu’aux bêtes la nature
Peut par les seuls ressorts opérer tout ceci.

(vv. 140-41)

The “je” affirms the poet’s presence not only in his dialogue with Descartes, but with Iris as well. His restatement of things he has “already said” underscores the repetition and continuity of discourse carried on at many different levels.

On a symbolic level, the link between Iris and the rainbow, particularly the physical property of refracting light through water, touches on La Fontaine’s overall goal of subverting Descartes. From a rhetorical standpoint, the poet refracts, or changes the direction of Descartes’s method to prove the antithesis of the geometer’s argument. Notions such as the “cogito”, “bon sens”, and experience will demonstrate that animals do indeed think. The principle of refraction also anticipates the intended public’s reaction to the text. Specifically, the eye’s ability to change the path of incoming light in order to form an image on the retina mirrors the reader’s capacity to alter his/her reception of a given idea so as to create a new image of this idea. La Fontaine will pass Descartes’s method and precepts through a different lens, thereby creating new means by which to view the philosopher’s theories. It is now a question of exploring these methods and precepts in greater detail.

DUALISM, EXCLUSION, AND THE PRIMACY OF THE MIND

Most of the Cartesian principles that La Fontaine attacks come from the *Discours de la méthode*. In all likelihood, then, one reason why La Fontaine chooses to include the term “discours” in his poem’s title is to underscore his opposition to Descartes. The idea in La Fontaine’s *Discours* that “la bête est une machine” (v. 30) derives from Descartes’s theory of animal behavior first postulated in the *Traité de l’homme* (Adam and Tannery 130-32), then reiterated in Part

V of the *Discours de la méthode* (Robinet edition 90-92). Descartes argues here for the concept of animals as “automates, ou machines mouvantes (90) [qui] n’agiraient pas par connaissance mais seulement par la disposition de leurs organes” (91). The contention that animals are without reason finds various means of expression, of which the most notable are an animal’s lack of speech (*Oeuvres philosophiques*, I:628-30). Descartes asserts that “elles [les bêtes/machines] ne pourraient user de paroles, ni d’autres signes en les composant comme nous faisons pour déclarer aux autres nos pensées” (629). Even if, Descartes argues, animals such as parrots pronounce words in the same manner as humans, they cannot think about what they say (630). By contrast, while deaf-mute humans may be unable to enunciate words, they often invent signals by which they can make themselves understood. The key to distinguishing animals from humans for Descartes is the being’s ability to think before it attempts to communicate. Thought presupposes the capacity to create tangible, systematic signs through which meanings and exchanges may take place. In other words, the lack of codified language in animals leads Descartes to the conclusion, “pas seulement que les bêtes ont moins de raison que les hommes, mais qu’elles n’en ont point du tout” (630). Later in Part V, the machine metaphor takes over much of Descartes’s argument, as he asserts that nature directs animal movement much the way wheels and springs direct the function of a clock (Robinet 93).

The mechanical conception of animal life rests on Descartes’s assumption of the dual nature of mind and body, of “esprit” and “corps.” Dualism results not only from the distinction of mind and body, but from the primacy of the mind in directing human consciousness. Descartes asserts that it is only through the mind, “a solo intellectu” (429) that the body, and indeed anything, can be perceived. The mind/body distinction subdivides into two concepts, that of *res cogitans*, (420-21) or thinking substance, and *res extensa*, (400) or extended, i.e. material substance, both of which are mutually exclusive. Part V of the *Discours de la méthode* bears early witness to this dualism in the contrast between humans and animals. Humans occupy the domain of *res cogitans*, while animals are reduced to the level of extended substance which assumes a mechanistic form. Of note in Descartes’s verification of his theory is his concept of animals as near-geometrical beings. He explains his approach in the *Abrégé des six méditations* as:

[la suite] d’un ordre semblable à celui dont se servent la géomètres, [à] savoir d’avancer toutes les choses desquelles dépendent la proposition que l’on cherche avant d’en rien conclure. (*Oeuvres philosophiques* 2:400)

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The "proposition" guiding Descartes's dissections and experiments in Part V of the *Discours*, as well as the *Traité de l'homme* and *La description du corps humain* (Adam and Tannery 11:119-286), is that not only the circulatory system, but the movement of all material things must be proven by "la force des démonstrations mathématiques" which translate into "raisonnements conformes aux principes du mécanisme" (*Oeuvres philosophiques* 1:599-600). Geometrical reasoning, while empirical, concerns itself less with common experience than with sequences of logic stemming from a given principle. Descartes finds this type of verification sufficient because his dissections center on how one part of an extended substance, an organ, for example, influences and moves the other parts as well as the whole. Of greatest importance is seeing how a distinctive experiment contributes to the process of demonstrating a given concept, in this case, the mechanistic character of the animal (and for that matter, human) body.

The goal of Descartes's exclusionary contrast between human and animal natures is to argue for the existence of a human soul. He states that the composition of the human spirit extends far beyond the elements of physical matter. Unlike animals' nature, man's is independent of the body, and thus "not subject to die with him" (632). Consequently, immortality becomes the largest distinction between man and animal, with the existence of the mind the crucial factor in extending human life beyond the terrestrial realm.

ASSIMILATION, HIERARCHY, AND REFUTATION

While La Fontaine's *Discours* constitutes the poet's firmest rejection of Descartes's propositions, other texts echo the same sentiment. Along with the *Discours à Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld*, fables such as *L'Homme et la couleuvre* and *La perdrix et les coqs* discuss the qualities of animals in their own right. As in the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, the poet often depicts animal intelligence and virtue as superior to those of their human counterparts. What distinguishes La Fontaine's *Discours* from the aforementioned works is the poet's systematic refutation of a known scientific theory. This systematization expresses itself in two structures of thought 1) an assimilative method of discourse and 2) an inferential method of discourse. The first represents a departure from Descartes's mode of argument, while the second evokes many similarities.

Briefly, La Fontaine's assimilative method distances itself from Cartesian dualism. While the poet agrees with Descartes that the mind and body should be considered separately, distinctions between mind and body, between human and animal do not concern La Fontaine as much as classifications or scales of beings. Throughout his *Discours*, but especially in the closing verses, La Fontaine tends to rank different life forms according to their degree of consciousness. In

the hierarchy of terrestrial life, adult humans constitute the highest order of life, with children and animals second in line, followed by plants. Like Descartes, La Fontaine distinguishes between what he sees as superior and inferior manifestations of being. Yet, for La Fontaine, differentiation is not necessarily exclusionary. Rather, differentiation evolves into a process of distinction where comparisons, not simply contrasts, are taken into account when determining the nature of a specific creature.

In the poet's view, all living beings, plant or animal, share some common life functions and experiences such as breathing and reproduction. The more complex these functions and experiences, the higher the degree of consciousness. La Fontaine bases his supposition on intuition and "bon sens," concluding that the hierarchy of life forms is self-evident:

Ce que je sais, Iris, c'est qu'en ces animaux
 Dont je viens de citer l'exemple,
 Cet esprit n'agit pas: l'homme seul est son temple.
 Aussi faut-il donner à l'animal un point
 Que la plante, après tout, n'a point.

(vv. 172-76)

Unlike Descartes, La Fontaine verifies his assumptions through common experience as opposed to controlled experiments designed to conform to an established chain of reasoning.

In examining the particular natures and dispositions of different species, the poet again seeks similarities and differences. The four examples of animal intelligence in La Fontaine's *Discours* reveal a differentiative and an assimilative mode of reasoning, with La Fontaine underscoring either similarities or differences between the animals according to the context. In the illustrations mentioned, the prime trait animals share is an ability to confront and overcome an obstacle through reason. What distinguishes each animal is its particular means of coping with the problem. The birds, rats, and deer engage in various ruses (vv. 73-91), while the beavers and boubaks (vv. 92-138) display their respective engineering and military skills. The result is a general awareness of animal cognition, which finds many expressions and functions given the different circumstances. La Fontaine thus strives to refute Descartes's assertion "Que les bêtes n'ont point d'esprit" (v. 198) by cultivating the public's appreciation of specific manifestations of animal intellect.

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INFERENTIAL STRUCTURE

While the assimilative character of the poet's argument presents an external framework in which to outline many of La Fontaine's main arguments, the internal consistency of his discourse relies on the inferential structure of his rhetoric. In Cartesian terms, inferential structure of thought refers to the logical derivations of consequences given a presupposed set of concepts. Daniel Garber interprets inferential structure in Descartes as the discovery of causes via effects through experimentation. He uses the following excerpt of Part VI of the *Discours de la méthode*:

Puis, lorsque j'ai voulu descendre à celles qui étaient particulières, il s'en est tant présenté à moi de divers, que je n'ai pas cru qu'il fût possible à l'esprit humain de distinguer les formes ou espèces de corps qui sont sur la terre d'une infinité, d'autres qui pourraient y être, si c'eût été le vouloir de Dieu de les y mettre, ni, par conséquent, de les rapporter à notre visage, si ce n'est qu'on vienne au-devant des causes par les effets, et qu'on se serve de plusieurs expériences particulières. (1:112-20)

Garber claims that the passage suggests a form of reasoning from effects to causes through a version of the hypothetico-deductive method. This method then, would consist of "making experiments, gathering the results, and framing a hypothesis that would explain the results in terms of...[assumed] principles" (127). While Garber contends later that Descartes seems to endorse other kinds of argument over the hypothetical, he nonetheless states: "The evidence in favor of the claim that Descartes was seriously committed to hypothetical arguments in science...is substantial" (127).

What sort of link exists between Cartesian reasoning and La Fontaine's mode of argument in his *Discours*? I maintain that the structure of La Fontaine's fable resembles that of the hypothetico-deductive method, with one possible variation. This variation centers on the meaning of "expérience" in Descartes as well as in Garber's translation. For Garber, "expérience" signifies "experiment" in the sense of the scientific method (126). Descartes is less clear, with either being equally admissible: the scientific meaning or the more general notion of knowledge that results from participation or observation.

The question arises as to which concept of "expérience" most accurately applies to La Fontaine. On the most apparent level, the second definition best fits since the poet's descriptions of animal defense and cunning appear more as reported and personal observations than as preconceived tests or controlled opera-

tions. Yet, the notion of experiment as test is germane to La Fontaine's mode of argument in that each example—be it the partridge that pretends to sport a broken wing to save her family, or the boubaks that employ sophisticated battle techniques—puts Descartes's claims to the test and refutes them. If indeed La Fontaine employs his *Discours* to experiment with Cartesian theory, then the scientific definition of "expérience" merits greater attention.

Interestingly, the idea that La Fontaine's discursive technique in his *Discours* resembles a form of experimentation with Descartes's method coincides with the notion of inferential structure. Here, Busson and Gohin's outline of the poem becomes useful in tracing the derivation of La Fontaine's claims (45). After the poet's introductory praise of Madame de La Sablière, (vv. 1-23), he moves to an explanation of Cartesian theory which Busson and Gohin divide into a) "l'automatisme" (24-52) and b) "la pensée et la réflexion" (53-68). In this section on "automatisme" La Fontaine announces the primary Cartesian principle he intends to challenge, "Que la bête est une machine" (v. 30). The challenges to the principle take the form of counter-examples to Descartes's assertions. Busson and Gohin label this third section "Objections de La Fontaine aux Cartésiens," with each "objection" illustrated by an instance of animal intelligence.

As mentioned, these examples include the 1) buck which, upon hearing the barks of hunting dogs, sacrifices a younger member of the herd to stave off the attackers (vv. 68-81); 2) the mother partridge feigning a broken wing so as to divert a group of hunters (vv. 82-91); 3) the Canadian beavers whose genius in collective dam building surpasses man's (vv. 92-121); and 4) the sophisticated attack and defense strategies of the Ukrainian boubaks (vv. 122-39). These observations act as effects stemming from a first cause, namely the animals' possession of some kind of "esprit." What is interesting to note about La Fontaine's exposition of cause and effect is the way in which he leads the reader through the inferential process.

Even before La Fontaine lists the examples that anchor his argument, he asks the reader to make inferences that undermine Descartes. In his explanation of Cartesianism (vv. 24-68), La Fontaine begins his refutation by assailing Descartes's comparison of animals to clocks. Framing his objections literally as a dichotomy of "us" versus "them," La Fontaine summarizes Descartes's theory in the following manner:

Au dire de ces gens, la bête est toute telle:
L'objet le frappe en un endroit;
Ce lieu frappé s'en va tout droit,
Selon nous, au voisin en porter la nouvelle;

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Le sens de proche en proche aussitôt la reçoit.
L'impression se fait, mais comment se fait-elle?
Selon eux, par nécessité,
Sans passion, sans volonté.

(vv. 39-46)

The inference to be drawn from Descartes's principle is that if animals are nothing more than clocks, they, unlike humans, are devoid of consciousness:

Qu'est-ce donc? Une montre. Et nous? C'est autre chose.
Voici la façon que Descartes l'expose.

(vv. 52-53)

La Fontaine infers from Descartes that if animals have no real thought, they in turn do not truly exist. This inference is most fully expressed in La Fontaine's adaptation of the *cogito*, which immediately follows:

Voici, dis-je, comment raisonne cet auteur.
Sur tous les animaux, enfants du Créateur,
J'ai le don de penser et je sais que je pense.
Or vous savez, Iris, de certaine science,
Que, quand la bête penserait,
La bête ne réfléchirait
Sur l'objet ni sur sa pensée.
Descartes va plus loin et soutient nettement
Qu'elle ne pense nullement.

(vv. 58-66)

The goal then, of the specific observations that come directly afterwards is not only to prove that animals think, and therefore are, but, in Cartesian fashion, that their essence derives from their ability to think. Though deprived of the capacity to "reflect" (v. 63), animals, according to La Fontaine, constitute sentient beings, i.e. creatures "conscious or percipient of something; having the power or function of sensation or of perception of the senses" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 993). Animals thus move beyond the sphere of mere objects, claiming their part of the kernel of general esprit.

ESPRIT, BON SENS, AND SUBVERSION OF DESCARTES

Much of this notion of general "esprit" is enveloped in the Cartesian idea of "bon sens." For La Fontaine, "bon sens" operates on two levels in the text, re-

lating to animal behavior and reader reception. It is reasonable to equate “bon sens,” in both the Cartesian and Lafontainian senses, with the capacity to “bien juger” (*Discours*, Robinet edition 21). Animals show astute judgment by devising various stratagems to save their lives, while the human reader demonstrates it by recognizing that animals do indeed possess “bon sens.” The term’s appearance in the text, at the end of the poet’s description of the boubaks, amplifies La Fontaine’s argument on several levels:

Corps de garde avancé, vedettes, espions,
 Embuscades, partis, et mille inventions
 D’une pernicieuse et maudite science,
 Fille du Styx et mère des héros
 Exercent de ces animaux
 Le bon sens et l’expérience.
 Pour chanter leurs combats, l’Achéron nous devrait
 Rendre Homère. Ah s’il le rendait,
 Et qu’il rendît aussi le rival d’Epicure,
 Que dirait ce dernier sur ces exemples-ci?

(vv. 130-39)

Structurally, the term “bon sens” reframes La Fontaine’s argument, while advancing it at the same time. “Bon sens” highlights a demarcation in the poem between the illustrations of animal intelligence, which make up “La Fontaine’s objections to Descartes,” and the next section of the *Discours*, which Busson and Gohin entitle the “Response of the Cartesians” (vv. 140-78). While summarizing the poet’s, as well as the attentive reader’s conclusions about animal cognition, “bon sens” also brings Descartes directly back into the fray.

La Fontaine’s four examples of animal thought do not mention Descartes despite the poet’s intention to employ the examples as a means of refuting the geometer. The poet waits over seventy lines before reinvoicing “le rival d’Epicure” (v. 138) in part to let the instances of animal thinking prowess stand on their own merits. Not until after all the illustrations are noted, do the ideas of “bon sens” and “expérience” (v. 135) return the reader to the dispute at hand. The rhetorical question in verse 139 (“Que dirait ce dernier sur ces exemples-ci?”) leads to further debate, either from Cartesians or from those who La Fontaine believes have a more reasonable point of view.

It is clear La Fontaine believes that animals, as well as objective readers, exercise “bon sens” based on their experience. One can infer that the poet believes the opposite of Descartes, i.e., that the philosopher bases little of his reasoning on the “bon sens” and “expérience” he claims to espouse. La Fontaine’s

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examples of animal intelligence, as the exotic settings of Canada and Ukraine suggest, have a certain universal quality about them. The illustrations deal with basic survival strategies, underscoring a commonality that invites any thoughtful reader to provide additional examples. La Fontaine's conclusion that animals display "bon sens" by inventing different means of self-preservation is, in Cartesian terms, "évident," or self-evident. Evidence refers to the derivation or illumination of a truth that the holder deems indubitable. The poet declares such an "évidence" after praising the engineering faculties of the Canadian beavers:

Que ces castors ne soient qu'un corps vuide d'esprit,
Jamais on ne pourra m'obliger à le croire.

(vv. 114-15)

Emerging from the poem is La Fontaine's position that the principles of "bon sens," "expérience," or évidence are basically absent from Descartes's reflections. Interestingly, the "Response of the Cartesians," is devoid of concrete examples and hard conclusions. The Cartesians fail to respond scientifically to La Fontaine's objections and merely repeat shopworn speculations on animal memory:

Que la mémoire est corporelle...
L'objet, lorsqu'il revient, va dans son magasin
Chercher par le même chemin
L'image auparavant tracée,
Qui sur les mêmes pas revient pareillement,
Sans le secours de la pensée.

(vv. 145-50)

While one can accuse La Fontaine of placing a truncated, rather simplistic reply in the mouths of the Cartesians, it is true that in Part VI of the *Discours de la méthode*, the geometer's argument is more speculative than factual. But what is more important about the above quote is La Fontaine's use of animals to describe Cartesians. Like the animals to which the poet refers, Cartesians have a mechanical memory, reacting to challenges in rote, predictable fashion. Cartesians, bereft of the judgment that comes with adapting to different experiences, can only retrace their steps when confronting a new obstacle. La Fontaine's depiction of animals thus depends on the point of view he asserts at a given moment: smart and flexible when advancing his own "gassendiste" argument, automatic and rigid when discussing Descartes. In an ironic turn, then, La

Fontaine appears to “animalize” Descartes, perhaps to show the “primitive” nature of the philosopher’s theories.

Rhetorically, this section of the poem becomes important because La Fontaine makes his final criticism of Descartes before setting forth his own hypothesis. La Fontaine’s greatest objection is to the geometer’s assertion of absolute certainty regarding the causes behind the notion of general “esprit.” The poet counters Descartes’s claim that ontology can be defined in human, rational terms, arguing instead for the presence of a kind of mystery:

Un esprit vit en nous, et meut tous nos ressorts;
 L’impression se fait. Le moyen, je l’ignore.
 On ne l’apprend qu’au sein de la Divinité;
 Et, s’il faut en parler avec sincérité,
 Descartes l’ignorait encore.

(vv. 166-70)

Specifically, La Fontaine’s dispute with Descartes concerns the philosopher’s belief that the body consists only of matter, while the soul is comprised of thought. While La Fontaine later argues for a greater compatibility between body and soul, his main disagreement pertains to Descartes’s overall claims to certitude of knowledge. As the poet states in verses 168-70, absolute knowledge of the forces behind existence come only through union with God. La Fontaine’s assertion, in verses 169 and 170, that Descartes himself would have to be dead to make any avowal of certainty, attacks the core of the latter’s theories, based on the supposed universal character of the *cogito*. La Fontaine’s *gassendisme* begins to manifest itself in the sense that the poet covertly accuses Descartes of dogmatism. Gassendi criticizes dogmatism because it “exaggerates the power of the human mind” (Popkin 142). In his *Discours*, La Fontaine impugns what he sees as overestimation of the capacity of the human mind to discern absolute truths. The claim to know anything with certitude before death also smacks of human arrogance, mocking the arrogation of Divine omniscience. Relativism, based on “bon sens” and common experience, become the closest approximations to the truth, and thus provide the most effective means for continuing philosophical debate.

THE CASE FOR RELATIVISM

Toward the end of the “Cartesian’s response,” the reader notices the first glimpses of La Fontaine’s relativist theory of the animal and human soul. La Fontaine’s relativism finds its origin in Renaissance humanist philology. Zachary Sayre Schiffman notes that this philology “held forth the possibility

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that all laws and institutions were relative to their historical circumstance, potentially undermining the evidence of normative standards” (6). Concepts of relativism, which emphasize the particular, conditional nature of a thing or idea, undergird many of La Fontaine’s distinctions concerning the idea of “esprit.” While La Fontaine accedes to the idea of a “principe intelligent” (v. 157), which allows both man and animal to exercise rational judgment, the degree to which the “principe” manifests itself in the two species is vastly different:

Ce que je sais, Iris, c’est qu’en ces animaux
Dont je viens de citer l’exemple,
Cet esprit n’agit pas: l’homme seul est son temple.
Aussi faut-il donner à l’animal un point
Que la plante, après tout, n’a point.

(vv. 72-76)

In listing a hierarchy of mental faculties descending from man to animals to plants, La Fontaine categorizes his concept of “esprit” according to the logic of “bon sens.” The apologue *Les deux rats, le renard et l’oeuf* which follows this declaration, reaffirms the poet’s belief in animal intelligence. After describing the ingenuity of the rats who hide their dinner from a fox, the poet exclaims:

Qu’on m’aille soutenir, après un tel récit,
Que les bêtes n’ont point d’esprit!

(vv. 197-98)

Such a reaffirmation stems, in part, from the poet’s fear that his previous categorization will somehow diminish his overall argument. It is at this point that La Fontaine fully introduces his *gassendiste* theory of the animal soul. The theory, postulating that animals have a “material” (v. 207) soul, puts the animal soul on a footing with children’s souls “capable de sentir, juger rien davantage,/ Et juger imparfaitement” (vv. 215-16). La Fontaine’s adult human soul shares the traits of the animal/child soul, yet carries a transcendent quality, placing it just below the angel soul. The poet explains the “double trésor” (v. 220) of the cultivated adult soul in the following terms:

L’un, cette âme pareille en tous tant que nous sommes,
Sages, fous, enfants, idiots,
Hôtes de l’univers, sous le nom d’animaux,
L’autre, encore une autre âme, entre nous et les anges

Commune en un degré;
 Et ce trésor à part crée
 Suivrait parmi les airs les célestes phalanges,
 Entrerait dans un point sans en être pressé,
 Ne finirait jamais, quoique ayant commencé,
 Choses réelles, quoique étranges.

(vv. 221-30)

Gassendi's influence is evident, not only from the notion of the hierarchy of souls, but from the relativistic tenor of the passage. Of particular note is the use of the conditional tense. The conditional signals a hypothesis, a reasonable supposition based on a set of circumstances. La Fontaine's hypothesis describes the human soul relative to the animal; if, as he believes, the human soul is superior, then it will reach a transcendent state inaccessible to the animal spirit. The idea that the human soul would follow celestial phalanxes, would enter without haste, and would never end (vv. 227-29), underscores the hypothetical, if not speculative tenor of the proposition. Unlike Descartes, La Fontaine avoids any notion of certitude. The entire section begins with the speculation in line 199, "Pour moi si j'en étais le maître," leaving the reader to judge the plausibility of what follows.

Nonetheless, the personalized nature of the speculation warrants notice since it evokes a similarity between La Fontaine and Descartes. La Fontaine's first-person narration, articulated within an analytical framework, closely resembles the narrative voice in Descartes's *Discours*. Descartes's "je" is at once reflective and deductive, recounting both a personal and universal search for truth. La Fontaine also combines forms of musing and inquiry, employing what he believes are facts to support his inclinations. The presence of the "je" in both Descartes and La Fontaine renders an abstruse subject more accessible, demystifying and animating a scientific discourse which many readers could find obscure. For La Fontaine, however, first person narration lends an air of subjectivity to the process, a subjectivity that he believes permeates the writings of Descartes.

The idea that Descartes's theories were summarily subjective constituted one of the major criticisms of the *Discours de la méthode*. Popkin notes that Gassendi believed Descartes "to be stressing...subjective, psychological experience as the basis of certitude rather than any objective features of the ideas or what they may refer to" (202). Accordingly, if the Cartesian assumption that the "clarity and distinctiveness" of an idea assures its truth, then the clarity and distinctiveness can be challenged, Popkin states, because it is uncertain as to whether or not "[it is] really true, or...just that Descartes thinks it is true" (202). La Fontaine's personalized style reflects not only the subjectivity and personal-

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ization he finds in Descartes's argument, but his own skepticism concerning the validity of the *Discours de la méthode*. In parodic fashion, the poet uses a personalized style to show his doubt about a system in which ostensibly objective, absolute truth is derived from "an overwhelming [inner] compulsion (202)" devoid of common sense and external experience.

The poet's assertion in verses 166-70 that Descartes, or indeed anyone, can know the absolute only in death, suggests that all human activity and reasoning is grounded in relativism, since a relative perspective is the only one accessible to humans. Much of La Fontaine's refutation of Descartes derives from what the poet perceives as a basic flaw in the latter's method; that totally objective, certain thinking on the human level is possible. La Fontaine's relativism intersects with probabilism in that reliance on the plausible, as taken from the observed circumstances, remains the only workable option for the sophisticated thinker. The combination of first person narration coupled with analytical inquiry underscores the idea that human subjectivity, tempered by rational observation, produces the most dependable form of human knowledge.

The presence of subjectivity in La Fontaine's reasoning goes beyond narrative format. It touches upon the fundamental elements of the poet's argument, specifically La Fontaine's manner of depicting animals to suit his purpose.

I shall next examine closely La Fontaine's portrayal of animals in the *Discours* so as to determine the viability of the portrayal in terms of the poet's thesis.

ANIMAL REPRESENTATION AND DEFINITION OF THE FABLE

Historically, the "fabulistes" represent animals in a highly stylized, i.e., anthropomorphic way. Animals often speak, scheme, love, and fight in a fashion similar, if not identical, to humans. The idea that animal behavior in fables allegorizes human conduct is a basic tenet of the genre. For La Fontaine, such a portrayal is risky in his *Discours* because he argues that animals possess a mind and soul in their own right. If animals appear too human, then the poet's basic premise, while appearing reasonable on the level of "bon sens," collapses on the level of hard, demonstrative proof. If, however, La Fontaine depicts animals in a dry, colorless way, he comes dangerously close to paralleling Descartes's conclusions. The problem, then, in anthropomorphization, is for the poet to represent his bucks, partridges, and beavers *en soi*, in a manner that suggests their autonomous faculties without portraying them as humans in beasts' skins. As Richard Danner suggests, La Fontaine must refuse "to adopt the kind of anthropocentric attitude toward his characters that human readers are conditioned to expect" (6).

Despite his argument, La Fontaine fails to achieve his goal. Analysis of the four examples of animal intelligence described earlier reveals that the poet alludes to many *soi-disant* “animal” traits in human terms. The illustration of the old buck serves as a prime example:

L’animal chargé d’ans, vieux cerf, et de dix cors,
 En suppose un plus jeune, et l’oblige par force
 A présenter aux chiens une nouvelle amorce.
 Que de raisonnements pour conserver ses jours!
 Le retour sur ses pas, les malices, les tours,
 Et le change, et cent stratagèmes
 Dignes des plus grands chefs, dignes d’un meilleur sort!
 On le déchire après sa mort:
 Ce sont tous ses honneurs suprêmes.

(vv. 73-81)

On the surface, the buck’s action seems primal enough: he selects a younger member of the pack to be devoured so that others may escape. The poet describes the scene briefly, and since the animals do not speak, there is no debate over the moral or practical ramifications of the buck’s action. Indeed, the brevity and simplicity with which the act is recounted, as well as the obviousness of the act’s value suggests a certain natural, regular quality intrinsic to animal behavior. Yet, the general tone of La Fontaine’s language indicates the conventional fabulistic device of deploying animals as a metaphor for man. Terms such as “malices” (v. 77), “tours” (v. 77), and “stratagèmes” (v. 78) have predominantly human connotations despite the poet’s intention to describe basic animal defense maneuvers. The ruses and honors the poet speaks of in verses 78-81 clearly derive from human frames of reference, thus tightening the bond between representations of human and animal. La Fontaine’s failure to separate animal from human consciousness and behavior is mirrored primarily in the absence of a language that allows non-anthropomorphic description of animal sentience. Though reflected by language, or more precisely the inadequacy of language, La Fontaine’s problem is more than a linguistic one. Rather, it is a problem of accessibility and experience. While La Fontaine may witness and sense what he and others perceive as distinctive animal thought and action, the poet can only employ *his* modes of thought and expression in relating this behavior to others. As the poet has only human frames of reference to convey his observations, analogy, as expressed through anthropomorphization, becomes inevitable. In this instance, La Fontaine cannot play the role of translator, where the interpreter ostensibly knows the “languages,” i.e., the sets of social,

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cognitive, and communicative circumstances, of the parties involved. Instead, because the poet's experiences are one-sided, his viewpoint is necessarily one-sided, forcing him to revert to conventions with which he, and his public, are familiar.

The same situation occurs in the depiction of the partridge and beavers. From one standpoint, both are treated as instances of a particular animal behavior observed in nature. Virtually silent, methodical, but completely aware, the partridge fakes a wound to distract assailants and preserve her young, while the beavers retain flood waters and build a canal joining the two shores. Like the buck, the partridge and beavers engage in acts of self-preservation, with the poet neither problematizing nor morally evaluating their behavior. Nevertheless, the poet endows the partridge and beavers with what resembles human characteristics. The partridge bids farewell to her would-be attackers and laughs as she takes flight. Likewise, the poet describes a chain of command in the beavers' dam assembly where the old dictate the actions of the young:

Chaque castor agit: commune est la tâche;
Le vieux y fait marcher le jeune sans relâche;
Maint maître d'oeuvre y court, et tient haut le bâton.

(vv. 102-104)

The partridge's laugh, as well as use of the term "maître d'oeuvre" provide an especially anthropomorphic dimension to La Fontaine's animals. I would argue that these rather strident anthropomorphic qualities turn La Fontaine's animals into metaphors of human behavior. Consequently, the human representation of the animals subverts the poet's attempt to portray animals in their own right.

What effect, then, does this traditional kind of anthropomorphization exercise on the poem as a whole? First, La Fontaine's depiction of beasts does not in any way hinder the poet in deploying Cartesian method and style to undermine the philosopher's reasoning. Use of "bon sens," "experience" and the *cogito* to refute Descartes remains unaffected by the intergeneric comparison of animal with human-beings. The validity of La Fontaine's project does not rest solely on his ability to portray beasts in a non-anthropomorphic way. Rather, validity hinges largely on proposing plausible challenges to Descartes. In Cartesian fashion, La Fontaine strives to produce doubt with regard to previously accepted norms of thought. Second, conventional anthropomorphization helps readers interpret the poem as a fable. Somewhat ironically, La Fontaine's failure to find a "juste milieu" between fabulistic and real animals aids in the poem's generic definition. As mentioned earlier, the problems in labeling this work are numerous.

The irregular title of the poem, in which the standard notation of the term "Fable," followed by a sequential number gives way to the more declarative *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, immediately raises questions about the poem's generic classification. Hence the basic question: Why does La Fontaine not entitle this poem a fable?

Upon close examination, however, the work's structure, technique and end reflect what David Lee Rubin describes as "an inductive formal definition of fable." With respect to structure, La Fontaine's *Discours* is made up of two parts: apologue and exposition. Apologue assumes two different forms in the text: the four illustrations of animal intelligence and the brief tale entitled *Les deux rats, le renard et l'oeuf*. While the four illustrations seem more integrated into the exposition—the "abstract statement(s) for which the apologue serves as evidence" (12)—than does the tale *Les deux rats*, both are "theme-dominated narratives and descriptions which combine deductive (allegorical), inductive (exemplary) and analogical (intergeneric, i.e., beast fable) modes to illustrate and explicate the exposition" (12). Here, exposition refers to the philosophical reasonings behind the differing theories of animal intelligence. In particular, La Fontaine's use of exempla and analogy within the apologue(s) places the poem within the boundaries of fable. Technique in La Fontaine's *Discours* tends to problematize the text (13-14). The poet's illustrations reveal a sense of both incompleteness and anti-closure, as marked by the general interrogative style and the specific rhetorical questions posed either to Iris or to the implied reader. If one applies Rubin's definition, then the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* constitutes a "problematic," "reader-active" fable (11), whose goal is to pose literary and philosophical questions for the reader's contemplation.

Thus, as in *Les souris et le Chat-huant*, La Fontaine does not call his *Discours* a fable perhaps because his intention and/or need to portray real animals as opposed to fabulistic ones would violate one of the genre's fundamental criteria. However, as Rubin has shown in his reading of *Les souris* (92-95), reliance on the stylized, analogical portrayal of animals is not required to ascribe the term "fable" to a given poem.

What then, differentiates this poem not only from the fables in Book IX, but from those in the *Recueil* as a whole? The most significant distinction comes from the poet's attempt, despite the failure noted above, to reverse conventional notions of the fable. This reversal must be considered on two levels. Although the poet does not succeed in portraying real as opposed to conventional animals, he does manage, however briefly, to transpose the constitutive relationships in the fables' traditional man-beast allegory. While animals portray humans in conventional fables, in La Fontaine's *Discours*, the poet, at certain moments in the text, seeks to use humans as representations of animals. For ex-

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ample, the Cartesian notion of the animal, as described in lines 145-50, is, for La Fontaine, quite representative of Descartes and his followers: mechanical, obstinate, and uncreative. By contrast, La Fontaine's theory of animal thought and behavior mirrors the depiction of the poet, if not the *gassendistes* in general: intelligent, adaptable, inventive. Although La Fontaine is bound by tradition and frame of reference to subordinate animal experience to the human, he aspires, when comparing Descartes with Gassendi, to subordinate the human to the animal in order to convey his general sentiment about animal cognition.

This is not to say that the goal of the poem is to argue the merits of animals over humans. As mentioned, fables such as *La perdrix et les coqs* have as their underlying premise the intellectual and moral superiority of beast over man. The *Discours'* goals are more existential: to prove the cognitive existence of animals via their own thought, and to show that thought is a faculty extending beyond the realm of humankind. Curiously, human thought for La Fontaine, though more sophisticated than its animal counterpart, is, at least in this poem, more fallible. The poet's success in subverting Descartes by using the latter's methods attests to the vulnerability of human thought. In this work, animal vulnerability is primarily physical and is countered with an adaptability to material challenges. As human vulnerability is more mental in nature, humankind must find cognitive means of adjustment in order to survive.

Subtly, La Fontaine's *Discours* applies this process of evolution to poetry itself. The poet at first speaks of an attempt to praise Iris in a conventional manner which, in the poet's words, "n'est que trop aisé." Iris's refusal to accept the "louange" renders the poet vulnerable since he must now find an innovative way of paying tribute to his patron. He accomplishes this goal by writing a "discours" that mixes the lyric, science, philosophy, and "éloge." La Fontaine's choice to detail the virtues of animal intelligence as a hymn of praise for his patron reflects his appreciation of Madame de La Sablière's ability to foster an environment where science and the lyric converge to further intellectual debate. Poetry and public evolve to higher levels while the poet evolves to the status of philosopher in his own right. The three, much like the animals that La Fontaine defends, reach a more elevated level of existence, the essence of which is the ability to cultivate and apply thought.

NOTES

1. Collinet notes that La Fontaine could have known the text before its publication. See pp. 1240-41 of his 1991 edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*. All quotations from the *Fables* are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted.

2. This debate was actually carried out over several years. See Jasinski, *Revue d'histoire de philosophie* 1 (1933) 316-30 and 2 (1934) 218-24; and *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 42 (1935) 401-7 and 43 (1936), 317-20. For Busson's contributions, see *RHL* 42 (1935), 1-32, and 631-36 and 43 (1936) 257-86.

3. See also Busson and Gohin's critical edition of the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, 24-29.

4. Collinet makes a brief statement to this effect in his 1991 edition. However, his treatment of *Le Discours à Madame de La Sablière* as a refutation of the *Discours de la méthode* is limited to thematic considerations, specifically those regarding theories of animal intelligence. cf. 1239-40.

5. Bordas edition, vol. 2, 134-35.

6. The term "exposition" appears in quotes because it is adapted from the poem itself. In vv. 52-53, La Fontaine chides Descartes's mechanistic interpretation of animal behavior saying:

Qu'est-ce donc? Une montre. Et nous? C'est autre chose.

Voici la façon que Descartes l'expose.

7. Note that poem starts with an immediate address to Iris.

8. Fumaroli, 1:377. Collinet, 1242. Both editors stress the allusion to Parnassus.

9. The first category "contains no references to the narratee" (13). It is made up of direct statements which, while perhaps eliciting some sentiment on the part of the reader for the characters, do not directly evoke the narratee.

10. See lines 72-135, in which the poet details the cognitive skill of an aging buck, a partridge, Canadian beavers, and the Ukrainian boubaks.

11. Consult the second and third *Meditations*, pp. 420-30, 440-43, Alquié edition. Note that the *Meditations* (1638-40) were published after the *Discours de la méthode* (1637).

12. See verses 156-58 of La Fontaine's *Discours*:

Tout obéit dans ma machine à ce principe intelligent

Il [l'esprit] est distinct du corps, et se conçoit nettement.

13. For a full explanation of Gassendi's theory of the soul, see Olivier Bloch's *La philosophie de Gassendi*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971. pp. 363-65.

14. As noted earlier, La Fontaine does use the term in the text itself. See verse 25.

15. For a full definition, consult page 12 of *A Pact With Silence*.

16. See Rubin's interpretation of a "real animal" as "one whose deeds and motivations are taken literally, rather than by analogy with those of humans" (94).

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