

QUOTATION

DESCARTES ON HUMAN AND NONHUMAN LANGUAGE

... if a magpie be taught to say “good morning” to its mistress when it sees her coming, it may be that the utterance of these words is associated with the excitement of some one of its passions; for instance, there will be a stir of expectation of something to eat, if it has been the custom of the mistress to give it some dainty bit when it spoke those words; and in like manner all those things which dogs, horses, and monkeys are made to do are merely motions of their fear, their hope or their joy, so they might do them without any thought at all.

Now it seems to me very remarkable that language, as thus defined, belongs to man alone ... there has never yet been found a brute so perfect that it has made use of a sign to inform other animals of something which had no relation to their passions; while there is no man so imperfect as not to use such signs ...

From: Eaton, R. M. (Ed.). (1927). *Descartes Selections* (letter to the Marquis of Newcastle, 23 November 1646). New York: Scribner's Sons. Page 356

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