

## QUOTATION

### LA METTRIE ON LANGUAGE IN APES

“Let us pause to contemplate the varying capacity of animals to learn. Doubtless the analogy best framed leads the mind to think that the causes we have mentioned produce all the difference that is found between animals and men, although we must confess that our weak understanding, limited to the coarsest observations, can not see the bonds that exist between cause and effects. This is a kind of harmony that philosophers will never know.

“Among animals, some learn to speak and sing; they remember tunes, and strike the notes as exactly as a musician. Others, for instance, the ape, show more intelligence, and yet can not learn music. What is the reason for this, except some defect in the organs of speech? But is this defect so essential to the structure that it could never be remedied? In a word, would it be absolutely impossible to teach the ape a language? I do not think so.

“I should choose a large ape in preference to any other, until by some good fortune another kind should be discovered, more like us, for nothing prevents there being such an one in regions unknown to us. The ape resembles us so strongly that naturalists have called it ‘wild man’ or ‘man of the woods’. I should take it in the condition of the pupils of Amman, that is to say, I should not want it to be too young or too old; for apes that are brought to Europe are usually too old. I would choose the one with the most intelligent face, and the one which, in a thousand little ways, best lived up to its look of intelligence. Finally not considering myself worthy to be his master, I should put him in the school of that excellent teacher whom I have just named, or with another teacher equally skilful, if there is one.

“You know by Amman’s work, and by all those who have interpreted his method, all the wonders he has been able to accomplish for those born deaf. In their eyes he discovered ears, as he himself explains, and in how short a time! In short he taught them to hear, speak, read, and write. I grant that a deaf person’s eyes see more clearly and are keener than if he were not deaf, for the loss of one member or sense can increase the strength or acuteness of another, but apes see and hear, they understand what they hear and see, and grasp so perfectly the signs that are made to them, that I doubt not that they would surpass the pupils of Amman in any other game or exercise. Why then should the education of monkeys be impossible? Why might not the monkey, by dint of great pains, at last imitate after the manner of deaf mutes, the motions necessary for pronunciation? I do not dare decide whether the monkey’s organs of speech, however trained, would be incapable of articulation. But, because of the great analogy between ape and man and because there is no known animal whose external and internal organs so strikingly resemble man’s, it would surprise me if speech were absolutely impossible to the ape.”

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Julien Offray De La Mettrie. *Man A Machine* (various trans.). LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1912, pp. 100-101. (Originally written, 1748.)

Contributed by T. Dukich, Psychology Dept., and B. Hammes, Philosophy Department, Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington 99258.