The Human-Animal Boundary: Adding a New Perspective to the Pre-Modern History of the Nervous System

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Abstract

This thesis offers a fresh angle on the history of neuroscience by highlighting that the human-animal boundary has since Antiquity been a vital component of all philosophical, anatomical and experimental discourses on the nervous system and its associated properties. I argue that in this regard, the history of neuroscience is not as straightforward and progressive as traditional accounts convey; rather, the constant negotiation of what makes us differ from animals and the need to assert human bodily and mental superiority not only influenced philosophical debates, but at times even distorted the actual observation and description of corporeal structures. By focussing on key historical figures whose research helped shape our understanding of the nervous system, I want to show how crucial the model function of animals has been in establishing the importance of the brain and nerves as the executive members of the human mind and sensation. The aspect of the human-animal boundary is thereby the one thread that connects ancient philosophical and anatomical investigations with those of the early modern period. My overall aim is accordingly to assert that the negotiation of the difference vs. the similitude between humans and animals is a neglected but fundamental aspect that needs to be taken into account for a more comprehensive history of neuroscience.

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