The Unimaginability of Non-Human Minds: Kant on Animal and Divine Consciousness

Abstract: Kant's comments on animal minds have provoked radically different readings, with some contending animals have clear and distinct awareness of their world and others contending animals lack consciousness altogether. This paper argues that Kant's comments have received such divergent responses because, according to Kant, we inevitably slide into a deceptive anthropomorphism when talking about non-human minds. While Kant follows contemporaries, such as H.S. Reimarus, in arguing humans can only conceive of animal minds by analogy with their own, Kant's transcendental idealism shifts the meaning of this analogy. The upshot is that animal minds, just like the mind of God, are intrinsically unimaginable for humans. They can be talked about, but it is *mere* talk; humans cannot know what they are talking about.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, H.S. Reimarus, Animal Minds, Consciousness, Imagination, Analogy

> "[Kant's] main concern was the ease with which we can seem to talk (and even theorize) sensibly about things we cannot really understand."
>
> - John Haugeland, "Authentic Intentionality" 2013: 68

0. Introduction

Interpreting Kant's comments on animal consciousness has proved challenging. Throughout his corpus, he consistently asserts that animals represent, sense, imagine, feel, and desire, but he just as consistently denies they possess inner sense, consciousness, concepts, or self-consciousness—indeed, sometimes all in the same passage (e.g., Kant, Akademie Ausgabe (AA) L-Met28:276-8). His text also contains many frustratingly opaque passages, such as where Kant claims, "animals indeed compare representations with one another, but they are not conscious of where the harmony or disharmony between them lies" (AA L-Met29:888)?[i] How should we interpret these claims? What kind of theory is Kant offering about animal consciousness?

The strangeness—and, some have argued, incoherence (see Okrent, Acquaintance and Cognition, 2006)—of these passages has resulted in multiple different readings which typically fall into two camps. The first camp, the *clarity view*, is motivated by Kant's consistent discussion of animals representing their world and acting on their desires. Proponents of the clarity view, like Colin McLear and Sasha Golob, argue that Kant's theory affords animals clear but nonreflective consciousness (e.g., McLear, Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011; Golob, What do Animals See? 2020). By contrast, the second camp, the *confused view*, is motivated by Kant's consistent denial of animal consciousness. The confused view is represented by figures like Hein van der Berg, Naomi Fisher, and Patrick Leland, who argue animals have at most confused and indistinct consciousness (van der Berg, A Blooming and Buzzing Confusion, 2018), and possibly no consciousness at all (Leland, Kant on Consciousness in Animals, 2018). These two views seem so diametrically opposed that it is hard to understand how they both can be held. More recently, a third view has arisen: the *analogical* reading (Callanan, The Comparison of Animals, 2020; Browning, Kant's Canon, 2022b). This reading argues that Kant takes all talk of animal

mindedness to be merely analogical: we can understand it only as *like* human minds but cannot actually ascribe the same capacities to animals.

This paper expands on the analogy view by highlighting why Kant regards thinking about animal minds as so difficult. For Kant, transcendental idealism allows for *talk* about non-human minds—whether animal, alien, or divine—but ultimately makes these minds *unimaginable*. This reading extends John Callanan's (The Comparison of Animals, 2020) argument that, for Kant, the best we can do is think of animal minds analogically—as bearing a rough similarity to the human mind. But this paper also shows that Kant regards imagining animal consciousness as necessarily importing resources—such as the transcendental unity of apperception—which animals lack as non-rational creatures. As a result, and despite best efforts, Kant argues what humans imagine when they imagine animal minds is simply their own mind—though usually imagining it as somehow less clear, distinct, and orderly. Kant connects this unimaginability of animal minds to the unimaginability of the divine mind in multiple places: while one can *talk* about animal and divine minds, this is merely a "symbolic anthropomorphism," using human minds to analogically reason about something they cannot know anything about (AA Prol4:357). The upshot of this reading is that it provides a plausible explanation of the divergence of the other readings: they either take the analogy too strongly, and thus ascribe capacities Kant is unwilling to ascribe, or take the analogy too weakly, and thus fail to appreciate the similarities between humans and animals. For Kant, the only appropriate way to take the analogy is with epistemic humility: humans cannot know what an animal, or divine, consciousness is really like.

The first section lays out the main contemporary readings of Kant on animals, as well as highlighting why these different readings are all plausible readings of Kant's own comments. The second section draws on some of Kant's predecessors to highlight how philosophers in

Kant's day discussed animal minds and then, in the third section, highlights how similar Kant's own comments are to his contemporaries—especially H.S. Reimarus. But comparing these passages in Reimarus and Kant shows that Kant does *not* follow Reimarus on one point: for Reimarus, animals unquestionably possess confused and indistinct consciousness. By contrast, Kant either remains silent on this point or seems to deny it. The fourth section highlights Kant's comments in a letter to Herz showing that Kant argues animal consciousness is unimaginable *in the same way* that divine consciousness is unimaginable: it is simply not possible to imagine them given the nature of human minds. The fifth section argues that Kant regards attempts to compare human and non-human minds as inevitably sliding into deceptive anthropomorphism and illicit metaphysical speculation. The upshot is that, for Kant, non-human minds are unimaginable; they can be talked about, but this talk cannot convey knowledge into what it is like to be an animal.

1. Contemporary Readings

While there are many aspects to the dispute over Kant's account of animal consciousness, there is broad agreement on some points: Kant claims animals possess immaterial souls, immaterial representations, sensibility (specifically "outer sense"), desires, and the reproductive imagination. On the other hand, Kant clearly intends to deny animals *self*-consciousness. But interpretations diverge on whether Kant's denial of consciousness to animals should be interpreted as denying *all* phenomenal consciousness, or merely denying concept-involving consciousness. There are two main readings on animal consciousness: on one end, those endorsing "the clarity view" affirm what Colin McLear dubs "objective awareness" (Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011: 3), the embodied consciousness of particular objects in the

environment. On the other end, those who endorse "the confused view" argue Kant denies animals possess a meaningful consciousness—much less the ability to be aware of and track individual objects—in the absence of self-consciousness.

The clarity view is most explicit in McLear (Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011; Animals and Objectivity, 2020) but is also found in Lucy Allais (Kant, Non-Conceptual Content, and the Representation of Space, 2009; Manifest Reality, 2015), Sacha Golob (Kant as Both Conceptualist and Nonconceptualist, 2016; What do Animals See? 2020), Robert Hanna (Kant, Science, and Human Nature, 2006), Christian Onof (Is there Room for Nonconceptual Content, 2015), and Roberto Horacio de Sa Pereira (A Nonconceptualist Reading of the B-Deduction, 2016). The central claim of these readings is that animals not only possess phenomenal consciousness but also possess an innate, nonconceptual distinction between self and world. As McLear puts it, "[animals] are capable of genuine objective awareness of their environment rather than mere subjective awareness of their sensory states" (Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011: 13). For McLear, Kant holds animals are effectively naive realists, innately grasping that their senses are not merely subjective modifications but are also informative about objects in the world. This primitive grasp of sensory states as representing a mind-independent world permits complex capacities for tracking objects and treating them as stable entities across changing conditions—even if the concepts and judgments requisite for understanding objects *as* objects is lacking (Allais, Kant, Non-Conceptual Content, and the Representation of Space, 2009: 410; Golob, Kant as Both Conceptualist and Nonconceptualist, 2016: 32). The clarity view grants animals all the capacities of unreflective consciousness while excluding only reflective self-consciousness; as McLear puts it, "What animals lack, according to Kant, is a higher-order cognitive capacity both to reflect on features of their representations (qua representational acts or

vehicles) and to unify disparate representational states in an act of self-ascription" (Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011: 11). According to these readings, this non-reflective consciousness provides a model for human nonconceptual experience.

On the other end of the spectrum, the confused view regards Kant as granting no meaningful consciousness to animals in the absence of self-consciousness. Everyone on the confused view agrees that the proper way to characterize this lack of meaningful consciousness is by describing it negatively—as *not* like human consciousness in some regard. On the one hand, Patrick Leland (Kant on Consciousness in Animals, 2018; Kant and the Primacy of Judgment, 2019) and Jacob Browning (Meier, Reimarus, and Kant on Animal Minds, 2021) argue animals possess *no* consciousness at all. For example, Leland writes, "there is substantial evidence in Kant's early writings and *Nachlass* that he denied animals possess conscious representations [. . .] the preponderance of the evidence from the critical period suggests Kant continued to hold this view throughout his later writings" (Kant on Consciousness in Animals, 2018: 78). This view regards Kant as ascribing *no* consciousness to animals—as lacking any phenomenal consciousness at all—and possessing solely obscure representations that cannot ever be made conscious. By contrast, Hein van den Berg and Naomi Fisher allow *some* consciousness to animals—but this is characterized negatively. For example, van den Berg suggests animals possess a confused and indistinct consciousness, "a buzzing, blooming confusion" (A Blooming and Buzzing Confusion, 2018: 7), and Fisher regards it as a kind of consciousness that "does not rise to the level of [unified] consciousness," instead consisting in a dim awareness of obscure representations (Kant on Animal Minds, 2017: 443).

As if to make the whole situation even messier, Kant *himself* recognized that either reading was possible—at least for his contemporaries. In the lecture notes when discussing

Leibniz's view on the consciousness of monads, he writes, "[monads] either hav[e] no current consciousness at all of their representations, or at least not a consciousness of the manifold in things" (AA L-Met29:1033). This shows that the difficulty found in contemporary readers determining how to read Kant is reflected in how the early Modern period discussed animal consciousness. But, since Kant was aware of this problem, we might hope he would express himself less ambiguously.

A final reading has emerged most recently, endorsed by John Callanan (The Comparison of Animals, 2020), James Hutton (Kant, Animal Minds, and Conceptualism, 2020), and Jacob Browning (Kant's Canon, 2022). This avoids choosing between denying consciousness or ascribing merely confused consciousness, instead arguing Kant permits only an analogical understanding of what animal minds are like—one where the analogy is strained. For example, Callanan writes, "[animals] might even lack 'representations' and 'consciousness', at least insofar as those notions are thought of as bearing family resemblances to human representation and consciousness" (The Comparison of Animals, 2020: 21). On this view, humans cannot be certain whether animal consciousness is like theirs or not, whether animal representations are like human representations, and so on. All these views agree that animal consciousness is *not* like human consciousness in some way, though they diverge on where the difference is.

Frustratingly, Kant's comments are often ambiguous and different readings approach them differently. For example, in the *Jäsche Logic*, Kant notes animals possess acquaintance but lack acquaintance with consciousness, or recognition. The full passage reads:

> The first degree of cognition is to represent something; The second to represent something with consciousness, or to perceive (*percipere*); The third to be acquainted with

> something (*noscere*), or to represent something in comparison with other things, both as to sameness and as to difference; The fourth to be acquainted with something with consciousness [*mit bewusstsein etwas kennen*], i.e., to recognize [*Erkennen*] it (*cognoscere*). Animals are acquainted with objects too, but they do not cognize them.
>
> Kant, AA L-Log9:64-5, translation modified; cf. AA L-Log24:846

The passage draws a clear dividing line: humans are capable of conscious acquaintance, that is recognition, where animals are capable of some lesser kind of acquaintance. But it is unclear how a being can be acquainted with or compare representations *without* consciousness. On the clarity view, Kant grants animals the third degree, acquaintance, which suggests he also grants them the second degree, representing something with consciousness. Thus, this reading can contend the passage grants animals *perceptual acquaintance* with objects, which must allow some animal consciousness of the objective world, while simply denying the more robust conception of consciousness necessary for recognition (see Allais Kant, Non-Conceptual Content, and the Representation of Space, 2009: 409; McLear, Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011: 6; Golob, Kant as Both Conceptualist and Nonconceptualist, 2016: 370; What Do Animals See?, 2020: 66-7).[ii] But this reading provides little insight into what mere acquaintance is and how it is possible to compare representations without recognizing that they are similar or different.

On the other hand, the confused view can point out that Kant nowhere grants consciousness to animals, and explicitly denies them acquaintance *with* consciousness. This can be read as intending not to attribute any consciousness at all, since Kant nowhere else suggests animals possess perception or consciousness (which may mean it is an error of transcription;

Leland, Kant on Consciousness in Animals, 2018: 101-2; cf. Hutton, Kant, Animal Minds, and Conceptualism, 2020: 986-8). This can also be read, as Fisher and van den Berg read it, as allowing for *mere* perception—a kind of minimal, confused or disunified consciousness. In either case, the main takeaway for these readings is that, for Kant, animal consciousness is dissimilar to human consciousness.

The same problem bedevils the passage from the letter to Herz. In one of his longest discussions of animals, Kant attempts to imagine what it would be like to be an animal. But imagining being an animal, Kant notes, is problematic. He writes,

> All sense data for a possible cognition would never, without those conditions, represent objects. They would not even reach that unity of consciousness that is necessary for knowledge of myself (as object of inner sense). I would not even be able to know that I have sense data; consequently for me, as a knowing being, they would be absolutely nothing. They could still (if I imagine myself to be an animal) carry on their play in an orderly fashion, as representations connected according to empirical laws of association, and thus even have an influence on my feeling and desire, without my being aware of them (assuming that I am even conscious of each individual representation, but not of their relation to the unity of representation of their object, by means of the synthetic unity of their apperception). This might be so without my knowing the slightest thing thereby, not even what my own condition is. Kant, AA C11:52

The clarity view can fixate on Kant's assumption in the parentheses that the animal is "conscious of each individual representation" to argue that animals must be conscious. For example,

McLear's gloss on this passage is that "Kant seems to be suggesting here that we can attribute a consciousness of individual representations (or of their objects—the representeds) to animals. What animals lack [. . .] is the ability to attribute those representations—*qua* representations—to a unified subject" (Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2011: 8). This could grant animals a kind of bare consciousness without the self-consciousness requisite for treating objects as objects. This reading can contend that Kant's point is that animals lack full cognitive access to objects and encounter them simply in a lesser way. But this reading does seem to run against the grain of the text; Kant's claims that that sense-data "would never [. . .] represent objects," would be "absolutely nothing," would occur "without my being aware of them" and "without my knowing the slightest thing" are all strong denials of human-like awareness. If Kant merely meant to say animals have a limited but meaningful consciousness of objects, it is hard to think of a less clear way of saying it.

The confused view, by contrast, can take this passage as grist for their mill. As van den Berg notes, "without the conditions of the understanding, which include the concepts of the understanding, sense data would never represent objects" (A Blooming and Buzzing Confusion, 2018: 8). This suggests animal representations are mere confused and indistinct sense-data, moving along according to the laws of the reproductive imagination in a disunified mind. But Kant also suggests that the animal knows "absolutely nothing" of *itself* (Kant, AA C11:52), including what its own condition is. Thus, it is plausible that even some minimal, confused, disunified consciousness is *still* more consciousness than Kant is willing to grant (Leland, Kant on Consciousness in Animals, 2018: 104). Even so, there is an additional problem with this passage unrelated to consciousness. Here Kant seems to suggest animals cannot represent objects at all, which seems incompatible with some of Kant's other claims, especially in the *Jäsche*,

where he says or implies they can. So even if this passage could be read as decisive for one or the other views, there remains the issue of its compatibility with other of Kant's explicit claims.

All of these readings have at least partial textual support, but none are obviously correct. All have issues making sense of Kant's view and leave as many questions as answers. This paper will argue that grasping Kant's comments as in conversation with his contemporaries shows how Kant is carving out his own view in these passages.

2. The Historical Context

The last section presented the three contemporary readings of Kant. This section focuses on H.S. Reimarus's discussion of acquaintance [*kenntnis*] and use it, in the next section, to clarify Kant's comments from the *Jäsche Logic* as well as other mystifying passages.

The central approach to consciousness in Kant's day came from the Leibniz-Wolff school, which typically focused on whether animal representations (*Vorstellungen*) are "clear" or "confused"—what Wunderlich calls the "Clarity-Distinctness Schema" (Wunderlich, Kant und die Bewusststeinstheorien, 2005: 23). At the heart of this tradition is the assumption that all beings—God, humans, animals, plants, even microorganisms—represent their world (see Zammito, The Gestation of German Biology, 2018; Leland, Kant, Organisms, and Representation, 2020). The difference between beings concerns how *clear and distinct* their representations are, where consciousness is understood as the capacity to clarify and distinguish; as Wolff puts it, "we find that we are conscious of a thing if we can differentiate it from another" (Vernünftige Gedanken, 1720: §729). The Clarity-Distinctness Schema treats the amount of consciousness present for a being in terms of how determinate its representations are on a spectrum: "obscure" representations are unconscious; "confused and indistinct" representations

are disordered, undifferentiated, and indeterminate; and "clear and distinct" representations are orderly, differentiated, and determinate (Leland, Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2018: 80-4). This provides a spectrum for living beings: a being without consciousness, such as a plant, would possess merely obscure, undifferentiated representations and desires; humans possess mostly obscure and confused representations, but a small subset of clear and distinct representations they are attending to; and God possesses only fully clear and distinct representations (Browning 2021).

In the eighteenth century and prior, it was thus customary for philosophers to locate animals somewhere along this spectrum, specifying how clear and distinct their representations are relative to humans. Thus, G.F. Meier (Versuch eines Neuen Lehrgebäudes von den Seelen der Thiere, 1750) explicitly ties his comments on animal consciousness to the ability of animals to clarify and distinguish representations and, with it, objective awareness of objects and their causal relations (Leland, Kant on Animal Consciousness, 2018). A chief critic of Meier, H.S. Reimarus, instead argued animals could not clarify—and thus could not distinguish—because they lacked the ability to voluntarily attend to one representation instead of another (van den Berg, A Blooming and Buzzing Confusion, 2018; Browning, Kant on the Determinancy of Intuition, 2022).[iii] For Reimarus, what is distinct about humans—what makes them "rational" animals—is *reflection*, the capacity for voluntarily attending to representations, rendering them clear and distinct by abstracting them from the overwhelming mass of confused and indistinct representations bombarding the subject each moment (Die Triebe der Thiere, 1760: 49). Non-rational animals are distinctive in lacking voluntary attention and thus being incapable of clarifying or distinguishing their representations. They instead display only an indistinct acquaintance with objects; he writes, "we can grasp how animals are acquainted with and

distinguish between things, or how they are conscious of themselves and how they represent: everything is only indistinct and confused, yet very lively" (Die Triebe der Thiere, 1760: 31).[iv] For these animals, Reimarus contends, each object and representation the animal is conscious of is "mixed up with a thousand absent, similar things and cases" (Die Triebe der Thiere, 32). Without voluntary attention, the different representations in each moment—sensations and reproduced impressions, one sense-modality from another, self and non-self (Die Triebe der Thiere, 1760: 267)—all blur together into an indiscriminate muddle (Browning, Kant on Determinacy of Intuition, 2022).

In his criticism of Meier, Reimarus explicitly discusses the term "acquaintance" and identifies it with the capacity to distinguish representations according to similarity and difference. He also argues this is lacking in animals because they lack voluntary attention: "where there is no faculty for discerning the similarity or difference of things [. . .] there is also no capacity for being acquainted with or distinguishing them. Such acquaintance and distinction are very different from being acquainted through indistinct sensation" (Die Triebe der Thiere, 1760: 267). Reimarus is arguing that there are *two* kinds of acquaintance: the conscious kind that is a form of cognition and is present in humans, and a subconscious kind that is mere sensible acquaintance. The subconscious acquaintance is associated with instincts, allowing animals to behave skillfully and subconsciously distinguish representations while still only possessing confused and indistinct consciousness of their environment. Reimarus, following Baumgarten (Metaphysics, 1737/2013: §640-8), takes these instincts to be "analogous to human concepts" (Die Triebe der Thiere, 1760: 37), in that they are deployed automatically and subconsciously whenever the appropriate phenomenon is in view. The result is that animals' "mere sensation accomplishes the same things for [the animals'] needs as humans get through their knowledge of

concepts" (Die Triebe der Thiere,1760: 37; see also 272). Thus, both animals and humans possess a sensible, automatic acquaintance that does not require self-consciously comparing representations; the difference is that humans *acquire* this ability through experience, whereas animals possess this *innately.*

In sum, Reimarus contends that the confusion and indistinctness of animals' sensations, reproductions, and desires are no impediment to their functioning properly because they possess a sensible acquaintance that provide something analogous to the automatic concept-deployment seen in humans.

3. Kant on Acquaintance

While others have noted Kant's debt to Reimarus (van den Berg, A Blooming, Buzzing Confusion, 2018; Browning, Meier, Reimarus, and Kant on Animal Minds, 2021), this section focuses on Kant's discussion of acquaintance and connect it to Reimarus, thereby clarifying how one should read the passage in the *Jäsche Logic* quoted in section 1. But, in doing so, this section also highlights how Kant diverges from Reimarus and the Leibnizian tradition.

In Herder's 1760s lecture notes, Kant references Reimarus's discussion of animals explicitly and draws on many of his arguments, especially those concerning acquaintance. Within these discussions, Kant also mentions acquaintance in humans, noting, "[humans] often are acquainted only with mediate marks without distinct consciousness," which leads to error (AA L-Met28:84). He goes on to connect this with the ability of humans to accomplish actions when absent-minded:

> [Animals] distinguish mere things without consciousness of the distinction between things: cows cannot distinguish things with recognition [*erkennen*] and therefore cannot judge—they distinguish merely practically between sensations: possible through analogy. Humans also do this, if they are in thought, they will distinguish without consciousness of it. Kant, AA L-Met28: 88; see also AA FS2:59-61

Much as in the *Jäsche* passage, Kant contends animals lack recognitive powers but possess an automatic acquaintance. He also argues this is akin to the automatic, subconscious responsiveness seen in humans with habitually used concepts. This is a point Kant makes in multiple places (AA L-Met 28:276; 28:450; 28:594; 28:689; 28:765). This treats animals and humans as similarly capable of thoughtlessly engage in complex behaviors—a kind of sensible acquaintance.[v] Kant also connects the capacity for sensible acquaintance with instincts. In a mid-1770s anthropology lecture, Kant notes, "instinct is a desire in accordance with an object which one does not know [. . .] which are directed to an indeterminate object; they make us acquainted with the object" (AA L-Anth25:584; see also 25:1339; AA L-Met29:935). This response to an unknown, indeterminate object is also how Kant describes the instincts of animals. He writes, "stimuli, so far as they are in conformity with the obscure representations, are called instincts [. . .] little chicks already have from nature an instinct of aversion to the hawk" (AA L-Met28:255; see also 17: 313; AA L-Met28:277). These passages highlight the close connection between Reimarus and Kant's views of animal acquaintance and instincts, as well as how each takes these as necessary and sufficient for explaining animal behavior.

Thus, there is a clear similarity between Kant and Reimarus's discussion of acquaintance. In this regard, Kant's comments on animals are "virtually identical" to Reimarus's (van den

Berg, A Blooming and Buzzing Confusion, 2018: 8). For Reimarus and Kant, there is not a *single* kind of acquaintance, but two: the conscious, cognitive kind in humans, sometimes treated as an ability to recognize and distinguish; and a non-conscious, sensible kind which operates in the reproductive imagination which is subconsciously attuned by habit to respond to the appropriate object.[vi] Animals possess the latter but lack the former.

The similarity between Reimarus and Kant on acquaintance might be read as suggesting Kant endorses some minimal form of consciousness for animals—a kind of blooming, buzzing confusion in inner sense. One could thus argue that, given Kant's views on acquaintance, the clarity view ultimately collapses into the confused view: whether animals' percepts are clear or not, the problem is that they cannot *distinguish* them by means of attention (Browning, Kant on the Determinancy of Intuition, 2022). Thus, their conscious percepts should be thought of as unattended mental items, flitting and fleeting across the mind's eye—similar to how a human lost in thought might possess some consciousness of the world before them but without any ability to discriminate or recall it later. Kant's comments on acquaintance could thus be read as granting minimal consciousness while denying the attentive awareness—that is, acquaintance with consciousness—necessary for determinate consciousness.

While these comments all support the confused reading, there is one problem with this thesis: Kant is not simply reduplicating Reimarus's points. First, Kant goes further in treating the voluntary capacity as not just consisting in reflection but also requiring *spontaneity*, a point which he takes from many sources, such as Rousseau and Tetens (Callanan, Kant on Analogy, 2017; Dyck, Spontaneity before the Critical Turn, 2016). Second, Kant nowhere discusses animal consciousness as confused and indistinct—a notable contrast since this is a familiar point in discussions by his contemporaries (Leland, Kant on Consciousness in Animals, 2018;

Browning, Meier, Reimarus, and Kant on Animal Minds, 2021). Although van den Berg suggests this is implied by the discussion in the *Jäsche Logic* and Kant's other discussions of acquaintance, this is not obvious, and the references to non-conscious acquaintance renders it unlikely. Kant's denials of consciousness in animals tend to be absolute and unqualified: "Consciousness is entirely lacking in animals, their actions happen according to laws of the power of imagination, which nature placed in them—by analogy" (AA L-Met28:690-1; see also 28:276; 28:449-50; 29:888-9; 29:1033). In this regard, Kant's comments are not virtually identical to Reimarus's; they are notably divergent.

This divergence is even more notable because Kant often talks about clarity and confusion when discussing humans (e.g., AA Anth7:135-6; AA L-Log9:40-2; 24:34-6; 24:702-3; 24:805-6; AA L-Met28:584; 29:879). He even allows humans to slip into states of semi-consciousness when drunk or dizzy (AA Anth7:166) which mirror closely Leibniz's comments of "bare monads" as merely slumbering (Philosophical Essays, 1714/1989: §21). If Kant merely wanted to describe animals as like humans when they were drunk or dizzy, the resources are available and there would be precedent. There is not, however, much precedent for outright denials of consciousness outside the Cartesian tradition (see Browning, Kant's Canon 2022). But this seems incompatible with Kant retaining the Leibniz-Wolff view that animals (and perhaps even plants; Leland, Kant, Organisms, and Representation, 2020; Nunez, Kant on Plants, 2021) possess and act on their representations and desires. Kant's position seems unique: while he affirms most of Reimarus's comments on animals, he diverges on affirming *any* consciousness, even of the indistinct kind that his comments on acquaintance might be seen to support.

The next section shows that Kant has good grounds for denying animal consciousness: whatever animal minds might be like, they *cannot* have consciousness like that of humans.

4. Imagining the Unimaginable

The last section showed the similarity between Reimarus and Kant on the issue of acquaintance, but also highlights Kant's notable divergence on ascribing confused and indistinct consciousness to them. This section turns to the passage from the letter to Herz and argues that Kant rejects any attempt to imagine the consciousness of non-human beings—whether divine or animal—as akin to the human mind.

The 1789 letter to Herz centers on a draft of Salomon Maimon's *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, where Maimon argues, "our understanding is just the same [as God's], only in a limited way" (Essay on Transcendental Philosophy,1790/2010: 38). For Kant, Maimon's theory assumes "all creatures essentially" possess the same kinds of mind, and thus all cognition for any being involves "bringing the manifold of intuition (which is obscure because of our limitations) into clear consciousness" (AA C11:50). This is a return to the Leibniz-Wolff view, which Kant criticizes in multiple points throughout the critical period (e.g., AA A44/B61-2), for treating the difference between sensibility and understanding as a matter of the degree of clarity of representations. Kant's rebuttal is to highlight that human consciousness is distinctive. He writes, "the form in which [objects] are given depends on *us* [. . .] [objects are] dependent on the specific character of *our* kind of intuition [. . .] [and] are dependent on the uniting of the manifold in a consciousness [i.e., our understanding]" (AA C11:51, emphasis added). Kant is arguing the transcendental conditions make humans distinct from beings who either, in the case of divine beings, are not in space and time or, in the case of animal beings, lack the uniting power of the understanding. If one removes any of these components, Kant notes, "objects would be nothing for us, that is, not objects of cognition at all, neither cognition of ourselves nor of

other things" (AA C11:51). The concept of "object" is relative to the specific kinds of mind humans have, so imagining objects independent of these minds is invalid.

To make this explicit, the next long paragraph provides two thought-experiments designed to draw out how unimaginable minds unlike the human mind would be. In the first, Kant attempts to imagine what it is like to perceive things in themselves; in the second, to perceive representations without a synthetic unity of apperception. Both of these thought experiments have analogues in different places in the first *Critique* but are taken as essentially related here because they both make the same error: we *think* we can imagine non-human minds, but we ultimately cannot. In the first thought experiment, Kant supposes we could perceive things in themselves, "for example, that the infinitely small elements of those objects were noumena" (AA C11:51). The intelligibility of this depends on readers, like Maimon, who mistakenly think noumena are just hyper-clear and distinct phenomena—as if perceiving a noumenon is simply perceiving a normal phenomenal object using the most powerful eyes or microscopes. But this is simply a category mistake: human intuition, being passive, can only experience phenomena given in space and time. What phenomena are like when they are not given and not in space and time, we cannot know. Thus, humans cannot intuit noumena; their forms of intuition would be "absolutely unable" to receive it (AA C11:51). To make the thought-experiment possible, then, Kant notes one would need to "have still another manner of intuition [. . .] and another understanding with which to compare our own [appearances] and with which everyone could perceive things in themselves" (AA C11:51). The initial thought-experiment—where one could intuit the infinitely small objects *as* noumena—is thus revealed as a deception: no human could intuit them and, since this kind of understanding involves synthesizing what is given in intuition, no human could synthesize noumena into their phenomenal experience. The

infinitely small cannot be intuited simply by rendering confused appearances more and more distinct. As Kant notes in the Transcendental Aesthetic: "through sensibility we do not cognize the constitution of things in themselves merely indistinctly, but rather not at all" (AA A45/B62). It is a confusion to imagine divine consciousness as simply awareness of objects but more clearly and distinctly.

Kant shifts from this thought experiment to a related one: imagining human intuition without the synthetic unity of understanding. Kant introduces this thought experiment by highlighting it poses the same problem as the prior one: "we can only judge an understanding by means of our own understanding, and so it is, too, with all intuition" (AA C11:51; see also AA Prol4:318). Kant will go on in this thought experiment to connect this situation with animals, beings who possess intuition but lack the understanding. He contends one cannot imagine intuiting the world without the role of the understanding, even if it might at first appear like this is possible. The reason is that the synthesizing role of the understanding is essential for any representation in the mind to represent an object—or, for that matter, to be related to any other representation. Kant writes, "All sense data for a possible cognition would never [. . .] represent objects. They would not even reach that unity of consciousness that is necessary for knowledge of myself (as object of inner sense)" (AA C11:51). Kant is not denying the presence of representations, nor even that they might inhere in some inner sense; he is arguing these cannot represent any object, either an object in the world or a self. Kant even coins a new phrase, "sense data," so he can avoid calling it a sensation or an object; he is decidedly non-committal of its ontological status, going out of his way to avoid relating it to any familiar contents of the human mind. This is because, without the synthetic unity of apperception, they belong to no one and convey nothing; as Kant notes, "I would not even be able to know that I have sense data;

consequently for me, as a knowing being, they would be absolutely nothing" (AA C11:51). Kant's language here echoes his language concerning the role of the noumena in the previous thought experiment: these sense data are simply unavailable to the mind because they are not and cannot ever be subject to the unity of apperception.

The passage continues by connecting these comments more directly with animals. He notes these sense data could still instinctually influence feeling and desire through the reproductive imagination all in the absence of the unity of apperception. In this sense, they are *responsive* to objects in the world, which can thus influence their feelings and desires, without being aware of those objects or comprehending why they act as they do. Thus, animals do not thereby represent such objects *as* objects because they cannot unify their sense data into something coherent; their instinctual acquaintance is responsive to objects without any knowledge or awareness of them.

This thought experiment is interrupted by Kant with a strange parenthetical. In the parentheses, he notes that, if it is "assum[ed] that [the animal is] even conscious of each individual representation," this still would not mean it is self-aware or aware of objects (AA C11:52). As Leland rightly notes, this parenthetical is not meant to be taken seriously: we are not to imagine the animal is conscious of the infinity of different obscure representations bombarding it in each moment. This is evident when read alongside similar comments made in both editions of CPR. In the A-deduction, Kant writes that without the unity of mind "a multitude of perceptions and even an entire sensibility would be possible in which much empirical consciousness would be encountered in my mind, but separated, and without belonging to *one* consciousness of myself, which, however, is impossible" (AA A122; see also B134-5). This passage in CPR has a garden path structure, leading through a thought experiment that, at

the last second, Kant rejects as nonsensical.[vii] While a multitude of disconnected perceptions might *seem* imaginable, this is actually just wordplay; no one can imagine conscious percepts which are conscious to no one and belong to no mind, much less that are utterly disconnected and unrelated to one another. For Kant, consciousness is about connection—about bringing sense data together into meaningful unities, like objects—so a disunified consciousness encountering disunified objects is incoherent. The attempt to do so is simply imagining the synthetic unity of apperception and its corresponding objects but making both blurrier and less distinct in some way. But this is invalid; as Kant concludes the thought experiment in the letter, these various perceptions would all occur "without my knowing the slightest thing thereby, not even what my own condition is" (AA C11:52). The absolute, unqualified nature of Kant's comments makes clear one is not to imagine animals as possessing merely a less clear and distinct kind of consciousness; they are meant to question whether such a thing is conceivable.

This is ultimately the point of Kant's critique: ascribing consciousness to animals, however confusedly, already imputes apperception. This, in turn, brings with it two illicit assumptions: first, that such minds have an inner theater which provides a tacit, synchronous unity of consciousness where all representations from the different sense-modalities arrive together and form a coherent spatial manifold; second, that these different representations come together in accordance with one another to represent objects without synthesis. But it is the *coming together*—in either mind or object—that Kant argues is unwarranted. Against the first, Kant is explicit that the sense-data "would not even reach that unity of consciousness that is necessary for knowledge of myself," emphasizing that in such a case these sense data are "absolutely nothing" (AA C11:51).[viii] Imagining an inner theater without a unity of apperception, in other words, imports exactly what it is supposed to explain: without the unity of

consciousness, there is no inner theater for which the play of representations is required. Inner sense without the logical unity of consciousness is just bare, unattended consciousness—consciousness that is not happening anywhere or to anyone. It is, in Kant's words, "absolutely nothing."

Kant also makes explicit that this lack of a unified mind or central attender rules out any sense in which a cluster of representations *could* be meaningful. He argues, without the unity of apperception, these "sense-data [. . .] never [. . .] represent objects" (AA C11:51). For Kant, objects are not brute facts of the universe, but are constituted by the discursive understanding. If one does not provide the unity given by the unity of apperception, then there is no *thing* to be found in the mass of sense data. For Kant, these flitting sense data are not connected together for a "self" which is aware of them, nor connected together into meaningful clusters representing objects. Kant regards imagining animals as possessing consciousness of objects as ineliminably anthropocentric, projecting into animal minds a self that is unwarranted and objects that should not exist in beings without a unity of apperception. If we remove the self and objects, however, it is not clear *what* we should imagine or *how* we should imagine it.

In this regard, it is the exact same error at work in imagining either the divine or animals: God does not perceive the same objects more clearly, nor do animals perceive the same objects more confusedly. Rather, humans can understand both "perception" and "objects" only from their own experience; non-human experience is unimaginable.

5. The Limits of Analogy

The last section presented Kant's letter to Herz and highlighted the impossibility of imagining the minds of God or animals. But notably, Kant writes about animals often and does

so confidently. The seeming incoherence of writing about something unimaginable is resolved by recognizing that Kant's comments on animals are meant to be read analogically—and as a strained analogy at that.

While the last section highlighted the impossibility of imagining non-human minds, it is worth noting that Kant does not argue that we should simply remain silent about them. Rather, Kant argues there are ways of thinking that fall short of cognition which can still be helpful, especially when trying to conceive of God. Principal among these is an appeal to analogy. Among the many different kinds of analogy, analogies to the divine are of a peculiar kind (see Gill, Kant, Analogy, and Natural Theology, 1984; Bielefeldt, Symbolic Representation in Kant's Practical Philosophy, 2003; Callanan, Kant on Analogy, 2009; The Comparison of Animals, 2020). In a normal analogy, both aspects are understood: if someone says a chair is like a stone, facts about both chairs and stones are understood and one can thus infer what they share in common—such as both being uncomfortable. But analogies to the divine work differently: only one side of the analogy is understood, the aspect which applies to the phenomenal world. Nothing is understood about the other side, the aspect which applies to things considered noumenally. As Kant notes, "If I say that we are compelled to look upon the world *as if* it were the work of a supreme understanding and will, I actually say nothing more than: in the way that a watch [. . .] [is] related to an artisan, [. . .] the sensible world [. . .] is related to the unknown" (AA Prol4:357). While the analogy between the watchmaker and God makes sense, it provides no insight into how God creates. Kant notes in the *Prolegomena,* analogies referring divine nature to anything humanly knowable are simply "symbolic anthropomorphism," a way of talking that "concerns only language and not the object itself" (AA Prol4:357). The best one can do is merely gesture at it with the language of human creativity, while still lacking insight into

how God's creativity works. Analogy provides limited insight, but it is still the best way humans have to conceive of something unknown.

For Kant, analogies with non-human minds inevitably require anthropomorphism. But, Kant also points out, this can lead to foolishness if one is careless. In a footnote to the *Anthropology*, he writes, "in order to attach an intuition to our concepts of rational beings, we can proceed in no other way other than to anthropomorphize them; however it is unfortunate or childish if, in doing so, the symbolic representation is raised to a concept of the thing in itself" (AA Anth7:172n). In other places, Kant simply highlights that any talk about them is problematic at best because "the possibility of [a thing in itself] we cannot in the least represent" (AA A256/B312). And in the third *Critique*, Kant brackets his comments on the intuitive understanding by noting one can understand it only "negatively, namely merely as not discursive" (AA CPJ5:406). As Gill notes, Kant's analogical treatment does not directly ascribe properties like wisdom and rationality to God but instead posits him as the "ground of rationality as it is experienced in the world" (1984: 22). This indirect, anthropocentric view still frames and understands rationality, wisdom, intuition, understanding, and so on all from the human perspective. Analogically applying these terms to God provides useful fictions, allowing humans to at least *contrast* their self-understanding with the divine. But they open the possibility of self-deception if one mistakenly assumes any corresponding comprehension into what the divine mind is like.

What is noteworthy about the Herz letter is that Kant also seems to regard the comparison between animals and humans as analogical in the same sense—at least as regards the mind. Kant is willing to grant that there is only a difference in degree between animals and humans at one level, in that both are living beings. This allows Kant to ascribe souls, representations, instincts,

the reproductive imagination, acquaintance with objects, and so on. But, as analogical readers like Callanan (The Comparison of Animals, 2020) and Hutton (Kant, Animal Minds, and Conceptualism, 2020) note, Kant often qualifies these as merely analogical attributions which, as such, should not be taken *too* literally. For example, Kant notes, "animals are accordingly different from human souls not in degree but rather in species" (AA L-Met28:276; see also 28:690); "[animal] representations are different in species and not merely in degree [from human representations]" (AA L-Met28:449; also see crossed out section in AA Anth7:141, 252); "When [the capacities of the imagination are combined with apperception], then they belong only to human beings, when not—then animals also have them. We ought, therefore, to have two different names for these, but for this [faculty] there is only one, namely, the reproductive power of imagination" (AA L-Met29:884). In each case, Kant makes explicit that one cannot treat *any* cognitive capacity in animals—souls, representations, intuitions, or reproductive imagination—as identical to those in humans because, ultimately, the analogy breaks down when one tries to understand the ontological status of these or grasp how their operations compare to the human kind. These capacities are granted the same names as those present in humans merely as a linguistic convenience, but, metaphysically speaking, the capacities in animals and humans are different in kind and distinct in incomprehensible ways. Humans can only know their own minds and, thus, must accept how that limits the understanding of non-human minds.

In the same vein, humans also lack the ability to imagine any analogue to the unity of apperception in God. This is much more intuitive: if God synthesizes, it is not synthesizing a manifold or any representations (AA CPJ5:406-8). But, from Kant's perspective, it is the same argument which applies to animals. He even makes this point explicit in a footnote in the third *Critique,* where the inability to conceive of animal and divine minds on the human model are

again connected. Kant begins the passage by noting that animals and humans are sufficiently similar to assume (though without assurance) they possess both an immaterial soul and representations—that is, there might be a mere difference in degree since all are the same genus of living beings. But Kant immediately qualifies this by discouraging pushing the analogy any further. He makes this explicit by contrasting the creative powers of animals, humans, and God. Concerning animals, Kant notes the difference in their creative capacity is not in degree but involves a wholly different kind: "the ground of the artistic capacity in animals, designated as instinct, is in fact specifically different from reason, but yet has a similar relation to the effect (comparing, say, construction by beavers with that by humans)" (AA CPJ 5:464n; see also AA FS2:60n; AA L-Met28:90; 28:594). Kant is noting one can know well how humans mentally plan out dam-building using reflection and reasoning, but they have no idea how beavers are capable of accomplishing the same feats without reflection or reasoning. All that is sayable is that it is analogous in some ways (both humans and animals create), but disanalogous on the central point (humans use reason, animals use instinct). The same applies to God: while God also creates, one cannot treat it as different in degree because "precisely what is missing [is] the *paritas rationis* for counting the highest being as part of one and the same species along with human beings" (AA CPJ5:464n). If the divine creative capacity was different in degree it would be understandable, at least in part. But God and His creative capacities are different in kind, and thus fundamentally unknowable. One can name divine creativity and call it "intellectual intuition," "divine instinct," or even an "analogue of reason." But naming the phenomenon does nothing to explain it. It can be characterized *as* different from human creativity, but no one can explain *how* it is different; this would require going beyond the bounds of what is knowable.

The upshot is that, for Kant, embracing transcendental idealism demands accepting that some things are constitutively incomprehensible, and the nature of non-discursive minds is one of them. At best, non-discursive can be talked about analogically. But this kind of analogical reasoning cannot make positive claims about minds other than those humans possess. It can provide only negative claims about what such minds are *not*: they are not conscious in any way a being dependent on apperception can recognize, nor do they involve the unified objects such a being is acquainted with. While compelling proposals for what Kant *could* say that would be consistent with his overall theory of mind (e.g., Hutton, Kant, Animal Minds, and Conceptualism, 2020), such proposals remain conceptual exercises because there is no way of testing them. Without a touchstone of experience, they remain wholly speculative.

The anthropomorphic characterization of non-human minds—the only way humans can bring them into view—is thus ineliminably stained with the human perspective. One can speak analogically about animal minds but cannot make determinate claims about them. Nonetheless, it does help to explain why Kant's remarks on animal minds seem frustratingly inconsistent and why divergent readings of his theory appear mutually plausible: there is no way to speak about them *except* by comparing them to human minds, but no way to cash out this talk or decide between different theories. In short, for Kant, non-discursive minds are not like human minds—and what they are like is unknowable.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that Kant regards non-human minds as unimaginable. Placing Kant in his historical context shows Kant does not simply hold animal consciousness is confused and indistinct; rather, he regards it as unknowable what it is like. For Kant, human consciousness and

the objects of human conscious experience are dependent on the distinctive unity of human forms of intuition and the synthetic unity of apperception; humans cannot imagine anything coherently if any of these components are missing. Kant contends that, while one can talk about non-human minds, this remains mere talk; humans cannot know what they are talking about.

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[i] All translation for Reimarus and Herder's lecture notes are my own. All citations to Kant refer to the Akademie edition, with translations from Cambridge Works of Kant where available. Abbreviations: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Anth); *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR); *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (CPJ); *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Prol); 'False Subtlety of the Syllogistic Figure' (FS); Anthropology Lectures (L-Anth), Logic Lectures (L-Log); Metaphysics Lectures (L-Met), Pedagogy Lecture (Ped).

[ii] This reading also depends on glossing Kant's denial of inner sense to animals, based on Kant granting outer sense and some comments he makes about inner intuition being necessary for outer intuition in CPR. However, all readers can agree animals have representations and that those representations conform to the forms of outer and inner intuition (i.e., are spatially arranged and temporally ordered). The question is whether the intuitions Kant is discussing in the Aesthetic are conscious or not, which is debatable even among nonconceptualists (e.g., Tolley 2015; 2017). This is an especially acute worry, since Kant explicitly allows animals to possess unconscious, and seemingly *only* unconscious, intuitions (L-Log24:702; cf. Grüne 2014). If unconscious intuitions are possible, then Kant's discussion in the Aesthetic about inner sense is neither here nor there; the question remains whether the representations conforming to the forms of intuition are unconscious, confused, or clear and distinct.

[iii] For a fuller discussion of Reimarus, see Jaynes and Woodward (1974), Richards (1979), Wunderlich (2005), Theil (2011), Zammito (2018), and Leland (2020). Reimarus's tome actually differentiates between different kinds of instincts in animals, distinguishing, for example, those that are merely mechanical, for sensing and action, from those that are artistic, such as the beavers ability to construct dwellings (Leland 2020).

[iv] Like Bertrand Russell's notion, this kind of acquaintance involves an immediate, non-conceptual relationship to a representation. However, unlike Russell, this notion in Reimarus (and, as we will see, in Kant) is more ambiguous about its phenomenal status and its relationship to knowledge.

[v] Kant calls this animal ability the "*analogon rationis*," a Latin term he picks up from Baumgarten (1737/57: §640-8; Browning 2021).

[vi] It is unclear to me if this is van den Berg's reading as well. He regards acquaintance in Kant as a kind of "sensible cognition," which suggests he is making the same claim I am with "sensible acquaintance". However, van den Berg could be read either as arguing animals are consciously capable of discriminating indistinct bundles of features, or also simply instinctually accomplishing this without any conscious discrimination. If his reading is the latter (which I presume), then there is no difference; whatever cognitive-like operation the animal achieves through acquaintance is not the result of any consciousness or cognitive capacity, but simply the result of the hard-wired dispositions implanted by God in the animal's reproductive imagination.

[vii] This is an example of what James Conant calls a "philosophical fiction," one where "we only apparently grasp what it would be for it to obtain" (2016: 102), but, as the scenario develops, we realize, "its initially seemingly genuine possibility amounts to nothing more than just that: a seeming possibility" (2016: 102).

[viii] It could be argued that there is an intrinsic unity to intuition that is not dependent on the understanding. There are good grounds for skepticism (see especially Grüne 2014). But even if there *were* an intrinsic unity where each representation was conscious—and even *clearly* conscious—this would not help the animal. It would simply be an overwhelming mess of sensory representations—both reproduced prior representations, mingled present representations, and anticipated future representations—all cramming indiscriminately in the mind without any capacity to single out any of them (see Browning 2022). There is nothing in such a view to provide support for assuming a naive realism of the mind, on which the present moment and the objects within it stand out clearly and distinctly in some automatic way, helpfully segregated from the other representations of inner sense.