Abstract: Descartes challenged his critics to say why we should credit intelligence to animals, which outperform humans on some tasks but not all. Few people today accept the hard divide between human and animal intelligence that Descartes supposed. Nevertheless Descartes’ challenge highlights the problem of understanding and interacting with forms of intelligence that are less general than our own—including artificial intelligence and autonomous robotics, which are limited in similar ways to animals: extremely competent in some domains, but opaque to themselves and us. Futuristic thinkers believe that super-intelligent machines are just around the corner, but I believe that we are facing a relatively long period in which humans will need to adapt more quickly to the limitations of our machines than vice versa. I will draw out some implications of this asymmetry for the responsible design of socially responsive machines and discuss whether research in animal cognition can usefully inform the development of domesticatable machines.

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