In “Können Tiere Denken?” Reinhard Brandt denies that non-human animals can think. He does so on the grounds that unlike humans, non-human beings do not engage in judgment-making of the form ‘S is P’ or ‘S is not P’. As other philosophers, such as Robert Brandom (1994), Brandt conceives of judgments as the foundation of, or, in his own words, the ‘conditio sine qua non’ (2009, 30) of thought. The following syllogism might thus represent his line of argument in drastically abbreviated form: Thinking essentially comes down to judging. Animals do not judge. Ergo, animals do not think.

While I share the view that only humans engage in genuinely propositional thought, I am skeptical as to whether we have thereby captured the critical difference between human conduct or cognition and non-human animal conduct or cognition. Throughout the history of philosophy, many offers have been made as to what kind of an animal the human animal is: animal rationale, zoon logon echnon, the political animal, the tool making and using animal, animal risibile et cetera, et cetera. The air separating “us” from “them” seemed to be getting thinner as naturalistic observations and experimental data began to suggest that animals show at least rudimentary skills in the craft and use of tools (Emery & Clayton 2004), imitation (Subiaul 2007), referential communication (Cheney & Seyfarth 1990), deceit of other individuals (Hare, Call, & Tomasello 2006), and even hindsight and foresight by remembering things episodically (Dally, Emery, & Clayton 2006) and planning for future events (Mulcahy & Call 2006).

Some contemporary scholars see this as evidence in support of an assimilationist or continuity position, arguing—in Darwinian fashion—that whatever difference one may find between humans and animals is going to be merely gradual. Others grant similar or identical skills in various areas and possibly in
general “cognitive horsepower”, limiting the critical difference to one particular domain, such as the understanding of social intentions (e.g., Herrmann, Hernandez-Lloreda, Call, Hare, & Tomasello 2010). In his own attempt to identify and secure the last bastion of the uniquely human, Brandt remains within the classic framework of the rational animal but narrows the anthropological difference down to the ability to make judgments and state propositions as true or false.

What I will argue and provide evidence for in this paper, is that reducing uniquely human cognition to the ability to deal with propositions is “over-stingy”, as Ryle (1962/2009, 432) puts it. The scope needs to be widened, as there are a myriad, maybe countless dramatic differences between human and animal cognition beyond and prior to judgment formation. Long before children have refined their conceptual capacities to a degree that allows them to explicitly affirm or deny (positive or negative) propositions, their cognition differs drastically in all kinds of ways from that of animals. The ability to string conventional symbols together with the intent to claim that things are thus-and-so probably does not emerge before toddlerhood, and a full apprehension of the predicates “true” and “false” is not in place before school-age (Olson 1999). But even infants manifest various early linguistic, but also quasi- and pre-linguistic performances for which there are no analoga rationis in animals either. Judgments are thus only the tip (or some other part) of the iceberg of unique human cognition.

In his brief and roughly sketched evolutionary story of the emergence of thought on p. 48, Brandt sees a developmental milestone in the pointing gesture thanks to its role in opening up a public space. But he does not devote much attention to the ontogeny of this step, although it is here, in the course of individual development, that we can actually observe the distinctiveness of human thought unfold. In this paper, I shall fill this void by identifying and analysing ontogenetic precursors of what according to Brandt characterizes human cognition: judgments and truth-functional negation.

First, I will take a close look at pointing gestures and early verbal productions dubbed “holophrases”, both of which emerge during infancy. These referential acts—which are often used in combination—can be regarded as proto-declaratives (Bates 1976) because the child points out something for us to attend to as a topic. Even though subject and predicate are not yet differentiated, it is here that the stage for predication is set. These precursors of structured propositions are just as peculiar to humans.

Second, I will trace the development of proto-negations such as rejections, refusals, prohibitions, references to disappearances or missing objects (“All gone” in English, “Alle-alle” or “Weg” in German) and lack of success (“Doesn’t work!”, “Doesn’t fit!” in English; “Geht nicht!”, “Passt nicht!” in German). Even though animals reject things and can refuse actions, there are marked qualitative differ-