

1           **The role of animal faces in the animate-inanimate distinction in the ventral**  
2   **temporal cortex**

3                   Running title: Faces and the animate-inanimate distinction

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26

27 **Abstract**

28 Animate and inanimate objects elicit distinct response patterns in the human ventral  
29 temporal cortex (VTC), but the exact features driving this distinction are still poorly  
30 understood. One prominent feature that distinguishes typical animals from inanimate  
31 objects and that could potentially explain the animate-inanimate distinction in the VTC is  
32 the presence of a face. In the current fMRI study, we investigated this possibility by  
33 creating a stimulus set that included animals with faces, faceless animals, and inanimate  
34 objects, carefully matched in order to minimize other visual differences. We used both  
35 searchlight-based and ROI-based representational similarity analysis (RSA) to test  
36 whether the presence of a face explains the animate-inanimate distinction in the VTC.  
37 The searchlight analysis revealed that when animals with faces were removed from the  
38 analysis, the animate-inanimate distinction almost disappeared. The ROI-based RSA  
39 revealed a similar pattern of results, but also showed that, even in the absence of faces,  
40 information about agency (a combination of animal's ability to move and think) is present  
41 in parts of the VTC that are sensitive to animacy. Together, these analyses showed that  
42 animals with faces do elicit a stronger animate/inanimate response in the VTC, but that  
43 this effect is driven not by faces per se, or the visual features of faces, but by other factors  
44 that correlate with face presence, such as the capacity for self-movement and thought.  
45 In short, the VTC appears to treat the face as a proxy for agency, a ubiquitous feature of  
46 familiar animals.

47

48 **Key words:**

49 fMRI, ventral temporal cortex, object representations, face perception, animacy

50

51 **Significance Statement**

52 Many studies have shown that images of animals are processed differently from  
53 inanimate objects in the human brain, particularly in the ventral temporal cortex (VTC).  
54 However, what features drive this distinction remains unclear. One important feature that  
55 distinguishes many animals from inanimate objects is a face. Here, we used fMRI to test  
56 whether the animate/inanimate distinction is driven by the presence of faces. We found  
57 that the presence of faces did indeed boost activity related to animacy in the VTC. A more

58 detailed analysis, however, revealed that it was the association between faces and other  
59 attributes such as the capacity for self-movement and thinking, not the faces *per se*, that  
60 was driving the activity we observed.

61

## 62 Introduction

63 Multiple studies have shown that an animate/inanimate distinction is a major factor in the  
64 organization of object representations in the human ventral temporal cortex (VTC)  
65 (Kriegeskorte et al., 2008; Bracci and Op de Beeck, 2016; Proklova et al., 2016). Animacy,  
66 however, is associated with different attributes, from visual features to semantic concepts  
67 such as agency (Peelen and Downing, 2017), and it is still unclear what drives the  
68 animate/inanimate distinction in the VTC. Some studies have suggested that the it can  
69 be explained by visual features alone (Long et al., 2018; Coggan et al., 2016). Others  
70 have suggested that the animate/inanimate distinction is not based purely on visual  
71 features but is also driven by conceptual information associated with animacy (Thorat et  
72 al., 2019; Proklova et al., 2016; Sha et al., 2016).

73 Stimuli that do not conform to the strict animate/inanimate dichotomy have recently  
74 provided new insights into animacy organization in the VTC. A recent fMRI study showed  
75 that inanimate objects that share features with animals (e.g., cow-shaped mugs) are  
76 represented in a similar way to animate objects (Bracci et al., 2018). Another study that  
77 used “borderline” stimuli, such as robots, together with more typical animate or inanimate  
78 objects, found similar results using MEG (Contini et al., 2019). This suggests that what  
79 matters for the VTC is similarity to humans (either visual or semantic), rather than animacy  
80 *per se* (Contini et al., 2019; Sha et al., 2016; Gobbini et al., 2011; Thorat et al., 2019).  
81 Another possibility is that the VTC is tuned to the diagnostic features of animacy shared  
82 between animals and animal-like stimuli (e.g., faces or bodies; Bracci et al., 2018).

83 Although there is evidence that body shape cannot fully account for the  
84 representation of animacy in the VTC (Proklova et al., 2016, Bracci et al., 2016), few  
85 previous studies have controlled for the presence of a face. Faces are extremely  
86 biologically relevant stimuli. They play an important role in determining whether  
87 something is animate – and the animals with which people are most familiar tend to have  
88 faces. Animal-like objects such as robots and toys often share this critical feature with  
89 animals, which could explain why they are represented similarly to animals in the VTC.

90 A network of areas mediates face perception, most notably the fusiform face area  
91 (FFA) in the VTC (Grill-Spector et al., 2018). Interestingly, in a study by Proklova et al.  
92 (2016), the fusiform gyrus was one of the areas in which animacy information was present

93 after controlling for most visual features. Since all the animate stimuli in that study had  
94 faces, it is possible that this effect was driven by the presence of faces rather than by  
95 animacy *per se*.

96 A number of neuroimaging studies have argued that faces are not necessary for  
97 eliciting typical animate/inanimate distinction in the VTC by using images of animals with  
98 their faces covered (Chao et al., 1999), geometric shapes moving in characteristically  
99 animate (or inanimate) ways (Martin and Weisberg, 2004), or synthetic stimuli (*texforms*)  
100 which preserve the mid-level features of the stimuli but not the fine detail such as faces  
101 (Long et al., 2018). To our knowledge, however, no previous studies have directly  
102 compared the patterns of brain activation generated by images of real animals with and  
103 without faces. In the present fMRI study, we addressed this gap by using a stimulus set  
104 that included images of real animals with and without a face, as well as inanimate objects,  
105 all of which had otherwise similar visual features. Thus, we made animacy orthogonal to  
106 the presence of a face, which allowed us to directly examine the role of faces in VTC  
107 representations. We found that when animals with faces were removed from the analysis,  
108 the animate/inanimate distinction largely disappeared. Nevertheless, additional analyses  
109 revealed that this effect was driven not by faces *per se*, but by other features that typically  
110 correlate with the presence of a face, such as mobility and thoughtfulness.

111

## 112 **Materials and methods**

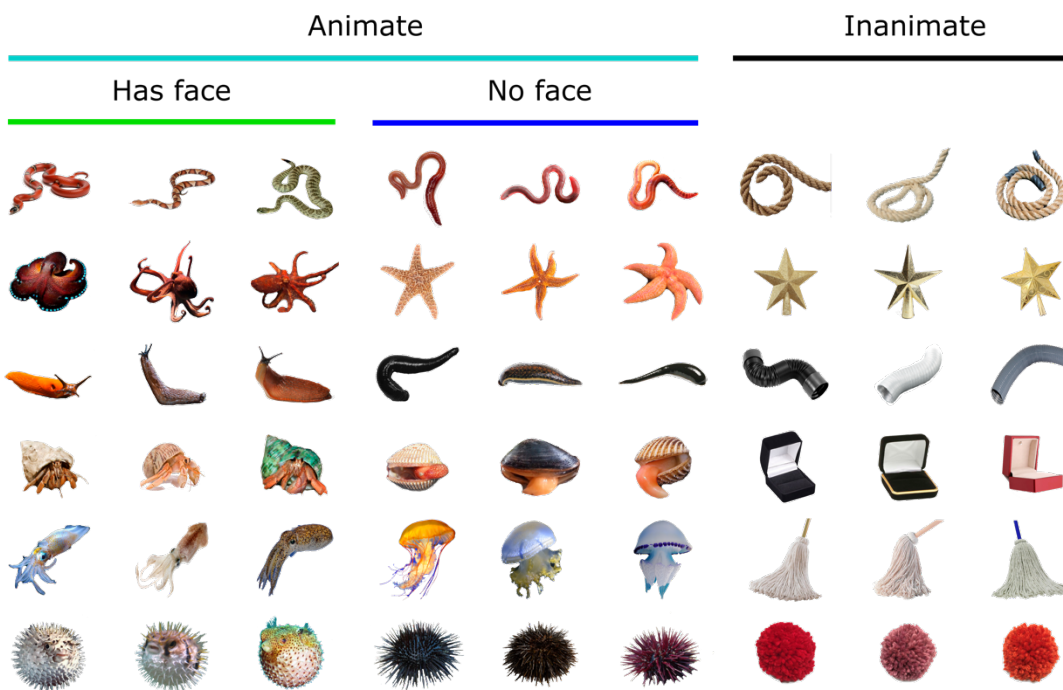
### 113 *Participants*

114 Twenty-four volunteers (18 female, mean age 26.7 years, SD = 3.3) participated in the  
115 behavioral ratings experiment. These included 14 people who also took part in the fMRI  
116 experiment described below (rating the animals after the fMRI session) and ten who did  
117 not. Ten other volunteers, who were not part of the behavioral ratings or the fMRI  
118 experiments (4 female, mean age = 25 years, SD = 4.6) participated in the behavioral  
119 visual search experiment. Twenty volunteers (14 female, mean age 26.1 years, SD = 4)  
120 took part in the fMRI study. Two were excluded from further analysis because of  
121 excessive head movement. All participants gave informed consent and the protocol was  
122 approved by the University of Western Ontario Ethics Review Board.

123

124 *Stimuli*

125 The stimulus set (Fig. 1) consisted of 18 unique stimuli divided into 3 groups: 6 animals  
126 with distinct faces (e.g., snake), 6 animals without a distinct face (e.g., starfish), and 6  
127 inanimate objects. Additionally, we used three different exemplars of each stimulus,  
128 resulting in a total of 54 stimuli. Importantly, to minimize the effects of visual feature  
129 similarity, stimuli were organized into six triplets (animal with a face - faceless animal -  
130 object) based on the overall shape similarity, such that all three stimuli within each triplet  
131 shared a similar overall shape (e.g., snake – worm – rope).



132  
133 **Figure 1. Stimulus set.** The stimulus set included images of animals with faces (left 3  
134 columns), without faces (middle 3 columns), and inanimate objects (right 3 columns).  
135 There were three exemplars of each unique animal/object. To minimize visual differences  
136 between the stimuli from different categories, the stimuli in each row shared a similar  
137 shape.

138  
139 *Behavioral ratings experiment*

140 Participants were asked to rate the 12 animal stimuli presented on a set of 6  
141 characteristics: (1) Does this animal have a face? (2) How fast can this animal move? (3)  
142 Is this animal capable of thoughts? (4) Does this animal have a head? (5) Does this animal

143 have eyes? (6) How familiar is this animal to you? There was a separate block for each  
144 of the 6 questions. The question appeared at the beginning of the block, followed by a  
145 presentation of all twelve animals used in the experiment. On each trial, participants were  
146 presented with all 3 versions of a given animal and the continuous ratings bar on the  
147 computer screen (Fig. 2C). Using a mouse, participants could click anywhere on a bar to  
148 provide their response, ranging from 0 (e.g. “this animal is not at all familiar”) to 100 (“I  
149 am very familiar with this animal”). In this and all the following experiments, including  
150 fMRI, stimuli were presented using Psychtoolbox for Matlab (Brainard, 1997).

151

### 152 *Behavioral visual search experiment*

153 The visual search experiment was analogous to the one described in Proklova et al.  
154 (2016) and based on the approach by Mohan and Arun (2012). On each trial, participants  
155 saw an array of 16 stimuli, 15 of which were identical distractors and one was an oddball  
156 target (see Fig. 2B for a trial example). We measured participants’ reaction times (RTs)  
157 to find the target and used the RT as a proxy of visual similarity between target and  
158 distractor. Faster RTs suggest that target “popped out” more because it was more visually  
159 distinct from distractors, and slower RTs indicate that the search was harder because the  
160 target was quite similar visually to the distractors. Each of the stimuli (Fig. 1) appeared  
161 both as a target and a distractor during the experiment, giving us the visual similarity  
162 estimate for each pair of stimuli. This excluded comparisons between the 3 versions of  
163 the same animal or object, since the responses for 3 versions were averaged in the fMRI  
164 experiment and were not analyzed separately in the representational similarity analysis.  
165 We refer the reader to Proklova et al. (2016) for further details of the visual search  
166 experiment.

167

### 168 *fMRI acquisition*

169 fMRI data were acquired using a Siemens MAGNETOM Prisma Fit whole-body 3 Tesla  
170 MRI scanner with a 32-channel head coil at the Centre for Functional and Metabolic  
171 Mapping, Western University, London, Ontario. The stimuli were back projected onto a  
172 translucent screen placed inside the scanner bore (60 Hz refresh rate; 1024 × 768 spatial  
173 resolution). Participants viewed the stimuli via a mirror mounted to the head coil.

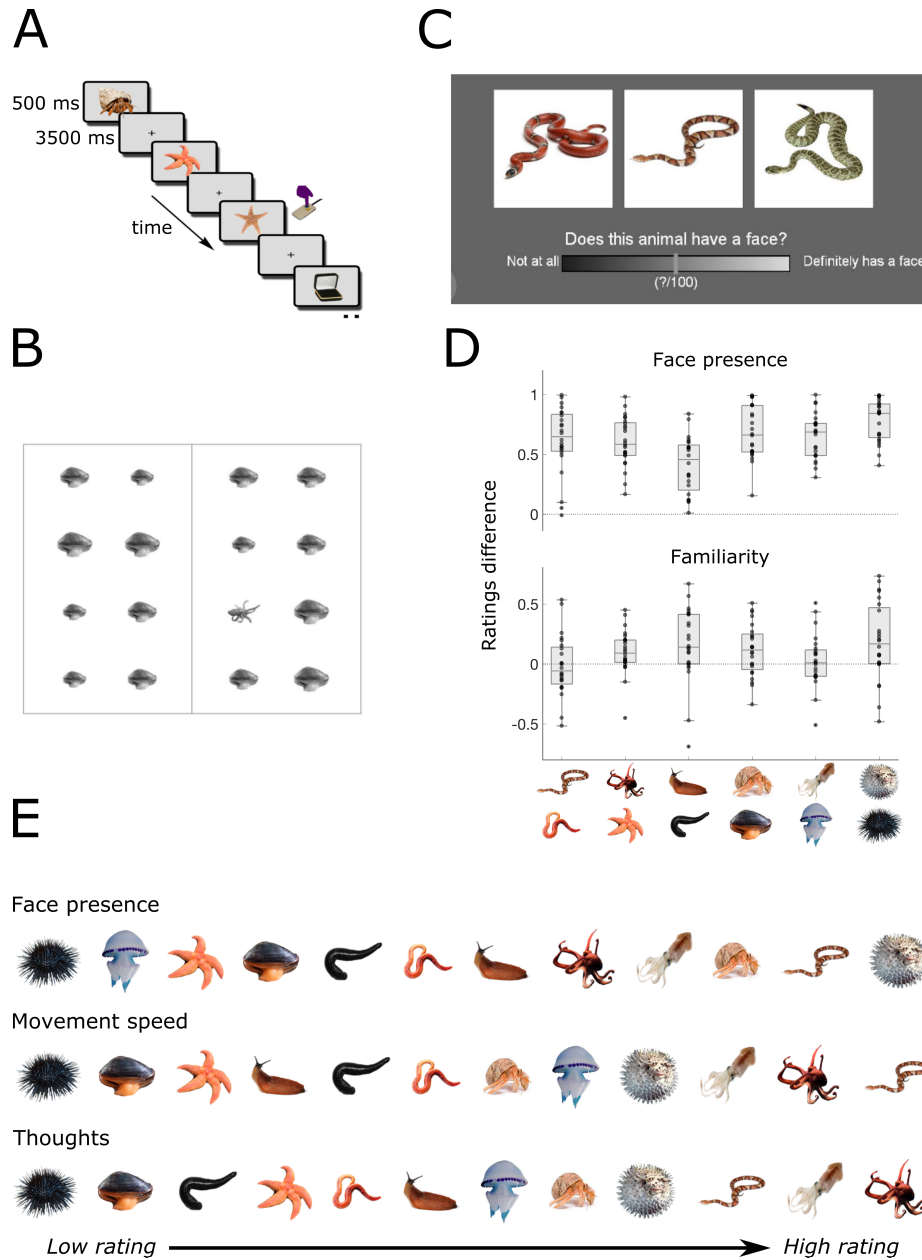
174 Functional images were collected with an echo planar imaging sequence (echo time, 30  
175 ms; repetition time, 2000 ms; field of view, 196 × 196 mm<sup>2</sup>; matrix, 64 × 64; flip angle,  
176 90°; slice thickness, 3 mm; gap, 0 mm; number of slices, 36; axial slice orientation). A  
177 high-resolution 3D structural T1-weighted scan was collected at the beginning of the  
178 session using a magnetization-prepared rapid gradient echo sequence (MPRAGE) with  
179 voxel size of 1 mm isotropic.

180

### 181 *fMRI task*

182 While in the scanner, participants completed 8 runs of the main experiment, and 2  
183 functional localizer runs. In each functional run, each of the 54 stimuli appeared at least  
184 once, in randomized order. Some stimuli appeared twice in order to introduce one-back  
185 repetition trials (10 per block.) Participants' task was to press the button any time the  
186 image of the same animal or object (e.g., 2 snakes, but not necessarily the exact same  
187 photo of a snake) appeared on 2 consecutive trials. The button-press trials were not  
188 further analyzed. Stimuli were on screen for 500 ms, followed by 3500-ms inter-stimulus  
189 interval (Fig. 2A). Each run lasted 256 s. In the functional localizer runs, participants saw  
190 images from 4 categories (faces, bodies, animals, objects) in a blocked design, pressing  
191 the button when the same image appeared twice in a row. The localizer procedure is  
192 described in detail in Proklova et al. (2016).





193

194 **Figure 2. Experimental design and behavioral ratings analysis.** **A**, fMRI experimental  
195 design. Stimuli appeared one at a time, and participants were instructed to press a button  
196 whenever the same animal or object appeared on 2 consecutive trials. **B**, Trial example  
197 from the behavioral visual search experiment used for quantifying pairwise visual  
198 dissimilarity between the stimuli. Participants had to find an oddball image among the  
199 distractors as quickly as possible and indicate with a button press whether it was on the  
200 left or right of the central line. **C**, Trial example in a behavioral ratings experiment.  
201 Participants had to indicate their response by clicking the mouse at any point of a  
202 continuous ratings bar. **D**, The difference between the face presence (upper panel) and  
203 familiarity (lower panel) ratings for each of the 6 animal pairs. Above zero values indicate  
204 that, for the 2 animals sharing a similar shape, the animal with a face received higher

205 rating than an animal without a distinct face. **E**, Animate stimuli sorted based on group-  
206 averaged behavioral ratings, from the lowest to the highest.

207

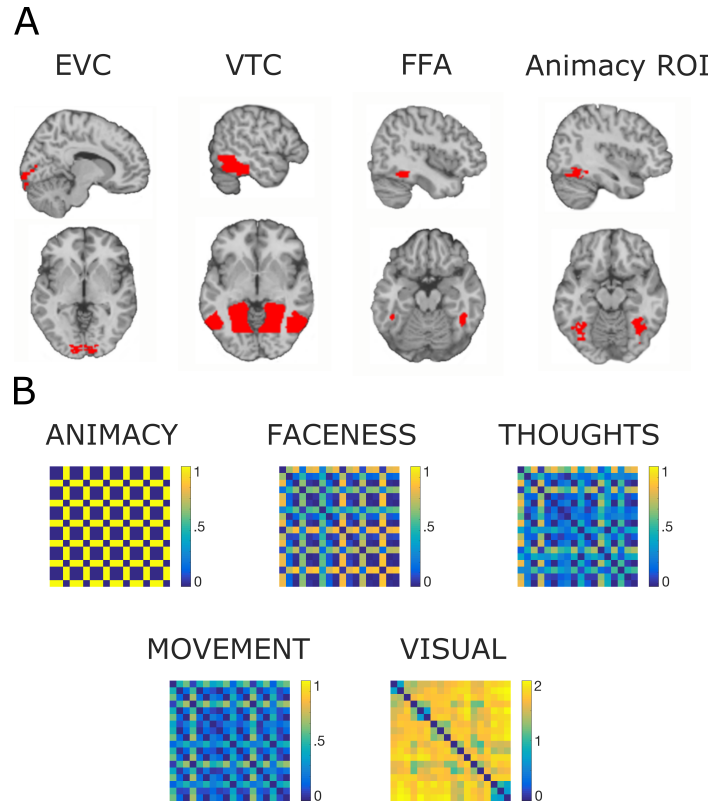
### 208 *fMRI preprocessing*

209 The neuroimaging data were analyzed using Matlab and SPM12. Preprocessing involved  
210 realigning the functional volumes, coregistering them to the structural image, re-sampling  
211 to a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  mm grid, and spatially normalizing to the Montreal Neurological Institute  
212 305 template included in SPM12. For the univariate analysis of the localizer data, the  
213 functional images were smoothed with a 6-mm FWHM kernel. Images were not smoothed  
214 for the multivariate analyses of the main experiment data. For the main experiment, the  
215 BOLD signal of each voxel in each participant was modeled using 24 regressors in a  
216 general linear model, with 18 regressors for each of the objects (e.g., one regressor for  
217 all snakes) and six regressors for the movement parameters obtained from the  
218 realignment procedure.

### 219 *ROI definition*

220 The four regions of interest (ROIs) are shown in Figure 3A and were defined as follows.  
221 Early visual cortex (EVC) ROI was defined anatomically by selecting Brodmann area 17  
222 (BA17) using WFU PickAtlas toolbox for SPM12 (Maldjian et al., 2003), and spanned  
223 5,856 mm<sup>3</sup> in size. To define fusiform face area (FFA), we used the group-level Faces >  
224 Houses contrast in the functional localizer ( $p < 0.05$ , FWE corrected), which revealed two  
225 clusters: one in the right hemisphere (792 mm<sup>3</sup>, peak MNI coordinates:  $x = 46$ ,  $y = -50$ ,  $z$   
226  $= -20$ ), and one in the left hemisphere (208 mm<sup>3</sup>, peak MNI coordinates:  $x = -42$ ,  $y = -40$ ,  
227  $z = -20$ ). Ventral temporal cortex (VTC) was defined according to previous studies (Haxby  
228 et al., 2011, Thorat et al., 2019). It included the inferior temporal, fusiform, and  
229 lingual/parahippocampal gyri, and extended from  $-71$  to  $-21$  on the  $y$ -axis of the MNI  
230 coordinates, with total volume of 73,776 mm<sup>3</sup>. Finally, we included a region defined in an  
231 earlier study (Proklova et al., 2016) in which the animate/inanimate distinction was  
232 observed after controlling for visual features (this study involved different stimuli and  
233 participants.) We refer to it as “Animacy ROI” for simplicity. It consisted of two clusters,  
234 with peaks in right fusiform gyrus ( $x = 42$ ,  $y = -60$ ,  $z = -18$ ; 2,672 mm<sup>3</sup>) and left fusiform  
235 gyrus ( $x = -44$ ,  $y = -52$ ,  $z = -16$ ; 1,968 mm<sup>3</sup>). The specific analyses that were used to

236 define this region are described in Proklova et al. (2016). The Animacy ROI and the FFA  
237 only shared 10 voxels (80 mm<sup>3</sup>) in common, and both were almost fully encompassed by  
238 the VTC: 97% of FFA (122/125 voxels) and 83% of the Animacy ROI (482/580 voxels)  
239 intersected with the larger VTC ROI.



240

241 **Figure 3. Regions of interest and model RDMs.** **A**, Regions of Interest included early  
242 visual cortex, ventral temporal cortex, fusiform face area, and the region in which the  
243 animate/inanimate distinction was observed after controlling for visual features in an  
244 earlier study (Animacy ROI). **B**, Model representational dissimilarity matrices (RDMs)  
245 used in the representational similarity analysis.

246

### 247 *Representational Similarity Analysis (RSA) Searchlight*

248 The RSA searchlight procedure was analogous to the one used in previous studies  
249 (Proklova et al, 2016; Thorat et al., 2020). All analyses were done using CoSMoMVPA  
250 toolbox for Matlab (Oosterhof et al., 2016). For each voxel in the brain, we took a 100-  
251 voxel spherical neighborhood around it and measured voxel-wise response patterns for  
252 all 18 conditions in this region. We then calculated pairwise Pearson correlations between  
253 these patterns for all pairs of stimuli. These correlations were then inversed (1-Pearson)  
254 and used to create a 18 x 18 neural representational dissimilarity matrix (RDM), in which

255 every entry corresponded to the dissimilarity between a pair of stimuli. For each 100-voxel  
256 neighborhood, we then ran a general linear model (GLM) style regression, in which the  
257 neural RDM was modeled as a linear combination of two model RDMs: Category  
258 (Animacy) and Visual (Fig. 4A), resulting in two beta-weights describing the individual  
259 contribution of each model to the neural dissimilarity. Finally, the resulting beta-maps for  
260 all participants were entered into a second-level analysis in SPM 12, producing a whole-  
261 brain maps reflecting the contributions of Animacy and Visual information to the VTC  
262 response patterns (Fig. 4B). Additional details about the Searchlight procedure can be  
263 found in Proklova et al., 2016. We also ran two additional versions of the RSA using  
264 smaller subsets of a full stimulus set. For example, in order to exclude animals with faces  
265 from the analysis, we removed the entries of the neural and model RDMs that  
266 corresponded to 6 animals with faces, resulting in smaller 12 x 12 RDMs that included  
267 only faceless animals and inanimate objects. The same logic was applied when excluding  
268 faceless animals from the analysis. Apart from this, the RSA procedure was identical to  
269 the one described above.

270

### 271 *ROI-based RSA*

272 In the ROI-based RSA, the pairwise neural dissimilarity was measured in the same way  
273 as in Searchlight RSA described above, but instead of doing it for each voxel in the brain,  
274 it was done in each of the four ROIs (Fig. 3A). After constructing the neural RDMs, we  
275 then correlated them with 5 model RDMs that corresponded to Animacy, Face presence,  
276 Movement speed, Thoughtfulness, and Visual dissimilarity (Fig. 3B). The neural and  
277 model RDMs were normalized before running this analysis. The correlation values were  
278 t-tested against zero, and the resulting p-values were corrected for multiple comparisons  
279 (Bonferroni correction, 3 analyses x 4 ROIs x 5 correlations = 60 tests, adjusted alpha  
280 threshold  $0.05/60 = 0.0008$ ). The Animacy RDM was defined by assigning 1 (maximum  
281 dissimilarity) to pairs of stimuli belonging to the same category (animate or inanimate),  
282 and 0 (minimum dissimilarity) to pairs from different categories. The Faceness, Thoughts  
283 and Movement RDMs were defined based on the behavioral ratings from the ratings  
284 experiment described above, correlating the ratings for each pair of images. Inanimate  
285 objects (not included in the ratings experiment) were assigned a rating of zero. Finally,

286 the Visual RDM was constructed using the reaction times from the behavioral visual  
287 search task described earlier. For each pair of stimuli, we used the inverse reaction time  
288 (1/RT) for the corresponding target-distractor pair as a corresponding entry to the visual  
289 RDM. Longer reaction times (indicating higher visual similarity) were thus reflecting lower  
290 visual dissimilarity.

291

### 292 *Multidimensional scaling*

293 To visualize the relationship between the stimuli representations in each ROI, we  
294 performed multidimensional scaling (MDS) using the *cmdscale* function in Matlab r2018b,  
295 The MathWorks, Natick, MA.

296

## 297 **Results**

### 298 *Behavioral results*

299 We first wanted to check if our pre-selected faceless animals were indeed perceived as  
300 faceless by participants. In our design, each of the six faceless animals (e.g., a worm)  
301 was matched with a similarly shaped animal that had a more distinct face (e.g., a snake).  
302 For each participant, we took the difference between the two “face presence” ratings for  
303 each stimulus pair. The positive difference meant that an animal with a face received a  
304 higher “face presence” rating than a corresponding faceless animal. As seen in the upper  
305 panel of Figure 2D, this was the case for all six animal pairs. By contrast, there was no  
306 significant difference in familiarity between animals with and without faces for each of the  
307 six stimulus pairs (Fig. 2D, lower panel).

308 Next, we averaged the ratings across participants and arranged the animal stimuli  
309 on a scale from the lowest to highest “face presence” rating (Fig. 2E), revealing that, on  
310 average, all of the six preselected faceless animals were indeed rated lower on the  
311 “faceness” scale than the six animals with faces ( $p < 0.0001$ ). The same analysis was  
312 performed with the ratings of movement speed and capacity for thought (see Fig. 2E). On  
313 average, animals with faces were rated as faster moving and more capable of thought  
314 compared to faceless animals ( $p = 0.02$  and  $p = 0.002$ , respectively.) The ratings of head  
315 and eye presence were almost identical to face presence ratings and were not further  
316 analysed.

317 Perhaps unsurprisingly, familiarity ratings correlated positively with face presence  
318 ( $r = 0.42$ ), movement speed ( $r = 0.64$ ), and thoughtfulness ( $r = 0.54$ ). It can be challenging  
319 to disentangle familiarity from these factors because we tend to be more familiar with  
320 animals that move and think. As mentioned above, however, there was no significant  
321 difference in familiarity between animals from the same shape pair with and without a  
322 face.

323

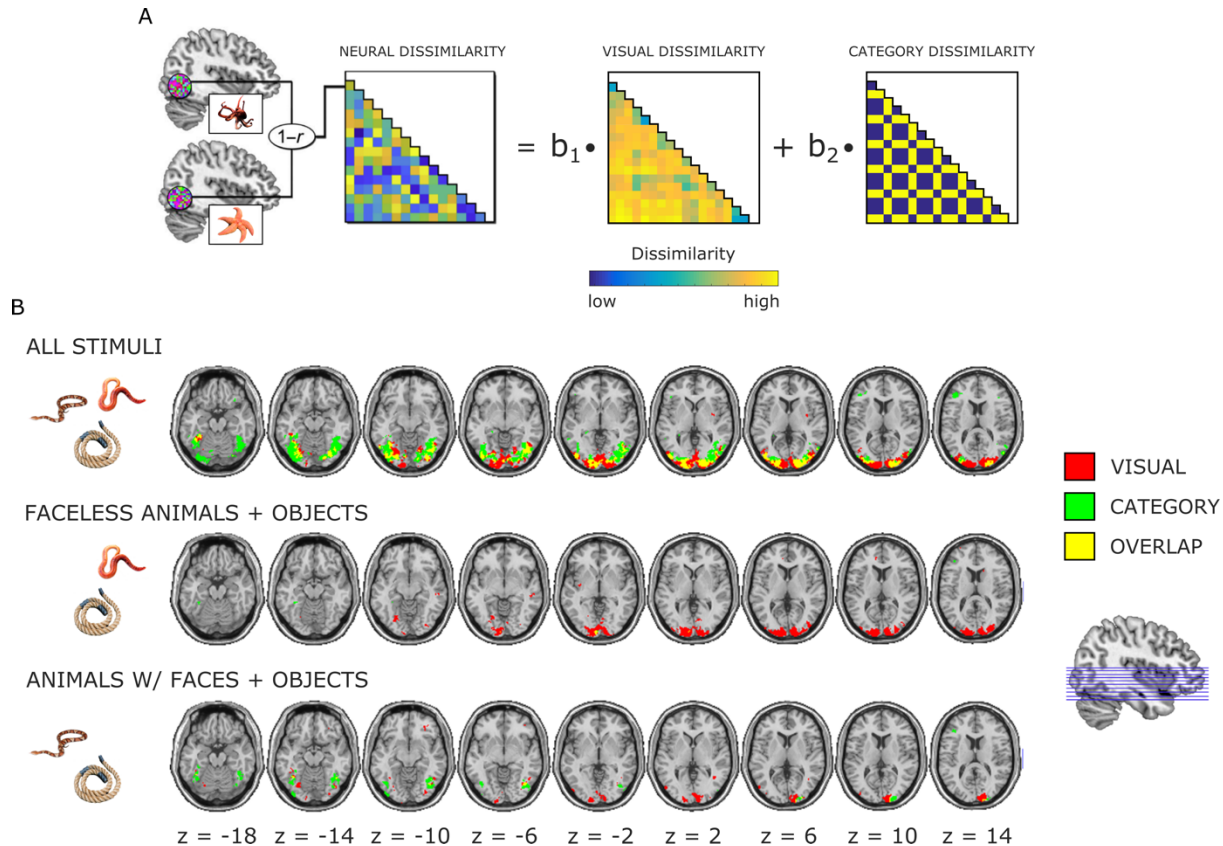
### 324 *RSA Searchlight Results*

325 Our next goal was to replicate the animate/inanimate distinction in VTC representations  
326 found in earlier studies (e.g. Proklova et al, 2016) and to explore the possibility that these  
327 results could have been driven by animal faces.

328 We performed the representational similarity searchlight analysis (identical to the  
329 one used in Proklova et al, 2016) to reveal independent contributions of Animacy and  
330 Visual models to object representations on the whole brain level (Fig. 4, see Methods for  
331 the description of the analysis.) Importantly, this analysis was run three times: once with  
332 all stimuli (Fig. 4B, upper row), once with only faceless animals and inanimate objects  
333 (Fig. 4B, middle row), and once only with animals with faces and inanimate objects (Fig.  
334 4B, bottom row). This allowed us to directly examine the contribution of animal faces to  
335 the animate/inanimate distinction in the brain.

336 The first analysis, which included all the stimuli, revealed bilateral clusters in the  
337 VTC in which Animacy model correlated significantly with the neural RDM (Fig. 4B, upper  
338 row), with local peaks in left fusiform gyrus (19,096 mm<sup>3</sup>, peak coordinates:  $x = -38$ ,  $y =$   
339  $-62$ ,  $z = -14$ ) and right fusiform gyrus (22,624 mm<sup>3</sup>, peak coordinates:  $x = 40$ ,  $y = -58$ ,  $z$   
340  $= -14$ ). However, when animals with faces were excluded from the analysis, we observed  
341 only a small cluster in the left fusiform gyrus (168 mm<sup>3</sup>, peak coordinates:  $x = -36$ ,  $y = -$   
342  $44$ ,  $z = -16$ ) in which the neural dissimilarity correlated significantly with category  
343 (animacy) dissimilarity (Fig. 4B, middle row). As fewer stimuli (and fewer trials) were  
344 included in this analysis, there is a possibility that the reduced animacy-related  
345 information was observed due to reduced power. To control for this possibility, we then  
346 ran the final searchlight analysis in which animals with faces were included in the analysis  
347 and faceless animals excluded, which involved the same number of trials as the previous

348 analysis (Fig. 4B, bottom row). The results showed that the animacy information was  
 349 again robust in the VTC in two clusters with peaks in left inferior temporal cortex (1,992  
 350 mm<sup>3</sup>, peak coordinates: x = -48, y = -64, z = -10) and right fusiform gyrus (3,336 mm<sup>3</sup>,  
 351 peak coordinates: x = 32, y = -72, z = -18). This suggests that the reduced animacy-  
 352 related response observed in absence of animals with faces was not due to reduced  
 353 power, but specifically to the absence of a face. Together, these results show that  
 354 including animals with faces in the analysis leads to much more robust animate/inanimate  
 355 distinction in the VTC. They also raise a possibility that the animacy information reported  
 356 in previous studies (e.g., Proklova et al., 2016) could largely be an artefact of faces in the  
 357 animate stimuli.  
 358



359  
 360 **Figure 4. GLM Searchlight.** **A**, Schematic of the analysis. For each voxel, we defined a  
 361 100-voxel neighborhood around it and modeled the neural dissimilarity in this region as  
 362 the linear combination of Visual and Category (Animacy) dissimilarity. **B**, Searchlight  
 363 results. Results of whole-brain group-averaged analyses testing the value of each  
 364 predictor versus zero. The results show independent contributions of Visual (in red) and  
 365 Category (in green) predictors to neural data. This analysis was run three times: first,

366 including all the stimuli (upper row), next, after removing animals with faces (middle row),  
367 and, finally, including only animals with faces and inanimate objects were included  
368 (bottom row).

369

370

### 371 *ROI-based RSA Results*

372 The searchlight analysis showed that animal faces clearly play an important role in the  
373 VTC representations. What is it about face presence that is driving this effect, and is it  
374 different in different sub-regions of the VTC? Since face presence is associated with many  
375 different factors (from visual features to perceived intelligence and similarity to humans)  
376 we wanted to examine this further, including new behavioral models that captured  
377 different aspects of the stimuli. We also focused on four regions of interest (ROIs) that  
378 were defined prior to and independent from the searchlight analysis, including a large  
379 VTC ROI, the fusiform face area (FFA), a region sensitive to animate/inanimate distinction  
380 independently of visual features (Animacy ROI, see Methods for the details of how it was  
381 defined), and early visual cortex (EVC) as a control region.

382 For each ROI, we correlated the neural representational dissimilarity matrix (RDM)  
383 with five model RDMs characterizing Animacy, Faceness (face presence), Movement  
384 Speed, Thoughts, and Visual information. The correlation values were then tested against  
385 zero, and p-values were corrected for multiple comparisons (Bonferroni correction). The  
386 results are shown in Figure 5. Analogously to the searchlight analysis, the ROI-based  
387 RSA was run 3 times using different subsets of stimuli in order to directly examine the  
388 effect of animal faces on object representations in those regions.

389 We first ran this analysis with the full stimulus set (Fig. 5, left column). As expected,  
390 the Visual model, but not the high-level ones, correlated significantly with the early visual  
391 cortex RDM. In the VTC, the Animacy model showed the highest correlation with the  
392 neural RDM, followed by the Movement and Thoughts models for which the correlations  
393 were also significant. Interestingly, the correlation with the Faceness RDM did not survive  
394 correction for multiple comparisons. In the FFA, although none of the correlations  
395 survived multiple comparisons correction, the highest correlation was with the Faceness  
396 model. Finally, in the Animacy ROI, all high-level models (apart from Visual) correlated  
397 significantly with the neural RDM.



398           Next, to see whether these results were driven by animals with faces, we re-ran  
399 the RSA after excluding all animals with faces from the analysis (Fig. 5, middle column).  
400 The results showed overall lower correlation values in all the ROIs, and, crucially,  
401 animacy information was not significant after correcting for multiple comparisons in both  
402 VTC and Animacy ROI. Interestingly, even in absence of faces, both Movement and  
403 Thoughts RDMs still correlated significantly with the neural RDM in Animacy ROI.

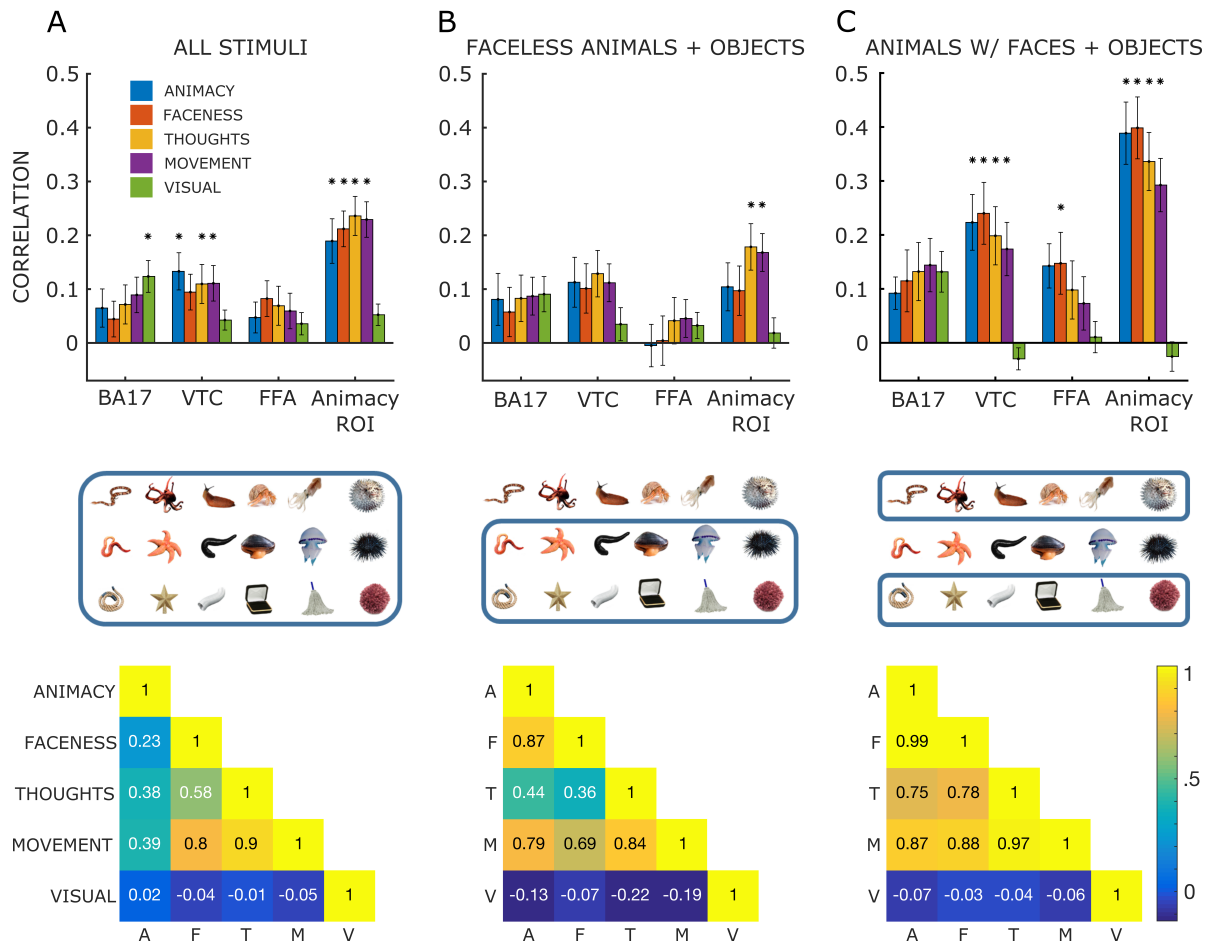
404           Finally, we re-ran the analysis after removing faceless animals and looking only at  
405 animals with faces and inanimate objects (Fig. 5, right column). Note that Animacy and  
406 Faceness RDMs were almost perfectly correlated in this condition. Strikingly, this led to  
407 much higher correlations in VTC and the Animacy ROI with the Animacy RDM and all the  
408 other high-level models.

409           Using different subsets of stimuli in the three analyses meant that the target RDMs  
410 and correlations between them also changed. Pairwise correlations between target RDMs  
411 are shown in the bottom row of Figure 5. In all three analyses, the Visual RDM did not  
412 correlate highly with the remaining high-level models. The correlation between Animacy  
413 and Faceness models was 0.23 for the full stimulus set, increased to 0.87 when animals  
414 with faces were excluded (likely driven by the fact that in both models the inanimate  
415 objects had a rating of zero), and was close to perfect (0.99) in the final analysis when  
416 only animals with faces and inanimate objects were included.

417           At first glance, these results, in line with the Searchlight, seem to suggest that  
418 faces heavily influence the representations of animacy in these regions: when animals  
419 with faces are excluded, animacy information in VTC is not significant, and when they are  
420 present, it is strongly pronounced. If this were the case, however, we would expect to see  
421 higher correlations between the Faceness model and the VTC RDM, which was not the  
422 case. Instead, this result seems to be driven by something other than faces (but  
423 something that correlates with the presence of a face) – in this case, movement speed  
424 and capacity to think. Indeed, even when animals with faces were excluded, the  
425 Movement and Thoughts models (but not the binary Animacy model) correlated  
426 significantly with the neural RDM in the Animacy ROI. This suggests that the  
427 animate/inanimate distinction in this region is influenced not so much by the presence of

428 faces, but rather by other properties that correlate with face presence, such as the  
 429 capacity to move and think.

430



431

432 **Figure 5. ROI RSA results.** Top row: RSA results in four ROIs including all the stimuli  
 433 (A), the same analysis repeated after removing animals with faces from the analysis (B),  
 434 and after animals with faces were included and faceless animals excluded from the  
 435 analysis (C). Asterisks indicate significance after correcting for multiple comparisons.  
 436 Middle row: stimuli that were included in each type of analysis (in blue frame). Bottom  
 437 row: pairwise correlations between model representational dissimilarity matrices (RDMs)  
 438 used in the three analyses.

439

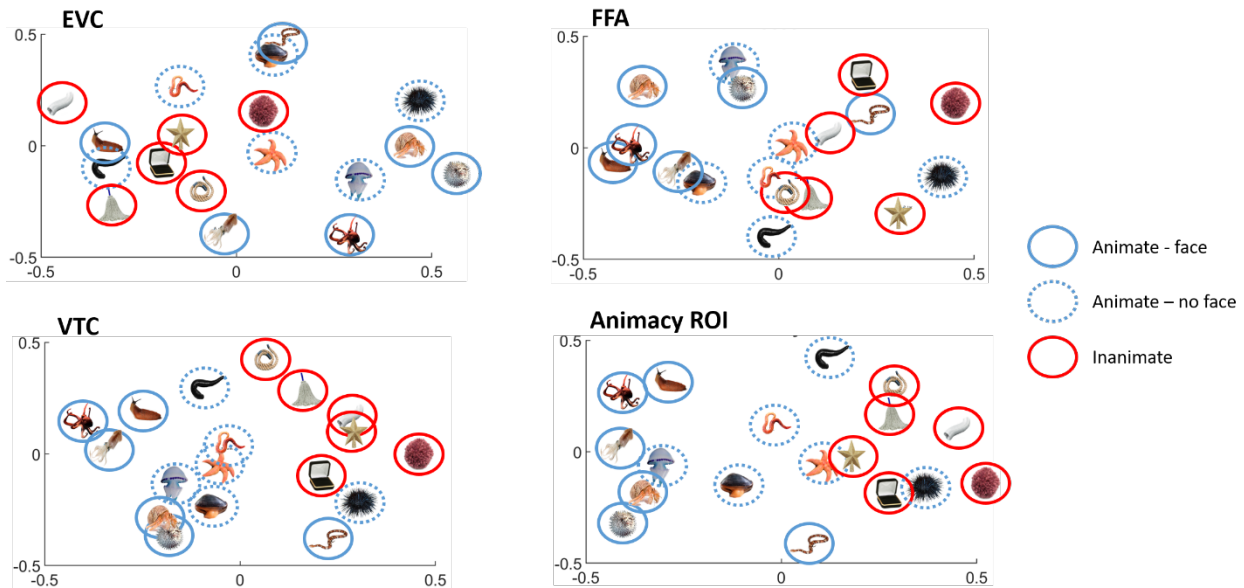
440 *Multidimensional scaling results*

441 Finally, we performed multidimensional scaling to visualize the representational structure  
 442 in each ROI (Fig. 6). In this analysis, the images that are represented similarly in a given  
 443 ROI end up closer together on a 2D plane. As expected, the representations in the EVC  
 444 did not show clustering based on Animacy (compared to the other ROIs) and instead

445 seemed to have reflected visual properties: elongated stimuli, such as the tube, slug, and  
446 leech, clustering together on the left and roundish objects clustered on the right. In both  
447 the VTC and the Animacy ROI, however, the animate/inanimate distinction was  
448 pronounced, with inanimate objects clustering together separately from animals (Fig. 6).  
449 Intriguingly, this analysis revealed a kind of gradient in those particular ROIs: animals with  
450 faces on one side, inanimate objects on the other side, and faceless animals in between.  
451 This explains the results of the RSA, showing how including only animals with faces in  
452 the analysis makes the distinction between animate and inanimate objects in those  
453 regions more pronounced.

454

455



456

457 **Figure 6. Multidimensional scaling results.** Representational structure in the four ROIs  
458 revealed by multidimensional scaling, showing how animals with faces (solid blue circles),  
459 faceless animals (dashed blue circles), and inanimate objects (red circles) are  
460 represented with respect to each other in each ROI. Stimuli that are represented similarly  
461 in a given ROI are shown close to each other in 2-dimensional space.

462

463

464

465 **Discussion**

466 We investigated the contribution of animal faces to the animate-inanimate distinction that  
467 has been revealed in ventral temporal cortex (VTC) across many studies (e.g.,  
468 Kriegeskorte et al., 2008; Grill-Spector and Weiner, 2014; Bracci and Op de Beeck, 2016;  
469 Proklova et al., 2016). Unlike previous studies, we systematically controlled for face  
470 presence using images of real animals, half of which had a face and half of which did not,  
471 as opposed to obscuring the face or using different viewpoints in which a face is turned  
472 away (in which case our knowledge of how an animal usually looks could lead to filling-in  
473 effects). The initial searchlight analysis revealed that when animals with faces were  
474 removed from the analysis, the animate/inanimate distinction almost disappeared.  
475 However, further ROI-based representational similarity analysis revealed that Movement  
476 and Thoughts models significantly correlated with activity in a sub-region of the VTC –  
477 even after faces were removed. Together, these results suggest that the  
478 animate/inanimate distinction in the VTC is largely driven not by the presence of faces or  
479 animacy *per se*, but rather by perceived agency (a combination of the ability to move and  
480 the ability to think) that is correlated with these factors.

481

### 482 ***Visual vs. Conceptual Features***

483 How do our findings relate to the visual vs. conceptual features debate about the nature  
484 of the animate/inanimate distinction in VTC object representations (Peelen & Downing,  
485 2018; Bracci et al., 2019)? Although we did not address this question directly, our findings  
486 do shed some light on the issue. Faces are both a visual and a conceptual feature. They  
487 have characteristic visual features, such as eyes and mouth, and even simplistic smiley  
488 faces and two dots above a line will elicit a response in the fusiform face area (Caldara  
489 et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2016). Seeing faces in inanimate objects, such as clouds,  
490 mountains, and tree trunks, is a common experience, underscoring the important  
491 biological function of face recognition (Wardle et al., 2020). At the same time, faces  
492 convey rich conceptual information, including similarity to humans (Sha et al., 2015;  
493 Contini et al., 2019), emotion, and, in case of human faces, information about gender,  
494 race, and age (Dobs et al, 2019). Faces are a powerful cue to whether something is  
495 animate and, potentially, possessing agency and intelligence. Our findings suggest that  
496 VTC processes not just the visual appearance of a face, but also higher-level information

497 for which faces are a proxy: specifically, animal's capacity for agency (movement and  
498 thought). Moreover, we found that animal faces are not necessary for eliciting  
499 animate/inanimate distinction in the VTC, in line with earlier studies (Chao et al, 1999;  
500 Martin & Weisberg, 2003; Long et al., 2018).

501 It could still be the case that the animacy-related activity observed when animals  
502 with faces were excluded from the analysis was driven by some remaining visual features,  
503 such as curvature, symmetry, and visual texture, that differentiated the animals without  
504 faces from the inanimate objects. That explanation is unlikely to be the whole story,  
505 however, since we selected our images in a way that minimized shape and texture  
506 differences, which was confirmed by low correlation between Visual and Animacy models.  
507 Moreover, in a previous study (Proklova et al., 2016), we showed that visual features such  
508 as overall shape and texture are not driving the animate/inanimate distinction in the VTC.  
509 Of course, we still have to rely on visual information in order to recognize faceless animals  
510 as animals, but the fact that we observed high-level information about movement speed  
511 and capacity for thought in the Animacy ROI strongly suggests that our conceptual  
512 knowledge about an animal also comes into play in this region. Many of us have learned  
513 through the media and real-life experiences that starfish, sea urchins, and other creatures  
514 that at first could appear as inanimate are in fact animals. In other words, semantic  
515 associations between the image and previous knowledge is likely driving the observed  
516 activation in the animacy-sensitive regions when images of animals without faces are  
517 presented.

518

### 519 ***A Gradient vs. a Dichotomy***

520 More and more studies show that a simple animate/inanimate dichotomy is not the best  
521 way to explain the VTC representational geometry (Bracci et al., 2018; Contini et al., 2020;  
522 Connolly et al., 2012; Sha et al., 2016; Carlson et al., 2013). Our findings also suggest  
523 that animacy in the VTC is not all-or-none, but graded: from animals that are perceived  
524 as more mobile and intelligent to animals that are perceived as less capable of movement  
525 and thought (and thus more similar to inanimate objects). Other recent findings have also  
526 found that agency is an important organizing principle for the VTC object representations  
527 (Thorat et al., 2019; Haxby et al., 2020).

528           It has also been proposed that this continuum is driven by similarity to humans  
529 (Connolly et al., 2012; Sha et al., 2016; Ritchie et al., 2020), which could explain why  
530 inanimate objects such as robots and toys are represented similarly to animals in VTC  
531 (Bracci et al., 2019; Contini et al., 2020). Our study did not address this directly, since by  
532 design all the animate stimuli were quite dissimilar to humans. Our findings do point,  
533 however, to the importance of perceived agency (a combination of ability to move and  
534 intelligence) for object representations in VTC. Animals (or animal-like objects) that are  
535 perceived as possessing agency are indeed more similar to humans, compared to  
536 animals that do not move and have simpler nervous systems. That said, our results  
537 suggest that an animal does not have to share visual features with humans or to be  
538 evolutionary “closer” to them in order to be represented distinctly from inanimate objects  
539 in VTC. Capacity to move and intelligence are very behaviorally relevant features when it  
540 comes to perception and recognition of animals, regardless of how similar an animal is to  
541 a human. After all, a snake shares few physical features with humans, but it is important  
542 to recognize it as animate in order to avoid danger – and movement (as well as the face  
543 presence) is an important cue.

544

#### 545 ***Static vs moving stimuli***

546 Like most studies that have explored the distinction between activity related to animate  
547 and inanimate objects in the VTC, we presented our participants with static images. Had  
548 we used video displays of animals vs. non-animals, then the presence of self-movement  
549 or agency certainly would have been a powerful cue to animacy (Martin and Weisberg,  
550 2003; Haxby et al., 2020). In other words, self-movement could be as potent a cue for  
551 animacy as faces. The few studies that have used stimuli that move like animals have  
552 found a characteristic animate/inanimate distinction in the VTC (Martin and Weisberg,  
553 2003). Moreover, even though we used only static images in our study, the presence of  
554 faces in some of the images could easily invoke the concept of movement (and other  
555 features associated with animacy). Thus, as we have already discussed, this nexus of  
556 associated animacy features could explain why images of animals with faces are  
557 represented as more “animate” in the VTC compared to images of faceless animals, thus  
558 eliciting a stronger animate/inanimate distinction.

559

560 ***Implications for Future Investigations***

561 Our study does not speak to how and where the associations between faces and other  
562 aspects of animacy are encoded. There is a possibility that high-level aspects of animacy  
563 (e.g., agency) are first processed outside of VTC, and this information is then conveyed  
564 back to the VTC via re-entrant pathways. Electrophysiological techniques such as M/EEG  
565 could shed light on the time course of this process (Cichy & Oliva, 2020). Our findings  
566 also suggest that any attempt to disentangle the factors contributing to the animate-  
567 inanimate distinction (or gradient) in VTC should pay close attention to the animals that  
568 are used as stimuli. It is critical to include a wide range of animate objects, not just more  
569 typical, human-looking mammals. Moreover, this applies, not just to animals, but to any  
570 object category that is being investigated. The use of large, diverse, and naturalistic  
571 stimuli sets (Hebart et al., 2019, Nastase et al., 2020) is one way forward.

572 **(1331 words)**

573

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