

# Why We Would Not Understand a Talking Lion

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## I

One of the most perplexing passages in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* occurs in Part Two where it is asserted: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."<sup>1</sup> This remark has been interpreted as anything from a mere comment concerning our conception of a lion to an empirical claim regarding the communicative capacities of lions and nonhumans in general to a highly speculative assertion as to the *possibility* of there being radical incommensurability among language-users.<sup>2</sup> Whichever interpretation is correct, Wittgenstein's claim, if true, does not bode well for those of us who would like to assign rights to animals. Since the assignment of rights typically proceeds on the determination of interests, should it turn out that we would not understand animals *in spite* of their possessing language, then surely the whole task of assigning rights to animals is hopeless. My purpose is to clarify the meaning of Wittgenstein's statement and to determine whether what he says is true. I shall argue that what has emerged as the received view on the remark is wrong. The received view (as I shall call it) interprets the remark as expressing Wittgenstein's belief that there *could* exist "forms of life" so different in nature that their

respective practitioners could fail in every respect to understand one another. The received view also maintains that while radical incommensurability remains a *possibility*, it is highly *unlikely* that such an event would ever occur among organisms which share certain relevant biological features. In contrast, I maintain that the remark is primarily about the nature of *understanding* ("verstehen"), and that a careful analysis of the text indicates that what we refer to as "our 'understanding' of human languages and behaviors" differs severely from "our 'understanding' of animal languages and behaviors." This sort of analysis has both advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage is that ascriptions of mental states (interests) to animals, indeed the very *study* of animal languages and behaviors, must be viewed as quite different in nature from the ascription of mental states to humans and the study of human languages and behaviors. This makes the assignment of rights to nonhumans tricky business. On the other hand, the principal advantage of this kind of analysis is that it diffuses the very serious attack on animal mentality offered by Stephen Stich.<sup>3</sup>

## II

Let me return to the matter of why Wittgenstein's remark is so puzzling and why the received view has come to be accepted. The passage is perplexing for two



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reasons. First, what is asserted in the passage is very out of character with most of his claims concerning animals. Most of his comments pertain to the fact that if animals were to possess (or *do* possess) languages, then those languages would lack that characteristic of human languages which Charles Hockett calls "displacement," viz., the capacity to refer to objects and events which are far removed in time and space or which are counter-factual in nature.<sup>4</sup> For example, concerning dogs he says:

We say a dog is afraid his master will beat him; but not, he is afraid his master will beat him tomorrow. Why not?<sup>5</sup>

We can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not?

A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow? — And what can he not do here?<sup>6</sup>

A similar remark is made concerning orangutans in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume One:

It is easy to imagine an orangutan angry—but hopeful? And why is it like this?<sup>7</sup>

And concerning crocodiles:

[H]ope, belief, etc., [are] embedded in human life, in all of the situations and reactions which constitute human life. The crocodile doesn't hope, man does. Or: one can't say of a crocodile that it hopes, but of man one can.<sup>8</sup>

These passages suggest animals lack the orientation toward the future which characterizes such human phenomena as hope and despair. A similar passage concerning the inability of dogs to feel remorse is meant to suggest a corresponding lack of orientation toward the past.<sup>9</sup> The point is that there could be nothing in animal behavior (or language) which corresponds to our own expression of these phenomena. But, of course, Wittgenstein would not have regarded displacement as a necessary component of every language-game. On the contrary, he regards language-game (2), the block-

pillar-slab-beam language-game (which is no more complex than the system of calls used by vervet monkeys as warning signals), as a *complete language*.<sup>10</sup> At most, then, the above remarks point to a non-essential difference between human and nonhuman forms of communication.

A second reason why the comment about the lion is so puzzling is that on more than one occasion Wittgenstein asserts that we are quite capable of *understanding* animal behavior, indeed, that at times we may even understand animals *better than we understand our fellow humans*. For example, he asks us to imagine a tribe of humans who never express their feelings.<sup>11</sup> Their lives and ours would differ in many crucial ways: that which occasions a sympathetic reaction on our part (say, to someone being in pain) occasions no response from them. We are tempted to say:

'These men would have nothing human about them.'

Why?—We could not possibly make ourselves understood to them. Not even as we can to a dog. We could not find our feet with them.

And yet there surely could be such beings, who in other respects are human.<sup>12</sup>

And in an interesting passage which almost immediately precedes the lion remark in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part Two, he says:

We also say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them.<sup>13</sup>

Wittgenstein clearly denies that being members of the same species is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for mutual understanding. So why, if a lion could talk, would we be unable to understand it?

Commentators have regarded Wittgenstein as merely affirming the *possibility* of radical incommen-

surability without endorsing the view that such incommensurability actually exists. Perhaps the most explicit defense of this position is that offered by John Churchill. Churchill maintains that Wittgenstein is "denying the assurance of commensurability without embracing radical incommensurabilism."<sup>14</sup> Proponents of this view may paraphrase the lion comment saying, "If a lion could talk, we *might* not understand it." (The actual German is: "*Wenn ein Löwe sprechen könnte, wir könnten ihn nicht verstehen.*") That radical incommensurability is only a possibility is suggested by the conditions which would make it possible. What makes the language and behavior of the tribe described earlier incommensurable is not that they simply fail to express emotions which they possess (as if incommensurability amounted to not being able to decipher what's hidden in another's heart); rather, their patterns of behavior, their interests, differ from our own.<sup>15</sup> Differing, thus, in our forms of life, we imagine them as possessing sets of concepts entirely different from our own.

Remember, for Wittgenstein, the types of concepts a group shares are determined by its form of life, rather than *vice versa*. What is essential to a concept is its role. The behavior on the basis of which we ascribe to a subject a particular concept or its application is not some non-essential accompaniment to the concept itself.<sup>16</sup> So when Wittgenstein refers to the "common behavior of mankind" as "the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language"<sup>17</sup> he is not merely making the epistemological claim that behavior provides us with reliable inductive evidence for the ascription of concepts to others; he is claiming, rather, that such behavior is definitive of the concepts themselves. This suggests that the commensurability of the languages of two groups can be determined through an examination of their respective forms of life. Many scholars, however, follow J.F.M. Hunter in believing that forms of life are at least in part constituted by biological factors.<sup>18</sup> This view has most recently been attributed to Wittgenstein by John Churchill who says: "Wittgenstein posits a universal behavioural substratum whose shaping influence on language is sufficient to make all human languages commensurable."<sup>19</sup> So the languages of two organisms will be commensurable *at least* to the degree to which the organisms share biologically innate behavioral dispositions. Wittgenstein describes these behavioral dispositions as primitive reactions to one's environment and to the behavior of others which are later replaced, in humans at least, by

linguistic forms of behavior.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, whether the lion's language would be commensurable would depend upon our being able to relate what the lion says to certain primitive dispositions which we share. Since this would seem to be the way to view the issue, it is not surprising to find writers like Bernard Rollin saying:

[The claim that] we could not understand a lion if it spoke...seems implausible. I venture to suggest that our forms of life are not all that dissimilar: both the lion and I have interests in eating, sleeping, sex, avoiding encroachments on our environments, and so forth about which we could doubtless make small talk.<sup>21</sup>

In a similar vein, John Churchill asks:

Who has not rubbed a dog's ears, or scratched beneath a dog's chin? Our capacities for communication with dogs, surely, are rooted in a shared mammalian nature.<sup>22</sup>

Neither Churchill nor Rollin go so far as to attribute total commensurability to the languages and behaviors of humans and nonhumans. But the claim that their respective languages and behaviors are radically incommensurate would have to be regarded as thoroughly unwarranted. And so it is with the interpretation of Wittgenstein's lion remark as one which espouses radical incommensurability, since the grounds for rejecting radical incommensurability are Wittgenstein's own.

### III

I believe that this interpretation of Wittgenstein's remark is inaccurate and that he did indeed advocate some version of the incommensurability thesis. Two distinct objections can be raised against the received view. The second of these forms the basis for my attributing to Wittgenstein the view that understanding animals differs from understanding humans in an essential way.

First, we might accept Wittgenstein's view that most psychological predicates may be attributed only to "a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being"<sup>23</sup> without accepting the view that just *any* biologically innate behavioral disposition can serve as the basis for such attributions. If Wittgenstein

accepted anything like a universal behavioral substratum (to use Churchill's phrase), then that substratum consists primarily of human facial expressions. "The face," he wrote in 1932, "is the soul of the body."<sup>24</sup> Facial expressions are what is primitive, pre-linguistic. It is to them that we react spontaneously and with sympathy.<sup>25</sup> (That there is a set of facial expressions common to and immediately recognizable to all humans has been confirmed in the research of Paul Ekman. The set consists of expressions of happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise.<sup>26</sup>)

The imaginary tribe whose members Wittgenstein describes as never expressing feelings would be incomprehensible to us in that we would be unable to associate what they say with certain characteristic forms of behavior. It is crucial to notice that, for Wittgenstein, a lack of understanding may occur in spite of the fact that one knows the truth conditions of a speaker's utterance.<sup>27</sup> Before a speaker's utterance can even be the kind of thing that is true or false, it must be uttered in an appropriate context. An utterance which fails to satisfy this condition is neither true nor false, but nonsensical. Facial expressions (and certain other forms of behavior) belong to the contextual determinants of meaning. This does not mean that there must be some typical facial accompaniment to each and every utterance; that would be absurd. But it does mean that an utterance must be spoken in a context in which the speaker could convey (or could be imagined as conveying) his or her purpose by means of primitive, pre-linguistic behaviors. (Imagine the look of assertion or of puzzlement.) Where a connection between an utterance and a facial expression is unimaginable, there understanding is impossible. We rely upon such information as is contained in a glance when interpreting a speaker's words and when determining what a speaker expects of us. Wittgenstein's imaginary tribe consists of a group of people of whom we could have no expectations and with respect to whom we would be unable to determine what is expected of us. That is what Wittgenstein means when he says we would be unable to *find our feet* with these people. Wittgenstein's lion is in very much the same boat. The lion's utterances would not be connected to facial expressions in the appropriate way. (When we try to imagine a talking lion, as in the fairy tales, don't we also imagine the lion with a somewhat human face?) The point is that the lion's utterances would be meaningless to us; they would fail to occur within a context in which they might have sense.

It seems to me that a fairly straightforward objection could be raised against Wittgenstein's view as I've described it here, namely, that the faces of animals, particularly mammals, are quite expressive. They may not possess the full range of expressions which characterize the human face, but to the extent that they possess any range at all, to that extent their behavior is commensurate with our own.

Wittgenstein's response to this objection requires that facial expressions be viewed as akin to a *system* of signs in which the meaning of any given element is determined by its relation to the other elements. If any single element is removed, then the significance of each of the remaining elements is altered. It is relevant in this respect that he often refers to the human face and even the human body as a kind of *picture*. For example, he says,

The *content* of an emotion—here one imagines something like a *picture*, or something of which a picture can be made. (The darkness of depression which descends on a man, the flames of anger.) The human face too might be called such a picture and its alterations might represent the *course* of a passion.<sup>28</sup>

And the elements of the picture are internally related to one another:

Suppose someone had always seen faces with only *one* expression, say a smile. And now, for the first time, he sees a face changing its expression. Couldn't we say here that he hadn't noticed a facial expression until now? Not until the change took place was the expression meaningful; earlier it was simply part of the anatomy of the face.<sup>29</sup>

[P]ain...has a characteristic expression within the repertory of facial expressions and gestures.<sup>30</sup>

Feigning and its opposite exist only when there is a complicated *play of expressions*.<sup>31</sup>

Expression could be said to exist only in the play of the features.<sup>32</sup>

Wittgenstein's view that facial expressions are internally related to one another stems from his belief that were

they not so, then specific expressions would not be recognizable. Divorced from a system of expressions the specific expression would merely be part of "the anatomy of the animal."<sup>33</sup> I would guess that it is largely an empirical issue whether our ability to recognize specific expressions is dependent on the existence of a system of expressions. My impression of the research in this area is that it supports Wittgenstein's claim.<sup>34</sup> Be that as it may, if facial expressions are internally related to one another, then any *degree* of difference between human and nonhuman expression would be a significant difference. Thus, for Wittgenstein, arguments which emphasize the degree of similarity between human and nonhuman behavior would amount to red herrings.

Turn now to the second principal objection which may be brought against the received view. Proponents of that view believe that the process which culminates in the understanding of animal behavior is very much the same sort of process as that which culminates in the understanding of human behavior. In either case, it is thought, observation of behavior leads to the attribution of concepts (and other mental state ascriptions) which, in turn, afford us a certain amount of predictive power. While the inference from behavior to mental state is more immediate in the case of humans (given, presumably, our greater familiarity with human behavior), in each case the goal of the process is largely the same: the prediction of behavior. I would like to argue (and attribute to Wittgenstein the view) that understanding human behavior does not consist in being able to *predict* it.

While it is true that we form expectations of our fellow humans and often have these expectations satisfied (and to that extent predict their behavior), I maintain that there is a threshold beyond which, if human behavior becomes too predictable, we say we no longer understand the behavior in question. Indeed, we can no longer say that what we've observed is behavior (except in the sense in which we speak of the "behavior" of even rocks and molecules). Now it might seem that Wittgenstein does equate understanding with predictive power. How, after all, are we to interpret his remark about "finding our feet" with respect to the strange tribesmen? Also, how are we to interpret his remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* concerning the similarity between sentences like "Now I understand!" and "Now I can go on!" if understanding is something other than predictive power? "Being able

to go on" appears to refer to an ability to anticipate various kinds of events. True enough. But then in a passage written in 1948 which appears in *Culture and Value* he writes:

Life's infinite variations are essential to our life. And so to even the habitual character of life. What we regard as expression *consists* in incalculability. If I knew exactly how he would grimace, move, there would be no facial expression, no gesture.<sup>35</sup>

The problem with the expressionless tribesmen is not that we have an insufficient amount of behavior on which to base predictions; rather, their movements are too mechanical, too rigid, to count any longer as expressive behavior. For a particular bit of behavior to count as a facial expression it is not sufficient merely that it be a specific form of expression within a system of expression. Specific expressions must exhibit a degree of variability from person to person and from instance to instance:

Variability itself is characteristic of behaviour without which behaviour would be to us as something completely different. (The facial features characteristic of grief, for instance, are not more meaningful than their mobility.)<sup>36</sup>

Thus, understanding a facial expression requires more than its mere categorization; it involves a recognition of uniqueness. Nor is reacting to a facial expression merely reacting in a set, predetermined fashion; it involves tailoring one's reaction to the uniqueness of the situation. As sociolinguists are quick to remind us, speakers vary their form of expression to locate themselves (and allow themselves to be located) in what one writer describes as "a highly complex multi-dimensional social space."<sup>37</sup> Or perhaps it would be more apt for us to say that speakers use variation to *eke out* a position within social space. It is wrong, on this view, to identify the meaning of an expression with something (some mental content) which two individuals share in common when the one understands the other. Instead the meaning of an expression is a relation of sorts existing between those who express themselves and the individuals to whom they express themselves. Expressing oneself does not involve "conveying" something (a meaning) from one mind to

another. It has been the error of philosophers from Plato to Frege to Katz to try to *explain away* variation and unpredictability by postulating entities like meanings which exist in the mind or are "grasped" by acts which originate in the mind.<sup>38</sup> For Wittgenstein, in contrast, unpredictability and expressive variability are of the essence!<sup>39</sup>

These considerations are important for two reasons. First, we may conclude that Wittgenstein's notion of understanding human behavior is much more robust than that which would be allowable were the understanding of human behavior to be equated with mere predictability. In *Philosophical Investigations* the conclusion is drawn most explicitly:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Anymore than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)

In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions.

Then has "understanding" two different meanings here?—I would rather say that these kinds of use of "understanding" make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding.

For I want to apply the word "understanding" to all this.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to human beings both the predictable and the unpredictable are the "object" of understanding. Understanding only seems like prediction when one is "severed" (to borrow a word from Heidegger) from the situation in which understanding occurs.

Second, this analysis sheds light upon Wittgenstein's remarks concerning why we might, in certain contexts, say we understand dogs and other animals even better than we understand humans.<sup>41</sup> The sense in which animals may be more understandable than humans is the sense in which they may be more predictable. As Wittgenstein points out, the uncertainty one feels as to whether animals, like flies and spiders, feel pain does

not arise from not knowing what to expect, but from the fact that one does not know *how* to react (or *whether* to react) in the presence of their behavior.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that there could not be an understanding of animals in the robust sense of the word. The unpredictability which is the earmark of human behavior is not found in our interactions with animals. Consequently, Wittgenstein's remarks concerning animals being more understandable than humans in certain contexts cannot be taken as expressing a belief in partial commensurability. If a lion could talk, we could not (in the robust sense) understand him.

#### IV

If Wittgenstein's view is correct, then the assignment of rights to animals becomes tricky. I would suggest that before an individual can be assigned rights it is necessary for that individual to be understood (in the sense in which we understand humans). If having a right is anything like staking a claim, then how apart from expressive behavior (linguistic and non-linguistic) which *calls for* a recognition of one's individuality would this be possible? This does not mean animals should not be afforded rights. It only means that a different avenue for the assignment of rights would have to be found. This is the principal disadvantage of Wittgenstein's view.

Its greatest advantage is that it serves as a counterweight to the kind of Stichian analysis which denies mentality to humans and nonhumans alike. Stich's analysis permits no asymmetries in the assignment of mental states and their contents to humans and nonhumans.<sup>43</sup> On Wittgenstein's view, the mental life of animals emerges as ineffable. They resist analysis. Perhaps, in the end, it is to this ineffability that we must turn if we are to address the moral issues before us.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1953), p. 223. Passages from Part One of this text will be identified by section; those from Part Two by page.

<sup>2</sup>The first of these I've heard in conversation. The second view is expressed at one point by Bernard Rollin in *The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 142. The third approach is advocated by John Churchill in "If a

Lion Could Talk...," *Philosophical Investigations*, 4 (1989): 308-324.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford Books, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Hockett, "The Problem of Universals in Language" in J.H. Greenberg, ed., *Universals of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, #650.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980): #314.

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980): #16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, #308.

<sup>10</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, #2, #6.

<sup>11</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #706.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, #700.

<sup>13</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> "If a Lion Could Talk," p. 308.

<sup>15</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #708.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, #709.

<sup>17</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, #206.

<sup>18</sup> J.F.M. Hunter, "'Forms of Life' in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 4 (1968): 233-243.

<sup>19</sup> "If a Lion Could Talk," p. 310.

<sup>20</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume One*, ##915-916; *Philosophical Investigations*, #244.

<sup>21</sup> *The Unheeded Cry*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>22</sup> "If a Lion Could Talk," p. 311.

<sup>23</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, #281.

<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #699.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ekman, *The Face of Man: Expressions of Universal Emotions in a New Guinea Village* (New York: Garland Press, 1980); *Emotion in the Human Face* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>27</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #148.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, #356.

<sup>30</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings, Volume One: Preliminary Studies for Part Two of Philosophical Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): #764.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, #946.

<sup>32</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #356.

<sup>33</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, p.209; cf. *Last Writings, Volume One*, #776.

<sup>34</sup> *Emotion in the Human Face*, pp. 111 ff.

<sup>35</sup> *Culture and Value*, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #627.

<sup>37</sup> R.A. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 140.

<sup>38</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #663.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, ##644-646.

<sup>40</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, ##531-532.

<sup>41</sup> *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume Two*, #700.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ##659-667.

<sup>43</sup> *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science*, pp. 104-106.

