Russow, and R. G. Frey, who seem to appeal to the Wittgensteinian tradition, argue for a more narrow thesis, viz., that animals cannot have certain sorts of mental states, although they may well possess other conscious states. Carruthers argues that animals have no conscious states, and does link consciousness with the ability to use a natural language, but does not explicitly invoke Wittgenstein. In fact, Leahy is the only appropriate target I am aware of, in that he explicitly appeals to Wittgenstein in his arguments to show that animals lack “awareness.” Absent further references from Singer, it is difficult to know exactly to whom he wishes to attribute the more extreme claim.

2 We should remember, however, that for Wittgenstein, these psychological states should not be thought of as inner, private events—either for animals or humans.

3 For further discussion of the concept of deception, see Russow and other papers in Mitchell and Thompson (1986).

4 In “How to Change Your Mind” (Dennett, 1978), Dennett argues that animals can have beliefs, but not opinions. They can come to believe, but not decide, assent, or judge. In later discussions (e.g., Dennett 1991, ch 8) he analyzes the role language plays in determining what the content of our beliefs could be.

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Reply

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Prof. Russow invokes a distinction regarding the relevance of language to mind that she believes is overlooked in my paper. First, there is the thesis that some mental states involve concepts that seem to be too complex to be captured by creatures without language; e.g., dogs might have expectations, but dogs cannot expect to be taken out next Wednesday. The second thesis is that language may be necessary in order to have certain types of mental states. Among Russow’s examples here is understanding what it is for a certain proposition to be true. Clearly, such an understanding requires language. So, restrictions of the first kind deny certain states to animals due to conceptual complexity, while restrictions of the second kind restrict which types of states might reasonably be attributed to animals.

Now, this is an interesting distinction, but I don’t believe it was overlooked—at least not by me. Russow says that Wittgenstein presents the relevance of language to mentality in these two distinct ways. This may be, but there is little evidence that he had this distinction in mind. Indeed, in the passage from the Investigations cited in the first section of my paper, Wittgenstein lumps together restrictions due to complexity of conceptual content (dog cannot believe his master will come the day after tomorrow but does have other beliefs) with restrictions of type (a dog cannot be hopeful).

Nevertheless, Russow’s distinction is a meaningful one. To exemplify the distinction, she correctly observes that Stich focuses on possible belief contents, while Malcolm, Davidson, and others are more interested in which types of mental states animals can have. However,
while Stich alone focuses explicitly on conceptual content, his argument is against the possibility of animal belief (indeed, all belief) generally. He does not argue that while dogs cannot have beliefs about algebra, for example, they can have beliefs about bones. According to him, they can’t have beliefs about anything, which is also the conclusion to Davidson’s arguments. Stich does have different reasons than Davidson for denying belief states to animals, but if either Stich’s or Davidson’s arguments succeed, beliefs are a type of mental state that animals cannot have. Thus, the distinction between the two theses about the relevance of language to animal mentality appears to be somewhat blurred.

The difficulty of maintaining Russow’s distinction is perhaps best illustrated by one of her own examples of the second kind of restriction on animal mentality (the type of state restriction). An animal might understand what it is for a certain state of affairs to obtain but not understand what it is for a statement to be true. This seems obvious enough. But there’s no special type of mental state at stake here. Animals can understand some things and not others. Perhaps animals have no beliefs about truth, but a belief about truth is not a special type of mental state, it’s just a belief with a very special content—a content too complex to be held by most animals. The distinction, then, between the two theses restricting animal mentality is quite fuzzy indeed. I suspect this is why Wittgenstein did not make much of it.

Russow correctly points out that the priority of language is often invoked in arguments about whether or not animals have certain kinds of moral standing. Questions about animal mentality need to be answered in order to settle such issues. I agree entirely. Whether or not a creature can be said to have interests or rights does seem to depend on getting answers to complex questions about animal mentality. However, the virtue of Diamond’s conception of moral community is precisely that it does not depend on getting answers to all of these questions, important as they may be. Many facets of both animal and human psychology may remain mysterious to us, but this need not leave us morally paralyzed.

Notes

1 Of course there are important differences in the reasons that Stich and Davidson use to support this conclusion. Stich centers on specifiability of belief contents, while Davidson contends that having beliefs presupposes having the concept of belief, which in turn requires having the concepts of truth and falsity (see his “Thought and Talk,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.)

2 For an interesting discussion from the point of view of philosophy of mind on attributing “interests” to animals and its relevance to animal liberation, see George Graham’s Philosophy of Mind: An Introduction. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, pp. 186-190.