

Wittgenstein and Animal Minds

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In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer remarks that some philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein have maintained that we cannot meaningfully attribute conscious states to creatures without language.¹ This is, as Singer observes, a hazy line of thought at best, but it is true that some philosophers occasionally maintain it. The moral implications of such a view are obviously disastrous for animals. While it is absurd to associate such an extreme and implausible position with Wittgenstein himself, some of his remarks do lend themselves to more moderate positions which place serious restrictions on animal mentality. These restrictions do have an impact, probably a negative one, on the moral standing of animals. I do not intend this paper to be a strict exegetical account of Wittgenstein's own views; his remarks on these issues are more suggestive than explicit in any case. Rather, I want to consider a few lines of thought in the *Philosophical Investigations* along with some of the appropriations of Wittgenstein by some of his followers on the issue of animal minds. I hope to show that their efforts to draw a clear line distinguishing animal and human mentality is misguided and that emphasis on psychological continuity between the species is evidenced in Wittgenstein's own work.

I

First, I would like to say something about the association of Wittgenstein himself with the view that animals are utterly mindless. Perhaps this interpretation can be supported by some rather cryptic remarks that Wittgenstein made, particularly in the *Investigations*. There he denies that we could understand a lion even if it could talk. He also says that it's senseless to suppose a dog may hope or pretend that it is in pain. In addition, Wittgenstein's private language argument is supposed to show that the ability to apply concepts meaningfully requires *public* criteria. And presumably the most impressive public criteria can be provided by language. One might conclude from this that Wittgenstein's view is that minds require concepts and that concepts require the public evidence of language. Whatever might be said for such a position, it is clear that it is not Wittgenstein's.

Language does make an important difference as to what sorts of mental states a creature might realize on Wittgenstein's view, but in the very passages often invoked to support lack of animal mentality, Wittgenstein explicitly acknowledges that some mental states are possible without language:

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



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A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?²

In spite of his intention to limit the sorts of mental states that can be reasonably attributable to animals, Wittgenstein actually granted them rather a lot. His first statement gives examples of *conscious* infraverbal mentality, since anger and happiness do not seem to be realizable by non-conscious entities. His last claim, while denying the possibility of certain kinds of canine beliefs, explicitly attributes intentional states to dogs (since even simple beliefs are intentional). So, dogs and other animals have some intentional states as well as some conscious ones. But, as intentionality and consciousness are apparently the primary *indicators* of mentality, it is clear enough that Wittgenstein is not denying the possibility of animal minds.

It seems then that Wittgenstein is only contending that *some* mental states are possible only for creatures with linguistic capacity. Some beliefs, for example, are presumably too finely grained to be attributed reasonably to an infralinguistic organism. But that's quite different from claiming that the creature can't have beliefs at all. Perhaps Wittgenstein wished to deny that animals could have long term expectations, beliefs, or desires. But even this much is not obvious. Wittgenstein concentrates on certain examples which are supposed to illustrate the sort of difference that language makes for mind. But so far as I can tell, he makes no general claim like: "Animals can have present or short-term cognitive states, whereas long term intentional states require language." The reason I think Wittgenstein avoids such generalizations is that they seem to be subject to empirical falsification—perhaps non-linguistic evidence of a long-term expectation *could* be given. It's hard to say in a clear and general way just what it is that animals cannot, in principle, do, on Wittgenstein's view. This is why he concentrates on specific examples of certain mental states which are supposed to be dependent on language in various ways. But even some of the limited examples he provides can be called into question, as they have been recently by Bernard Rollin:

As to Wittgenstein's claims that an animal can't hope or simulate pain, these are truly perplexing. What else can one say of a dog when it sits at attention while you are eating

but that it is hoping you will give it a scrap? As to simulating pain, any pet-owner and any veterinarian can relate cases in which animals simulated pain in order to get attention, avoid punishment, and so on, especially if they have been fussed over in the past when they had an injury.³

Perhaps Wittgenstein should have used other examples. But in any case, it's clear enough by now that his contention that some mental states are language-dependent is not a claim about mental states generally.

Still, some may remain unconvinced. After all, Wittgenstein also made the startling claim that if a lion could talk, we could not understand him. This might be taken to mean that our lives are just different in kind from lions and other animals, and a part of the difference is the fact that we, and not they, are language users. Here again, Rollin points out that there might indeed be a great deal that a human and a lion might have to talk about. And granting that there is much that we would not have in common with this lion, we can readily think of human beings whose forms of life are similarly unfamiliar to us (Rollin mentions accountants and fundamentalists, but there are others): we can understand them as well, or as badly, as we can Wittgenstein's talking lion! But even if that is wrong, the alleged difference, on Wittgenstein's account, between a lion and a human is emphatically not the difference of linguistic capacity. Indeed, the example obliterates that distinction. Instead, the issue is whether or not there are enough shared features of life in order to make linguistic communication possible. The reason we can't understand a lion is not that we and only we have concepts, because we and only we use language. The intelligibility of linguistic utterance is dependent upon other features of a shared life. I think that Rollin is right. Wittgenstein has indeed overlooked those features of life that are shared between lions and humans in order to make his point about the intelligibility of language. But even if Rollin were wrong, the example does not endorse attributing lack of conceptuality or mentality to lions or other infraverbal organisms—quite the contrary.

Perhaps Wittgenstein's view with respect to the possibility of animal mental life is most apparent if one considers the simple state of being in pain. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that in teaching someone to say "I am in pain," we are teaching that person a new pain behavior. Clearly, the ability to say

those words is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being in pain. Indeed, the words have the sense that they have for us only in the context of other *natural* pain behavior—crying, moaning, etc. Such linguistic practices acquire their significance from non-linguistic ones. Patricia Hanna argued the point as follows:

Imagine a group of people who occasionally utter the words “I’m in pain,” but who never exhibit any natural pain behavior; they would be an enigma to us. We could not treat their use of the words “I’m in pain” as meaning what they would mean if used by us; but what other sense might we ascribe to them?⁴

Pain behavior can take both linguistic and pre-linguistic forms, but Hanna’s very Wittgensteinian point is that linguistic expressions of pain states are intelligible only in the context of their non-linguistic surroundings. But in this case the non-linguistic surroundings (i.e., the crying, moaning, etc.) already presuppose a conscious mental life. I think Wittgenstein holds a similar position with respect to mind and language generally. Consider his remarks concerning the Cartesian claim that animals cannot think:

It is sometimes said that animals do not talk because they lack the mental capacity. And this means: “They do not think, and that is why they do not talk.” But—they simply do not talk. Or to put it better: they do not use language—if we except the most primitive forms of language.—Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.⁵

II

While Wittgenstein does not draw the line between human and animal minds as sharply as some suppose, it is still clear enough that he does intend to draw a line somewhere. But where and how? Wittgenstein’s student, Norman Malcolm, suggests a way of drawing the linguistic line between humans and animals that perhaps elucidates Wittgenstein’s own view.

Malcolm considers a scenario where a dog is chasing the neighbor’s cat. The cat runs toward an oak tree but

at the last moment veers off to a maple tree nearby. The dog runs up to the oak, looks up into its branches, and barks excitedly. If we observe this, Malcolm says, we will want to say, “He thinks the cat went up that oak tree.” And to maintain with Descartes that animals do not think would be an error. Nevertheless, Malcolm does not want to credit the dog with having the mistaken thought, “the cat is up this tree.”

Malcolm’s contention is not so much that it is impossible for dogs or other animals to have thoughts. The question is, what are the grounds for *attributing* thoughts. As Malcolm puts the point, it is not a question about whether or not a dog might *have* thoughts but, rather, whether or not it can *express* thoughts. The expression of the thought, “the cat is up the oak tree,” like the expression of any thought, requires language, according to Malcolm. A dog, or a human being for that matter, might well behave *as if* she was having a certain thought. These are cases of “thinking that *p*.” To have the thought—that *p*—is a linguistically dependent act. Indeed, on Malcolm’s view, “the relation between thought and language must be so close that it is really senseless to conjecture that people may *not* have thoughts, and also really senseless to conjecture that animals *may* have thoughts.”⁶

Malcolm’s argument preserves the Wittgensteinian intuition that language makes a crucial difference in mental capacity while making a case against the Cartesian denial of all mental states to animals. Descartes’ mistake, according to Malcolm, was that he didn’t grasp the distinction between having thoughts and mere thinking. Animals may be credited, on this view, with a wide range of intentional and conscious states: they can feel, be angry, believe, fear, etc., but they cannot have thoughts.

Malcolm’s position is not without its difficulties, however. Since Malcolm will not say what “thoughts” are *in general* (he doesn’t think that there’s sensible answer to that question), it’s hard to get clear on just why they cannot be sensibly attributed to animals. Indeed, as Donald Weiss has shown, it’s easy to construct a counter-example to the contention that thought requires language.⁷ Weiss describes a fictional languageless character, named Arthur, who engages in a range of sophisticated intentional behavior that is clearly best described not only in terms of thinking but also of having thoughts. The moral of the story seems to be that there just is no non-question-begging way to exclude non-linguistic evidence for thought (after all,

consider the case of human mutes!) Some may (and have) resisted the fictional character of Weiss' example. Nevertheless, many ordinary cases of animal behavior seem to require explication in terms of thoughts, not just thinking. Gareth Matthews describes one such case of a well-known ape:

...Sultan...was given two hollow sticks, one of smaller diameter than the other. The smaller one could be inserted into one end of the other to make a single, longer stick. With the longer stick Sultan would be equipped to fetch a banana placed tantalizingly near the bars of the cage. But as Sultan himself determined by trial neither short stick, by itself, was long enough to reach the banana.⁸

Matthews goes on to describe the process whereby Sultan learns that he can reach the banana by placing the sticks together. He then contends, plausibly, that Sultan's behavior is best explained by attributing the following thoughts to Sultan: "The two sticks can be put together to form a single stick" and "the double stick can be used to reach the banana."

There are other impressive examples that strongly invite explication in terms of creatures having attitudes *about* the attitudes of other creatures. Dennett describes the case of vervet monkeys who give a peculiar cry that functions to warn others in the group of an approaching leopard:

...one band of vervets was losing ground in a territorial skirmish with another band. One of the losing-side monkeys, temporarily out of the fray, seemed to get a bright idea: it suddenly issued a leopard alarm (in the absence of any leopards), leading all the vervets to take up the cry and head for the trees—creating a truce and regaining the ground his side had been losing.⁹

This sort of evidence is, to be sure, anecdotal. But it does strongly suggest that there are other grounds for thought—even of fairly high order—than linguistic competence. The vervet, like Sultan, engages in behavior too complex not to be characterized in terms of thought. Now, Malcolm's position could, nonetheless be defended against such examples by simply insisting that such cases credit animals with more than is

necessary. After all, for Malcolm, the connection between thought and language is logical, not evidential. But such an obstinate refusal to attribute thoughts to Arthur, Sultan, or Dennett's vervets on such grounds would seem to amount to the bare *stipulation* that connects thought to language.

III

Despite its difficulties, Malcolm's position is really quite moderate on the issue of animal minds. Like Wittgenstein, Malcolm allows for a fairly rich animal psychology, even if he refuses to attribute thoughts to them. Some, like Davidson, Frey, and Stich, have followed a similar line of reasoning to the conclusion that animals cannot be credited with having any intentional states at all. While these views deserve careful consideration, I will not examine them now. I would like to comment briefly on part of Stich's position on animal belief, though, because I think there is a Wittgensteinian response to it.¹⁰

Stich's contention has to do with the difficulty of identifying the specific *content* of alleged animal belief. The central argument is this. We can attribute beliefs to a creature only if we can specify the contents of the beliefs attributed. But if a creature lacks language, we cannot specify its belief-contents. So, we cannot attribute belief to creatures without language. Stich argues that we cannot specify a belief-content for any animal belief, and unless we can specify belief-content, it is not clear in what sense we can *explain* animal behavior by appealing to their beliefs. "It is absurd to suggest that we can explain an animal's behavior in terms of beliefs and desires when we cannot say what it is that the animal believes."¹¹ An animal like Malcolm's dog cannot have the concept "oak tree" or for that matter "cat." But if not, it is not clear what it is to attribute the belief that the cat is up the oak tree to the dog.

This difficulty involving the content of animal belief is only apparent. It can be removed as long as we don't assume that the specific content of animal beliefs must be identical to those of linguistically competent humans, as Richard Jeffrey has suggested:

But can one agree that the dog simply doesn't have our concept of a tree without concluding that the dog has no concept that we can characterize (say, as 'marker a scratcher can disappear up') that applies relevantly to that

tree and that cat. I don't see why we can't deploy a terminology apt for characterizing those of the dog's beliefs and desires that concern us without falling into the trap of using terms that would only be apt for people.¹²

The differences in canine and human concepts are due to our different "forms of life;" nevertheless, our concepts overlap in many ways. We could adopt something along the lines of Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances"¹³ and thus replace the notion a particular concept *p* with a family of *p*-related concepts. The cat chasing dog's concept of the tree is not identical to our concept, but it is related to our concept and can pick out the same object in the world.

IV

Denying animal mentality has had obvious tragic moral implications for animals. But what of the more moderate limitations proposed (albeit unsuccessfully) by Wittgenstein and Malcolm? In a recent paper, William Hyde, arguing in an explicitly Wittgensteinian spirit, contended that the appropriate way to understand the context for being able to ascribe complex mental states to individuals is in terms of "stories."¹⁴ He suggests that we think of mental states, or at least *complex* mental states, as *story*-states. Rather than conceiving of our mental concepts as referring to inner brain or mind-states, we are to understand them in relation to stories that connect the concepts to other concepts. Only by locating our mental concepts in the appropriate story context can we understand them to be mental states at all.

Hyde draws the following consequences for the possibility of animal *rights*. To have rights, a being must have complex mental states. To have complex mental states means having complex story states, and animals don't have complex story-states. So, they don't have rights. Without stories, no animal can count as "one of us." Thus, on Hyde's view, animals may have moral standing, but they cannot have rights. He also maintains that the very concept of "rights" demands "reciprocity," a condition animals cannot meet.

Where Malcolm excluded animals from the realm of thoughts, Hyde excludes them from the realm of stories. In either case, they don't have rights. I suppose that in allowing for animal concepts, I am allowing for animal stories, if I may use that term. Many animals are, as Tom Regan puts it, subjects-of-a-life; that is,

they have beliefs, desires, perceptions, memory, a sense of the future, goals, and most importantly, a welfare. A dog may not believe its master will arrive the day after tomorrow, but that's just to say that there are some human stories that it doesn't participate in. According to Richard Routley, from a canine perspective, there are as many smells as there are things in the world.¹⁵ Can't we say that from the dog's perspective, every smell tells a story? The human olfactory awareness is comparatively impoverished. So, there are many canine "stories" that we don't participate in. But, I want to claim, what is more significant is that there are *shared* stories, in an admittedly broad sense, between humans and animals.

Perhaps it is too odd to describe the conceptual life of infralinguistic creatures in terms of *stories*. Stories *do* provide context, but context can be provided without, or at least *prior* to, stories. Even stories require context, as Wittgenstein tries to demonstrate in the *Investigations*, when he describes a very primitive "builder's language." Part of the point there was to show that meaning is to be understood in terms of what we *do*. That is, human practices and activities are what give rise to meaning. The only "story" that Wittgenstein builders have is given in their *activity*.¹⁶ The sense of human stories must be understood in connection with human activity—with human life generally. The priority of human life and activity for meaning sheds light on the nature of human morality and the role that animals may play in it.

I don't want to argue about animal *rights per se*. I don't know of anyone who seriously maintains that animals have rights in the sense of meeting the reciprocity condition. Of course, Regan and others deny that moral *agency* is a necessary condition for having rights, thus arguing for rights without reciprocity. And here again, one could employ Wittgenstein's family traits to argue that our conception of animal rights need not include *every* feature of human rights. But I would prefer to avoid the rights quagmire and talk instead about the psychological and moral connection between humans and animals. Cora Diamond has argued that the recognition of *human* rights has little to do with an impartial account of which mental states, complex or not, other human beings have.¹⁷ Rather, the sense of moral community with another lies in the recognition of one simply as a "fellow human being"—as Prof. Hyde might say, "one of us." But Diamond suggests similarly viewing animals as "fellow creatures" to

whom we extend our pity and our sympathy. I find Diamond's view to be attractive. And it is a view very much in the Wittgensteinian spirit. I would only add that sympathy and pity are appropriate only if we share something with nonhuman animals. There is a *psychological* connection here that gives the sympathy and pity their point.¹⁸ To recognize an animal in this way as a "fellow creature" is to that extent to see it as "one of us." The lines between the species simply cannot be sharply drawn.

Notes

¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York: Avon Books, 1975, p. 14.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Macmillan, 1953, p. 174.

³ Bernard Rollin, "Thought Without Language," in Regan and Singer, *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (2E), Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 49.

⁴ Patricia Hanna, "Must Thinking Bats Be Conscious?" *Philosophical Investigations* 13, 1990, p. 354.

⁵ *Philosophical Investigations* I 25, p. 12.

⁶ Malcolm, Norman, "Thoughtless Brutes," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 46, 1973, pp. 17-18.

⁷ Donald Weiss, "Professor Malcolm on Animal Intelligence," *Philosophical Review* 84, 1975, pp. 88-93.

⁸ Gareth Matthews, "Animals and the Unity of Psychology," *Philosophy* 53, 1978, p. 447.

⁹ Daniel Dennett, "Intentional Systems in Cognitive Ethology: The 'Panglossian Paradigm' Defended," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 6, 1983, p. 347.

¹⁰ It should be noted that unlike Davidson or Frey, Stich's argument against *animal* belief forms a part of an argument against beliefs and "folk psychology" generally.

¹¹ Stephen Stich, "Do Animals Have Beliefs?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 57, 1979, p. 18.

¹² Richard Jeffrey, "Animal Interpretation," in E. Le Pore and B. McLaughlin, eds., *Actions and Events*, New York: Basil Blackwell, p. 485.

¹³ *Philosophical Investigations* I 67, p. 32.

¹⁴ William Hyde, "Animal Rights and the Folk Theory of Reference," (unpublished) presented to the Philosophy Symposium of California State University, Fullerton, March 1995.

¹⁵ See Richard Routley "Alleged Problems in Attributing Beliefs to Animals," *Inquiry* 24, pp. 385-417, 1981.

¹⁶ It may be, as Rush Rhees ("Wittgenstein's Builders," *Meeting of the Aristotelian Society*, 14 March, 1960) has contended, that the verbal expressions of Wittgenstein's builders are too impoverished to qualify as a language. But ultimately, whatever qualifies as language must be embedded in human activity.

¹⁷ Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," *Philosophy* 53, 1978, pp. 465-479.

¹⁸ For more on the psychological continuity between animals and humans, see Gareth Matthews, "Animals and the Unity of Psychology," *Philosophy* 53, 1978, pp. 437-454.

