The paper you are about to read is the first draft of my introduction to an anthology called *Language, Ethics and Animal Life: Wittgenstein and Beyond*, forthcoming (Continuum/Bloomsbury, 2012). It really is a draft. There are parts missing, and I will revise some parts of it severely, so all comments are more than welcome.

The discussion will be in Swedish, unless there are some participants that prefer English.

Yours,

Niklas
1. Three examples

First example: A short sequence from the movie Alien: Resurrection.¹ We see a man lying with his chest under a vehicle repairing it. He is whistling. He lies in a mechanical wheelchair which has a backrest that can be tilted backwards. Above him, another man is standing on a ledge, playing with a knife – sounding like a monkey. With all the marks of an intentional action the man on the ledge “drops” the knife so that it falls and penetrates the leg of the man under the vehicle, but there is no immediate reaction from him. Instead, a woman named Call says: “What is wrong with you!” “Just a little target-practicing”, the man on the ledge replies, “Vriees isn’t complaining.” Vriees slides out, looks at his leg and says: “Goddammit! Johner, you son of a bitch!” “Ah, come on man,” Johner replies, “you didn’t feel a thing.” Johner makes a phony monkey laughter. “You are an inbred motherfucker, you know that?”, Call says. She looks at him with anger in her eyes, pulls the knife out of Vriees’s leg and breaks it – an act that offends Johner deeply.

Second example: A friend of mine grew up in a house outside the city with farms neighboring their house, so they were always near animals. Farm keeping, hunting and fishing were everyday activities for them and the transformation from animal to food came, as it were, naturally to them. He and his sister had two pet rabbits, “Snow White” and “Sooty”, which were very dear to them. But, as most pet animals grow old long before we humans do, the time came when they had to be done away with. Their father took care of that

¹ Alien: Resurrection, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (Twentieth Century Fox, 1997).
and, shockingly, prepared a meal out of them. At the dinner table, the children cheerfully fought over the cooked rabbit parts: “I want Snow White!”; “I want Sooty’s leg”, they said and ate their pets with smiles on their faces.

*Third example:* This is Georgina.

![Georgina](image)

She’s dead. We killed her, me and my former girlfriend “J”. Georgina had a heart condition. That’s why we had her put to death. For nearly two years, she was medicated with diuretic medicine that helped remove fluid from her lungs and a heart medicine that supposedly widened her artery so that her weakening heart could move her blood more easily. But eventually the muscle would no longer do it. We knew that. As her heart weakened, more fluid assembled in her lungs and she started to cough. During her last days she had trouble breathing, so she stretched her neck up – as if looking towards the sky, or at J – thus enabling some air to get into, if not fill, her lungs.

Finally the day came. J called me on the phone and said that Georgina wasn’t doing so well and asked if I wanted to come with them to the veterinarian. As I came to their apartment, it became evident that Georgina was in a very poor condition. She was slow, had
no appetite and her breathing was beyond heavy. She barely had the lungs to cough with and once she even lost her balance. It was very likely that we would take Georgina to the veterinarian but not back.

The examination went fairly quickly. Georgina was in very bad shape and we were confronted with something of a dilemma. We could place Georgina in intensive care for a week or so – a treatment which may give her a couple more months – or we could put her to sleep right now. To take her home again was not a possibility. One choice. Two options. None good. None acceptable.

The decision concerning Georgina’s existence was J’s to make. (In our community dogs are owned and she was hers.) The veterinarian was extremely helpful and she let us take all the time we needed. The examination room had a door facing a parking lot so we went outside with Georgina to think things through. In an attempt not to upset her we made a deal not to cry in front of her taking turns to go aside and dispose of tears. As we were trying to make up our minds about Georgina’s existence she walked slowly back and forth between us. She clearly knew something was wrong. She knew that we were not feeling well. The dog we were about to put to sleep was comforting us.

J asked the veterinarian if she could see the room Georgina would be placed in if we decided to give intensive care a chance. When J came back outside, she shook her head. The matter was settled. Georgina would die of sorrow and fear if not from her heart condition in that cage. Perhaps her history as an abandoned stray dog formed her, but she did not enjoy solitude. She hated it.

So the decision was made and Georgina’s passing was about to begin. The veterinarian assured us that this was a good thing to do. “This is the right decision. You are doing it for her sake.” Sometimes, sincere and comforting words ring false. Of course, it requires a peculiar perspective on things to describe the injection of poison as “the right
thing” or “for her sake”. One of Georgina’s forelegs was shaved. A needle was inserted and taped into place. This gave her some very understandable stress, so the veterinarian said that we should let her walk around a bit so that she could calm down – which she did, on three legs with lowered head. She was placed in J’s knee and injected. The bladder relaxed and urine spilled over J’s jeans as an emblem over the order of things. Georgina’s final transformation, from tense to completely soft, had taken place and J and I went to our separate homes – J with an empty leash in her hands.

2. Philosophical Drama and Argumentation

The three above examples are not unproblematic from a philosophical perspective. First of all, they are somewhat dramatic, perhaps even melodramatic, emotionally charged and it is not evident from the start what philosophical work they are meant to do. I have placed the three examples in a particular order. The first is perhaps easiest to incorporate into contemporary academic philosophy. There seems to be one single act performed there (the brute “dropping” his knife) which we may or may not condemn, pass judgment upon for this or that reason; say, it was mean because it is always mean to bully. We can also imagine a philosopher (of a particular bent) to be arguing that it was not really an act to be condemned for moral reasons because the man in the wheel chair had no feeling in his legs, and so (in an “objective” sense) no harm was done because harm always has a physical root (in, say, pain). Strange as it may seem, there are philosophers who willfully and proudly state that they succumb to repugnant conclusions – thus attempting to imply that their own hearts and egos are the subordinates of “rationality” and “objectivity”.

The second example is more complex from that perspective. Surely, we can single out one action to pass judgment upon in that too – eating one’s pets – but the nature of
this “action” is, at least seemingly, more difficult to cash out. In the case of the stew made of bunnies, the fact that it is real (not fictional) may appear to put a particular form of pressure upon us. For example, it becomes harder to condemn the action without also saying something about the persons involved. Simply put: the surrounding of the action cannot be circumvented without considerable distortion of the nature of the action. It matters that they were kids, that they grew up close to animals, that they were used to see animals being slaughtered and prepared for meals, that this particular meal was cooked by their father (a trustworthy and upright man), and so on. But it also matters that when my friend, many years later, tells the story he finds it at once absurd, comical, tragic and bizarre – something very remote from the life he leads today. It thus brings into view how complicated a reference to a “form of life” is – a phrase that is recurring in nearly all of the papers in this volume.\(^2\) If we want to evaluate this action morally, the response “Eating animals they knew was simply a part of their form of life, and hence it was correct by that ‘standard’; and then his form of life shifted, and now it is no longer so” handsomely seems to beg the question. We might use such talk to describe that a shift has occurred, and perhaps also to describe what kind of shift we have in front of us. But does it give us enough footholds to make a moral judgment? Does it explain anything about this particular region of our moral lives in language? The philosophical reference to the fact that two forms of life differ, that they can and do change, has to do another kind of philosophical work than explaining what is right and what wrong. (I will return to the idea of a form of life, and the difficulties in appropriating it, below.)

The third example is also the longest. I take this example to be even harder to turn into something that most contemporary academic moral philosophers might accept as “philosophy”. One might say that the first example is fictional and that the second is real but anecdotal (which already makes it problematic). But the third is personal, emotional and near

to confessional. Thus it clearly violates some common assumptions of what philosophy is (at least of the contemporary kind that strives to be scientific): it is not objective (enough?), and it may also be considered too emotional, too personal and indeed too detailed to give us any kind of generality. Surprisingly perhaps, the fictional example thus seems to lend itself more easily to academic discussions than the real. One might easily picture someone saying that in that case it is at least clear that we are talking about an example, and an example is always an example of something else, something general.

Of course, someone might argue that my third example includes a typical philosophical element: a moral dilemma. Should we put the dog to sleep now or attempt to postpone death by means of intensive care? And then we might quarrel and give reasons for and against our different views in a philosophy seminar – working under the assumption that, for near to logical reasons, one of these actions must be at least a lesser evil than the other and that that makes it “right” (if not good). But can the details of that tale be so removed without significant loss? Is the sense of necessity in the starting-point that one of the actions has to be a lesser evil illusory? For us who were involved, it was evident that we were not really confronted with a case of good vs. bad, or right vs. wrong. It was bad vs. bad, wrong vs. wrong, intolerable vs. intolerable. We might have reached some kind of mental peace in assuring ourselves that “it was the only thing we could do”, but that doesn’t make it right and it most certainly doesn’t make it “good”. The only good outcome in this case, was a healthy dog. But the good was not an option. So we act upon conscience, but not without regret and remorse.

It is true that we did what we thought best and that, in some sense, we were “calculating”. But that does not disqualify the fact that for me and J, the description “the right action” was not exactly false, but void or hollow, misplaced, carrying no genuine weight.
That we did what we thought was best does not remove the weight on our shoulders from an event that was bad through and through.

If it is argued (or silently assumed) that there has to be one sense of the event according to which we can rest assured that we did the right thing (in an objective sense), does not that include a sort of denial of the sense of tragedy that I and J experienced? A philosophy of an abstract, theoretical, intellectualized kind – one that builds on what Alice Crary, in “W. G. Sebald and the Ethics of Narrative”, calls a narrow conception of what an argument is and of what ‘rational’ is supposed to mean – might even include the claim that our sense of tragedy was merely a sense, not really real, and as such “nothing more” than an emotional reaction; something philosophy must (try to) disregard. But what if emotions are not mere outbursts of the un-reflected ego – outbursts, that is, in a nearly biological sense – but part of our understanding?³ I would like to suggest that the tormenting feelings of regret and remorse, of uncertainty and sorrow, are part of an adequate understanding of this situation. If you remove them and turn the death of this animal into an example or an intellectual puzzle, you have not reached the core of the moral concerns involved but distorted our reality to such a point that it is only in a diluted sense that we are talking about “the same event”.

The ways in which the habitual distinction between emotions and understanding is problematic are further highlighted and discussed in Ylva Gustafsson’s “What is Altruism?” and Camilla Kronqvist’s “Talking about Emotion”. Gustafsson shows us that we misunderstand the nature of altruism if we do not tend to how that concept is intertwined with more complex aspects of our moral lives in language, such as what it means to “hava a life”, and that we often go wrong in our theoretical accounts of altruism (and related concepts)

³ This has been convincingly argued by thinkers such as Stanley Cavell and Martha Nussbaum. See e.g. Stanley Cavell, “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan”, in Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell, edited by Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 177; and Martha Nussbaum XXXXXX
because it is very easy to think of the concept of understanding in purely epistemological terms. Similarly, Kronqvist shows us that we have a lot to gain in thinking about what it is that we are doing when we are talking about emotion in relation to humans and animals. The multifarious ways in which talking about emotion comes into our lives, displays clearly how one can go wrong if one adopts a wholly naturalistic and scientistic perspective on the question about the nature of emotions. Thus, one might say that the form of scientism that underlies the surprisingly common idea that any true account of morality and of human’s relations to animals must be based on descriptions in which our emotional involvements with one another deliberately have been left out, or set aside as irrelevant and even dangerous, runs the risk of achieving a only a partial accuracy.\(^4\) Kronqvist and Gustafsson can help us see that the idea that emotions need to be disregarded come together with, on the one hand, the attempt to disable the importance of context and, on the other, the desire to turn real and oftentimes messy human concerns into something manageable in a “purely intellectual” and “rational” way. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that morality can be reduced to emotions, as if our emotions are the foundation on which our moral judgments rest. Rather, it

---

\(^4\) One instructive example here is Peter Singer’s response to Coetzee’s fictional character Elisabeth Costello’s lectures. Singer notices, rightly, that there seems to be a point in Costello’s train of thought at which she is, as it were, running out of arguments, and that she does appeal to our emotions (empathy and sympathy in particular). Singer takes this to be a dangerous mistake of Costello’s, and he argues vehemently that the distinction between feelings and “moral data” must remain intact and unchallenged. (See *The Lives of Animals*, pp. 85 – 91, especially, p. 89.) Just how difficult this is, becomes clear if one reads Singer’s remarks on the film *Project Nim*, directed by James March (Roadside Attractions, 2011) in which Singer’s tone of voice is much more emphatic and it seems to me that Singer too recognizes that emotional responses are part of our understanding and that the cultural habitat of animals, of our more or less intimate relation with them, is of importance – which should also lead us to say that questions concerning animal rights cannot be reduced to questions about pain and suffering alone. See Peter Singer, “The Troubled Life of Nim Chimpsky” (“New York Review of Books Blog”, August 18, 2011).

It is possible to see the contents of this footnote as a comment to my above claim that there are philosophers who attempt to imply that their hearts and egos are the subordinates of rationality and objectivity. In saying that these are attempts, I am, in turn, meaning to imply that the supposed implications are void. First of all, one might say that Singer’s starch reaction against Costello’s appeal to emotions is, well… emotional. Secondly, if a philosopher calls his own conclusion “repugnant” he or she is already implying that it contains something that he or she, at heart rejects. A wholehearted defense of such a position is thus impossible, or rather, an illusion. One might even say that this kind of antonymic philosophy – that includes the attempt to wholeheartedly defend philosophical theses that one feel to be in need of descriptions such as “repugnant” – is a form of a repudiation of the ordinary, a more or less deliberate attempt to diverge from shared sense and meaning; an expression of the seemingly everlasting bewitchment inherent in the idea of a doubled world; ours and “the real”.

---
is an attempt to rediscover a broadened understanding of ‘understanding’ that often seems to have been overlooked or theorized away in contemporary academic philosophy.

The death of Georgina shows us, at least, that the human weakness is, as it were, forced upon us by the facts of reality. One bad, regrettable, decision had to be made. I feel inclined to say that this little death thus can show that the desire to intellectualize, to turn a death into a dilemma, to calculate pro’s and con’s, is completely understandable, called for, if you wish. But perhaps we turn to these resources of our intellect not so much to find out what really is the case, but to make the unbearable facts of life bearable? Is it possible that we sometimes turn to arguments to hide our own weaknesses? Do we at times turn to abstract theorizing in order not to face reality? And, if so, how does that affect philosophy, how we do philosophy? (These are questions, not answers. I’m asking, not claiming.)

Obviously, I do not mean to imply that all moral questions have this form in which the true moral work is a sort of struggle to acknowledge the reality of a tragedy. They don’t. Most if the time, we know what is good. We just don’t know why we don’t do it. It’s not that we don’t know that murder and rape is wrong. These are not neutral facts to be evaluated. The Wittgensteinian strategy of trying to make clear how one teaches a child a word is here instructive.\(^5\) For we do not – do we? – teach our children that there is this “thing” called ‘murder’ where one human kills the other, without also telling them that it is a very bad thing… Murder and rape are extreme examples and it might be argued that they are, as it were, too clear. But, as Iris Murdoch – another philosopher drawing upon Wittgenstein – convincingly has argued, morality is not a field delineated by a set of obviously moral concepts (good, bad, right, wrong, evil, murder, rape, mutilation, suffering, happiness...)\(^6\) It’s not that we don’t know how to hurt the other with seemingly “innocent” words too; and with gestures, a neglect to meet the eyes of the other, by not listening, etc. We do these things

---

\(^5\) Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 9, 143—155, 197, 244.

more or less on a daily basis, by accident, by mistake, by thoughtlessness and, at times, even with intent. (It is, for example, possible to demolish a man’s self-esteem with the words ‘Is that really your hair?’) And, as Stanley Cavell has argued, we are “exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims.”\(^7\) If “[i]ntimate understanding is understanding which is *implicit*,\(^8\) as Cavell said, then philosophical clarity may require a form of writing that enables us to absorb the intimate details of our lives in language. Does this quest for implicit understanding require intimate understanding in a personal sense, or does it merely fall back on the fact that we must trust each other’s familiarity with the language and culture shared? And in what sense can a form of intimate understanding counter or challenge more scientifically oriented forms of understanding?

Nora Hämäläinen’s discussion of Raimond Gaita’s views in “Honor, Dignity and the Realm of Meaning” brings into view how the use of records of personal engagements with animals is problematic, *if* they are meant to serve as counter-arguments to scientific theories or philosophical theories that adhere to a narrow view of what counts as objective and what counts as argumentation.\(^9\) What Gaita argues is that personal anecdotes may be useful, and detailed descriptions of the role animals play in our lives might even be necessary if we are to achieve a more comprehensive view of the human/animal relation, but they cannot rebuke science on science’s terms. The claim that philosophy needs richer, fuller and more detailed and nuanced depictions of our lives with animals – that we see in Crary’s discussion of Sebald as well as in Hämäläinen’s discussion of Gaita, Anscombe, Coetzee and Lidman – should thus not merely be seen as more attentive or emotionally sensitive alternatives to other more abstract and theoretical philosophical theories. Rather, the turn to

\(^7\) Stanley Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 12.

\(^8\) Ibid.

literature includes a reconsideration of the whole field under investigation. It is an invitation to a reconsideration of what the field is. The turn to literature should not, I believe, be seen as offering new solutions to “old” problems about animal rights or moral questions concerning our relations to animals. Crary and Hämäläinen are not exactly contesting the validity of the arguments of alternative theories. Rather, literature comes in as a reminder of what our moral world is and it helps to bring into view how complex and multifarious the world we share with animals is, and that many moral theories go wrong, not because their arguments are unsound, but because they rely on a reductive picture of what our world is like and of what counts as rational and what counts as arguments. The turn to literature is a call for a more adequate description and understanding of our world and our language. The employment of fiction is a call for a more austere form of realism than most philosophical theories about these matters accommodate. Put otherwise, W. G. Sebald’s “Austerlitz” and G. M. Cotezee’s “David Lurie” and “Elisabeth Costello” are far more real than most “agents” we encounter in analytic philosophy. ‘Peter,’ ‘Mary’ and ‘John’ – doubtless the most commonly employed names in this region of philosophical exemplification – are variables, not persons.

Anecdotes of various sorts may also seem to provide a much too particular outlook on things. (“You claim this happened, once! So what?”) And it is true that for scientific purposes the personal and the particular remain problematic. It is obvious that the repeatability of the experiment is of vital importance in many scientific circumstances. But one should not therefor conclude that generality always must come together with facts of quantity and repeatability. If one reads Pär Segerdahl’s “Humanizing Nonhumans”, philosophical clarity seems to require something different from the type of certainty, probability, corroboration and what not, that the repeatability of an experiment may provide. Is it, for example, really possible to start to ask for evidence for the other’s ability to speak when he is talking to you? When he is rebuking you, calling you a monster? Scientific tests
generally involve an idea of the expected outcome – you need to know what you are testing – so the scientist, more often than not, knows what he or she is looking for when testing or experimenting. The scientist, so it seems to me, often knows what his or her problem is and what would count as a solution to the problem, an answer to his or her questions. The question is if this is true about philosophy too? As Segerdahl’s work makes clear, it would be foolish to assume that philosophy can go on unaffected by empirical research. But that does not mean that philosophy is one with the sciences or that they can, as it were, marry. Philosophy rather seems to begin when we are no longer certain about what to make of our world, or of our empirical data, or when our ordinary language stand in some kind of conflict with the languages of the sciences, or when we feel that the words we used to be able to lead now seem to resist our guidance, or when some of our fundamental presuppositions of the order of things are challenged.

One might say that the papers in this book, in different ways and for varying reasons, echoes Wittgenstein’s strive to take philosophical language back to the everyday. What that kind of philosophical movement attempts to accomplish is not the development of an alternative theory – with our ordinary language use employed as a standard of correctness – with which to counter other theories. If there is a quarrel with alternative “theories” here, it is not about whether or not it is philosophically “kosher” to depart from the ordinary, nor about presenting alternative solutions to the theories’ problems, but about what our ordinary world is like. For example, Segerdahl’s objections against a particular form of empirical research is not that they are mistaken in thinking that we need to test the linguistic skills of apes, but that they are wrong in their view of what linguistic skills are. They are testing a

---

10 Of course, this is not to say that all scientific research runs smoothly and that science never encounters the unexpected. I do not mean to suggest that there is this thing called “Science” in which its practitioners proceed only in an instrumental sense, solving already known puzzles more or less mechanically. I merely mean that experiments and tests are molded, designed, for a purpose.

11 See also Pär Segerdahl, Michael Fields and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, Kanzi’s Primal Language: The Cultural Initiation of Primates into Language (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

world that is not ours, they are deflecting from, experimenting with, rebuking, a world that is not real. They are testing a picture of language, a theoretical model, and not our actual language – which is far more complex and multifarious than the picture suggests.

* * *

A discussion of Olli Lagerpetz’s piece on the concept of rape in relation to crickets (“Rape among the Panorpidae, Spouse Abuse among the Mantis Religiosa, and Other ‘Reproductive Strategies’ in the Animal and Human World”) will enter here. This paper nicely brings the connections between the “Wittgensteinian” critique of scientism, the weight and importance of our ordinary language and the difficulties involved in simply disconnecting an everyday psychological (and evaluative) notion from its “ordinary” home, into view.

* * *

If we now return to my first example with these remarks in mind, it now (hopefully) appears that what looked like something that effortlessly lent itself to philosophical reasoning, no longer seems to do so just so easily. Above, I said that the first example perhaps is the easiest for contemporary academic philosophy to adopt since it may seem as if there is one single action portrayed there for us to pass judgment upon. I also said that the fictional example, rather than the anecdotal, invites a kind of generalization that more personal stories appear not to do. My emphasis’s of the ‘perhaps’ and the ‘appears’ are meant to underline that such renditions of the example would be rushed. It is true that we get a vivid and colorful illustration of one action in the film sequence. We do see a man “dropping” his knife in such a way that it penetrates the leg of a man who has no feelings in his legs. But is that all we see? And why do we see it? And what does “seeing it” mean in this context? And is the nature of the action something we can understand without also considering the fact that it occurs as a scene in a movie?
If we ask what work this scene does in the film – which is not necessarily the same question as asking what work its author, the director, intended it to do – then we must also focus on the fact that it serves the function of introducing characters, Johner (the “brute”) in particular. This is where we learn what kind of a man he is: hard, strong and insensitive; a force to be reckoned with. We learn this by observing what he does and how he responds to others. And one might also say that when he, as a response to Call destroying his knife, tells us that “I am not a man with whom to fuck”, he is saying something we knew already, adding merely that we should also understand him to be, as it were, a man of principles. Thus, it would be a simplification to say that there is single action there (in the movie scene) for us to pass judgment on. If “dropping” a knife in the leg of a disabled man was a “neutral fact” for us to pass judgment upon, the scene wouldn’t work.

One might put it this way: the scene “works” – i.e. it manages to introduce this man in a convincing way as this kind of man – because we do not restrict the realm of the moral to questions of pain and suffering alone; because we do not first see one action and then go on to query whether it was morally blameworthy or praiseworthy; because we do not see one action in isolation. Indeed, one might say that even this example should lead us to the thoughts that philosophical understanding of morality requires a widened sense of the moral, that sensitivity towards context is indispensible and that “mere calculation” is not the procedure we normally employ when we assess one another, that moral understanding is not to be reached if we focus solely on actions and choices. In fact, one way in which we learn that Johner is a brute comes from the fact that he does, as it were, calculate. Johner gives us “rational” reasons for his actions that are supposed to trump the others’ objections to his behaviour: Vriees has no feelings in his legs therefore it is not morally blameworthy to let a knife penetrate his leg. Perhaps one might even say that it is the presentation of Johner as calculative is part of the presentation of him as brutish. Call, Vriess and, I suspect, most of
the spectators of the movie responds by saying ‘no!’ on no other basis than that this way of relating to one’s other is undignified.

We should also note that the way Johner is introduced as a brute is by linking him to animals. Johner’s phony monkey laughter can be seen as a way of presenting him as “not really human”. Again, it is fairly unimportant whether or not the director had that intention. What matters is that it comes natural to “us” to think that a brute is more “animal” than the rest of us. In that sense, the “film thinks”, as Stanley Cavell has put it, by means of holding up a picture in front of us for us to relate to regardless of what its author intended. And the mere fact that it works, that we understand it and as it were countersigns it portrayals, shows us, makes it clear to us (if we reflect upon it), that it comes natural to us to say that the contrast to the human, the non-human, is “the animal”.

If it is true that the scene works, at least partly, because it comes natural to us to think of the animal as “The Other” (of the human), we should also say that this picture of the animal is something that we all, to some extent, share. It is deeply rooted in our culture, our form of life. It is no wonder that we become baffled when an ape is rebuking a human being. The talking ape disrupts the order of things, makes some of our most fundamental beliefs visible to us, and forces us to look at them anew. Segerdahl’s disruptive experience is thus not merely a description of how faulty our picture of (some) animals are, but also a testimony to the ways in which they are different from us. The fact that a human is stunned by a talking ape means both that apes are more similar to us than we might have thought, and it is an acknowledgement of our separateness. This also shows that when Segerdahl talks about

---

13 Cavell’s idea that ‘the film thinks’ is, Cavell says, “to begin with just a provocative way of saying: Don’t ask what the artist is thinking or intending, but ask why the work is as it is, why just this is here in just that way. (…) My formulation employing the work’s thinking or intending or wanting something, is meant to emphasize the sense that the work wants something of us who behold or hear or read it. This is a function of our determining what we want of it, why or how we are present at it – what our relation to it is. It and I (each I present at it) are responsible to each other.” In “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan” in Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein after Cavell, edited by Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 186.
“encultured apes” or about a “pan/homo culture”, he is not denying that apes are different from us. The point is rather that preconceived views can be disturbed when made visible and that it often is hard, very hard, to elucidate and understand one’s most fundamental beliefs and attitudes – those that are not “opinions” in Wittgenstein’s view\(^\text{14}\) – that which has remained uncontestable, “given”, that which we have taken for granted, that on which our investigations, judgments, arguments, quarrels, opinions, rest. Mikel Burley’s “Wittgenstein, Wonder and Attention to Animals” also bears witness of how our encounters with animal life can bring facts about our own lives, our understanding and our morality, clearly into view in a way that is difficult, if even possible, to attain without such experiences. The recognition of the span between estrangement and familiarity that Burley describes functions to make visible facts about ourselves that we might have taken for granted or thought of as non-existing, or repressed from philosophical discourse on the assumption that they are irrelevant. One might say that attention to animal form of lives may functions as a kind of contrast that bring about a clearer conception about or own humanity, our own form of life.

One might even say that the attention to animals here paid, shows that philosophical clarity about these matters – about the human-animal relation, about the human’s engagement with its others, about the nature of of moral discourse and evaluation – must take the complexity of contextuality (linguistic and cultural) into account, and that we do not understand them if we focus solely on singular actions or judgments and statements and scrutinize them on their own. My three examples are partly meant to bring out the misguidedness of the attempt to single out singular actions and judgment and statements. I have tried to show that even that which might look like “one action” with a clear sense – say Johner’s little knife-party – will be misrepresented and misunderstood if thought of only in terms of already existing philosophical theories. The death of an animal can show us that the

tendency to intellectualize and to remove all emotional elements of moral understanding may give us something that is more easily dealt with by means of theoretical models, but it might be at the cost of misrepresentation. And that a human’s moral language can alter to such an extent that a joyful dinner is turned into something utterly remote an incomprehensible shows that the forms of life we lead are not static but in movement.

Together we can see these points converging in a call for a more sensitive form of philosophical method. To put it bluntly: it is a call for a reversal of philosophical strategies. The world should not be recast so as to fit our theoretical ideals; our philosophizing must be recast so as to be in touch with our world. This is one reason why I wanted to start with examples, with stories about our world, rather than theoretical accounts.

3. Different forms of forms of life

The essays collected in this volume all draw on Wittgenstein’s philosophy in various ways, some more indirect than others. Now, even though Wittgenstein’s writings include a fairly large amount of animals and references to animal life – the most famous being the lion we could not understand even if it spoke to us15 – it would be a mistake to say that Wittgenstein had his own philosophy of animal life or animal rights or a theory about the difference between humans and animals. This means that there is no unified conception examined here; and that is another reason why I wanted to introduce the themes under discussion here by means of descriptions of human-animal relations, fictional and real, rather than starting off from an elaboration of the recurring notions, phrases, references, themes.

Wittgenstein’s talk about different “forms of life” – clearly one of the most frequently employed formulations of Wittgenstein’s in this volume – should not be seen as a

15 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 190. (Also discussed in Burley’s “Wittgenstein, Wonder and Attention to Animals” below.)
definitive and well established theoretical notion that can easily be appropriated. ‘Form of life’ (Lebensform) is not a technical concept. It is tempting to summarize different occurrences of that phrase into a much too edifying, constructive or positive account, thus downplaying Wittgenstein’s own methodological goal not to present theories or to do hypothetical philosophy.¹⁶

If there is a “standard account” of Wittgenstein’s idea of “forms of life”, it is that the meanings of our words are communal and that sharing a language means sharing a worldview. This is not exactly false, but it easily leads us into questions concerning linguistic and cultural relativism on the one hand and to a specific charge of conservatism (that is often directed against so-called ordinary language philosophies) on the other. That is, if one assumes that we hold the views we hold simply because we share a language, then it may appear as if it is impossible for us to, as it were, think outside the box and that we cannot really change the way we perceive things. As a positive account of how the world is, a metaphysical thesis of sorts, the idea of “forms of life” seems to be at once static (since we cannot choose which language to use) and ad hoc (since it may seem as if the way we perceive our world and our relations to each other is “merely conventional”).

This rather common understanding of “forms of life” may lead us to think that the form of life we happen to be in sets the standard for what is right and what is wrong and it is that thought that in turn may lead us in two opposing directions. Either we think that we are, as language users, subordinated to the law of language. Or we may come to think that we can more or less choose our own standard of correctness since language, and so our form of life, is conventional. Neither of these options seem to me right.

In relation to this, I think that Stanley Cavell put his finger on something immensely important when he noticed that Wittgenstein’s famous remark: “So you are saying

¹⁶ Ibid., § 109.
that human agreement decides what is true and false?” – It’s what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement of opinions but in form of life.”

17 It is easy to misunderstand if one does not also take Wittgenstein’s equally recurrent talk about the natural into account. Cavell’s point is that we should not understand Wittgenstein’s talk about forms of life in a conventional (contractual) sense. We agree and disagree; but these agreements and disagreements seem to have a common ground, or backdrop against which they make sense. This “backdrop” – and I think we need to take all metaphors attempting to capture this with a pinch of salt – does not consist of “opinions” that “we” have (somehow and indeed very mysteriously) agreed upon. That’s exactly the picture that Wittgenstein is contesting. Rather, the contrast Wittgenstein draws between agreement and opinions suggests that we agree in language (not about language). And we do not choose our language (as we may choose to employ particular words on particular occasions and rebuke or praise our fellow beings for employing others). It is clear that we cannot choose what language to speak – “clear” in the sense that it is unclear what it would mean to do so. But we cannot choose just any words of our language to employ either. That is not because it would go against what we have agreed upon, a breach of contract as it were, but because we would make ourselves incomprehensible. Words belong in contexts, depend on them, but they do not belong in just any context. When I or you employ a word in a context – I or you employ it in a place, at a location in our world, in nature. These are not “conventions”.

A conventional sense of form of life will support a conventionalized, or contractual, sense of agreement. But there is a sense of form of life that contests this.

Call the former the ethnological sense, or horizontal sense. Contesting that there is a biological or vertical sense. Here what is at issue are not alone differences between promising and fully

intending, or between coronations and inaugurations, or between barter and a credit system, or between transferring your money or sword from one hand to another and giving your money or sword into the hands of another; these are differences within the same plane, the horizon, of the social, of human society. The biological or vertical sense of form of life recalls differences between the human and so-called ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ forms of life, between, say, poking at your food, perhaps with a fork, and pawing at it, or pecking at it. Here the romance of the apposable thumb comes into play, and that of the upright posture and of the eyes set for heaven; but also the specific strength and scale of the human body and of the human senses and of the human voice.\(^\text{19}\)

Our form of life is social, and so is language. But our form of life is also nature, and so is language. “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.”\(^\text{20}\)

This means that it is only in a very broad sense that the notion of “form of life” captures something linguistic, even though Wittgenstein says that “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.”\(^\text{21}\) Wittgenstein here uses the notion of “form of life” negatively in order to debunk pictures of language according to which it is merely a system of signs. He is not using ‘language’ to describe the sense of ‘form of life’. Thus, the notion here comes in, not as a positive account, but as the perfectly ordinary phrase it is, and he reaches for it when trying to show that language is not something cut off from the world nor disconnected from either our relations to one another or from nature. Language is, in that sense, not something we employ. It is our habitat.

It is as such that it functions as a “frame” or background for our judgments and opinions.\(^\text{22}\) We walk and talk, eat our meat, drown and die, laugh and cry, digest and distress, regret the mistress, break our bones, smile and moan – all that, and infinitely more, is

\(^{19}\) Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, pp. 41f.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., §19.

\(^{22}\) The scare quotes around ‘frame’ are necessary to signal that this is not really an enclosed space but something in change, something evolving
presupposed when we pass judgments upon our next of kin. And one might say that Iris Murdoch posed one of the question that this book is a response to: “We do continually make choices – but why should we blot out as irrelevant the different background of these choices, whether they are made confidently on the basis of a clear specification of the situation, or tentatively, with no confidence of having sufficiently explored the details?”

The response is: we shouldn’t.

This “background” is not something mysterious. It is hard to see, and thus easy to neglect when philosophizing, just because it is right in front of us all the time. That which we take for granted, we take for granted. It is not doubted, not proved, not seen, not hidden. We are, as it were, comfortable in it; it is certain, not a piece of knowledge. These are the themes explored in Julia Hermann’s paper “Man as a Moral Animal”. Hermann takes this sentence from On Certainty as her starting point: “I want to conceive it [this kind of certainty] as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.”

This paragraph of Wittgenstein’s is preceded by two very interesting remarks, so let us take them in order:

357. One might say: “I know” expresses comfortable certainty, not the certainty that is struggling.

358. Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.)

359. But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.

---

24 Wittgenstein, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
As Hermann makes clear, Wittgenstein perceives the platform of our knowing as something that includes many sentences we might want to call ‘empirical’. This means that even the empirical world – biological, physical, physiological, etc. – is part of the ground on which we stand when we pass judgments or condemn or praise actions. Thus, Hermann enables us to see the connection between Wittgenstein’s vision of language and a natural (as opposed to a merely conventional) sense of “forms of life”. Interestingly, as Wittgenstein returns to the phrase “form of life”, he adds the parenthetical remark “That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.” Now, what is badly thought end expressed here?

I am inclined to think that Wittgenstein here hesitates to equate comfortable certainty with a form of life for at least two reasons. First, one need not be comfortable in one’s form of life. The feeling of not being at home in this world is not as unusual as one might want to think. Second, a form of life is lived. It might be cared for, nourished or denied. (As I’ve said: it’s not a technical notion and so it has many different uses.) But the certainty that Wittgenstein aims at elucidating here can hardly be something one feel at home in or alienated from. It is “beyond being justified or unjustified”. It is something that we do not think about (which is not to say that it isn’t something that we cannot think about or reevaluate or reconsider). But given that it is beyond justification, it is something that surrounds us and guides us without reflection, tacitly, naturally. It is animal.

Hermann shows that as we form our views about the world, within a language, there are always elements, logical and empirical, that we do not consider. It is not that we cannot reconsider them after they have surfaced in our minds as something that could be up for grabs. Rather, we do not know now what it would mean to do so. One might say that the senses of our words, and the role they play in our lives, would have to change for such a question to arise. Such a question can arise, it’s just that it doesn’t. And there is seldom any sense in saying that it should. Hermann’s main point is that this extends to questions of
ethics. There are a great number of things that need to change if we are to start thinking of the sentence ‘Killing is wrong’ as so not right.

Thus, we may talk about a “form of life” as a phrase employed to capture the fact that linguistic sense, and so also moral sense, is intertwined with the way we lead our lives culturally and socially and with and in relation to empirical “facts”. This brings us back to the fate of Snow White and Sooty.

That example was at first brought into play in order to show that context matters. But I also said that the reference to the change in my friend’s form of life could not be employed to explain what is right and what wrong in relation to this example. Hermann can now help us see why. Explanation requires justification, and the way we lead our lives is not based on sentences whose sense we first grasp and then go on to ask if we are justified to believe them or not.

My first comments on Sooty and Snow White included the claim that “it matters that they were kids, that they were used to see animals being slaughtered and prepared for meals, that this particular meal was cooked by their father (a trustworthy and upright man), and so on.” We may see this as an expression of the form of life they had. I also said that it is important to note that my friend now finds this episode of his life near to incomprehensible. And this sense of astonishment, of wonder, may make us search for justifications for our outlooks on life (present and previous). So we may start looking for arguments that may enable us to entangle our confusion. We feel we need to establish the reasons behind the change. (This is right because… That was wrong because…) Now, the problem is that the arguments that are supposed to justify seem to come in at a level when the questions are already settled. They prove the established.26

---

26 Cf. Diamond, “Anything but Argument?”.
One obvious difficulty here is that we may employ the same words in two different forms of lives. This easily gives us the illusion that we are talking about the same thing. But as life shifts, our concepts are turned differently. We may say, with Cora Diamond, that “[a] pet is not something to eat, it is given a name, is let into our houses and may be spoken to in ways which we do not normally speak to cows or squirrels.” This is the way the concept of a ‘the pet’ is turned – now. But this does not mean that life, and so our concepts may be turned differently. This is the sense of Diamond’s stark formulation “it is not ‘morally wrong’ to eat our pets; people who ate their pets would not have pets in the same sense of the term.” As Rami Gudovitch shows in “What’s Wrong with a Bite of Dog?”, the way our concepts are turned are not dependent upon a general moral principle that can be scrutinized in an impartial manner, but on the senses of our expressions. And these, in turn, cannot be disconnected for the way they function in our lives.

It is important to note here, that our lives can and do change. And so does our language. And if we now retain the “biological” sense of our forms of life, we can see how it matters that a human’s relation to animals is interconnected with nature, culture, environment. It is thus a mistake to think that we simply have two forms of life, two “entities” as it were – human and animal – that are possible to describe in a neutral manner. The sense of estrangement from his former ‘I’ that my friend experiences is, as I see it, a result of the hardness involved in acknowledging conceptual change, in seeing how slowly and gradually our concepts change shape, and so how they (our concepts) change us. It is the idea that the words ‘pet’ or ‘animal’ or ‘human’ or ‘thing’ denote particular entities that simply have this or that property, and require a specific treatment in virtue of it having so, that is leading us astray here. In that sense, the question of “animal rights” that, after and in

---


virtue of the work of Peter Singer, holds a dominant position in the philosophy of animal life today, seem to miss its target.

* * *

Here follows a discussion of Julia Hermann’s “Living with Animals, Living as an Animal” (on the differences between Diamond and McDowell), and David Cockburn’s “What We Owe to Speakers” (on how the concepts of ‘suffering’ relates to “having a language”). The connection between these two papers lies in their attempts to show that “having a language” is not something that is a “property” that simply determines the essence of a being, and that this supposed “essence” in turn grants us “objective” rights to be or not to be treated in this or that way.

* * *

There is a sense in which it is an illusion to say that we control ethics, that we can reach full perspicuity of it and that we may choose our moral outlook on the basis of reason alone. The opposite seem nearer the truth: ethics controls us. This, in turn, moves the concept of ethics closer to that of logic. It is that which we reason through, not about. And as we investigate it, it is both the object of study and the subject studying. Just as we must use logic to elucidate the sense of logic, so we reason “ethically” when we try to elucidate ethics. This is one of the reasons, I think, why Wittgenstein persistently stressed that all we can do in philosophy is to describe, and that the production of “theories” will distort our perception. This makes ethics more difficult. Reason is under reason’s investigation. It is philosophy.