

Something Animal, Something Unpredictable: On the Difficulty of Finding the Beginning and Not Trying to Go Further Back

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The admirable opening of Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's "Literature as the Measure of Our Lives" reads as follows:

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1993), Toni Morrison said: "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the meaning of our lives." (Moyal-Sharrock, 2020, p. 270)

With these words, Morrison may have captured, Moyal-Sharrock suggests, the distinctive importance of language across the range of human lives. This is not to say, with the early Wittgenstein, that the limits of my language are the limits of my world, nor to imagine alignment with the later Wittgenstein as linguistic idealist, for he is no such thing: he does not deny, Moyal-Sharrock affirms, the existence of an independent reality with which our language connects; only the connection is "not due to our *discovering* tracks in nature but to *making* them" (*ibid.*). The connection is a grammatical one.

I shall come back later to Morrison's felicitous phrasing, considering the extent to which her twin aphorisms imbue Moyal-Sharrock's discussion not only of literature but of Wittgenstein, especially her emphasis on the animal in *On Certainty*. I shall lay the way for this by considering Norman Malcolm's and Rush Rhees' discussions of Wittgenstein's response to G.E. Moore's "Proof of an External World" (Moore, 1939).¹

Something animal

It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back (Wittgenstein, 1969, §471; hereafter referenced as *OC* §).

Central to Malcolm's discussion of *On Certainty*, in "Wittgenstein: The Relation of Language to Instinctive Behaviour", is Wittgenstein's claim that the absence of doubt is to be conceived as "something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal" (*OC*, §§358, 359). To speak of knowledge or conviction or acceptance, etc., is not really appropriate in these circumstances as these expressions have their roles within specific language games: they are not appropriate when it comes to explaining the basis of *all* language games. In fact, all such psychological terms lead us away from what is important here, from this "unthinking, instinctive behaviour" that, as Malcolm puts it, underlies all language-games (Malcolm, 1982, p. 17). Wittgenstein makes the point in terms at once more

¹ Parts of this paper draw heavily on my "Something animal: Wittgenstein, language, and instinct" (2017a). I am grateful to Springer for permission to publish.

stark and more graphic: “The fact that I use the word ‘hand’ and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed that I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings—shows that the absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game. . .” (OC, §370). This instinctive behaviour is like the squirrel’s gathering of nuts or the cat’s watching a mouse hole. Can the child who is told to sit on a chair and responds appropriately be said to know what a chair is? What of the dog that is told to sit? Learned discriminative behaviour does not depend upon mental states that “explain” the response: mental states are not the basis of mastery of language, for all psychological concepts have their basis in ways of acting.

Malcolm’s argument gains plausibility if it is acknowledged that, paradoxical though it initially sounds, the nature of the human being is convention. But the account naturalises convention. In its sustained attack on mentalistic thinking and cognitivism in psychology, it frames language within the terms of the animal—that is, as a refinement of natural reactions, from the blinking of an eye and the adjustment of one’s balance to primitive reactions of sympathy when others are in pain. It understands the rule-following of language and so much ordinary behaviour in terms of knowing how to go on in the same way, a view that has obvious plausibility in light of the vast background of consistency in our linguistic and social behaviour. While so much of this will be learned, it later becomes embedded in a fabric of reactions and responses that have the spontaneity of instinct. Malcolm moves the discussion forward here by focusing on such claims of G.E. Moore as that he knows he is wearing clothes or knows he is in a room presenting a paper. The fact that Moore is wearing clothes—given the culture he is in, etc.—might be understood as something of which he has instinctive awareness: it is not something that, under normal circumstances, he could reasonably be said to check. If he were to check, this would be interpreted as a sign not of conscientiousness but of mental disturbance. In this sense, it is not something that he can be said to “know” or to be “certain of” (that is, there is no role for the claim: “I know/am certain that I am wearing clothes.”). It is not something he could ordinarily be mistaken about. And here distinctions between the empirical and the conceptual begin to break down. Does our use of words, even the logic of our thoughts, have an empirical basis? In a sense, yes, because we have learned them, and the particular language we learned was a contingent matter. But our relation to that background is not anything we would need to check. Our words are there for us in a way that we cannot ordinarily doubt. They are, as it were, as close as our skin. The words stand fast for us.

But it is helpful here also to recognise something else—something that is of unique importance for the understanding of human lives as a whole. This is that the signs human beings produce, with which and through which they live, are of a different order from those made by other animals.² The

² Of course, this view is not shared by all. Moyal-Sharrock herself has argued that it is erroneous. Against, for example, Daniel Hutto and Eric Myin’s claim that human language is distinguished from animal communication because it is contentful, she endeavours to show, appealing

signs of animals in general (and clearly we are speaking primarily about the higher animals) operate with a kind of push-pull regularity, sophisticated in varying ways but limited in the range of their possibility. Lions roar at one another in different ways, and their young learn this behaviour. It is passed on from generation to generation. The lions roar, reproduce, eat, and sleep, and over time things remain the same. Human beings communicate through signs also, but their signs are of a quite different order. Human signs—words and gestures, the full range of expression—are such as to admit open possibilities of response: unending chains of association and connection, and infinite possibilities of interpretation. The human sign is not of the order of an animal here-and-now but depends upon a distancing from things that can refer precisely to what is not present here and now, which in turn conditions what “here” and “now” can mean. And it is crucial that signs refer: in language it is possible to say things about the world. Indeed, it is through language that the world comes into view. World, in the sense that we ordinarily think of it, is language dependent; and so too, of course, is the human being. Being open to association and connection in the way indicated, words do not remain within a closed circle of exchange: on the contrary they become the engine of culture, the very possibility of new departure, and in a sense the essence of education; and such can be seen in ordinary conversation, which can take directions that are not anticipated and produce effects as yet unknown.

The world the child comes into is not a world of similar beings, all making early moves in the refinement of natural reactions—along the lines, one might imagine, of the development of primitive human societies in evolutionary terms. It is a world where there are grownups with language full-blown. A consequence of this is that when the child is told to sit on a chair, their early understanding, which produces the correct behaviour, occurs against a background that is at present, so to speak, above them. It occurs against refined cultural practices of sitting on chairs and having dinner or watching television or attending to a lecture. . . . None of this is to deny that the child begins with untutored reactions, but without this framing from the top down, as it were, how could such practices be rightly understood? On this account then, the child’s developing reactions, behaviour, and language can be understood only in limited terms from below. This is not so much the case for the lion-cub for which the relevant

to Wittgenstein, that the human relation to content is itself to be understood as action: “Not all action is linguistic, but language is fundamentally—that is, phylogenetically, ontogenetically and, indeed, logically, linked to action” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2019, p. 6). But I believe her discussion is stymied by the distracting and to some extent spurious opposition between action and representation. Why should the claim that human language is different in kind from animal communication involve the denial that language is action—that, as J.L. Austin puts it, we do things with words? There is not space to argue this here, but as the paragraph above unfolds, I draw attention to the iterative nature of human signs, which is the means of the human imagination, which is the basis of culture and world—a point developed further later in the discussion.

signs are finite and circumscribed in their usage, as is the behaviour to which they relate—behaviour that constitutes neither practices nor actions. Not to mark this distinction between the animal and the human is to submit to a naturalism that falls short of what it is to be a human being.³

It is certainly the case that Wittgenstein said much in his last writings that would support such a naturalistic view—perhaps because of the vehemence of his condemnation of Cartesianism and of the mentalistic philosophy of mind that persisted so stubbornly during his lifetime. But it is a mistake to confine the interpretation of his work to these passages, and there is much elsewhere in what he says that gestures towards a less naturalistic view. “My attitude to him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul” (*PII*, iv, p. 152). “The human body is the best picture of the human soul” (*ibid.*). What is to be made of remarks such as these, or of the following from a few pages earlier in the same text?

One 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?—How do I do it?—How am I supposed to answer this? (*PII*, i, p. 148).

In the face of such questions, the emphasis on language as a refinement of natural reactions seems of limited use, to say the least—or, at best, to require a recasting of the idea of the natural, such that human nature is understood as convention. In fact, however cogent its rejection of mentalistic pictures of psychological states, the idea of language as a refinement of natural reactions here seems in danger of missing the point.⁴

Saying things

A further question can also be raised against Malcolm, and perhaps against Wittgenstein, about how far this emphasis in the account teeters on the brink of being wrong. Our everyday relation to words is such, it is said, that

³ Of course, neither Malcolm nor Moyal-Sharrock is saying that human animals are (exactly like) nonhuman animals or denying that the child's language evolves. They are asserting that language does not begin with reflection or ratiocination. This is certainly right, and it is the hallmark of a battle that needed to be fought. But preoccupation with it— more understandable in Malcolm's time than now— can deflect attention from qualities of human language that I emphasise here.

⁴ Moyal-Sharrock believes her views to be compatible with both passages: animals do not develop the linguistic and conceptual sophistication necessary for the notion of “the day after tomorrow”; human beings do, having started with basic, animal reactions. She fully agrees that human nature cannot be understood without convention. But the agreement here is not sufficient for my purposes, and once again I am led to the view that preoccupation with rejection of the Cartesian picture obscures the points I am trying to press.

they stand fast for us and we do not call them into question. Yet this is plainly not true for everything we say—at least, not every day, all of the time. It is a common experience to find oneself at times unable to choose one’s words well or simply at a loss as to what to say. Moreover, there is the eerie experience of repeating a word over and over again until it becomes difficult to connect it with its usual reference; or at least until that connection no longer seems as natural as it did. Not to acknowledge this is to fail to recognise a degree of violence that exists in our coming into language, which both distances us from our animal-like, prelinguistic, seamless involvement in things present and opens for us a kind of alienation, the condition for entry into the world of human beings. Wittgenstein surely had some sense of this, with his remarks about, for example, the physiognomy of words (*PI*, §568; p. 155, 179, and 186), strange and surreal as these to some extent are, and with his respect for the human tendency to run up against the limits of language. But the philosopher who has most extended this line of thought is surely Stanley Cavell, whose purpose is other than the sceptic’s but whose concern is with the all-too-human tendency to call into doubt the human condition. Language seems as close as one’s skin, but at times one can feel oneself to be in the wrong skin, or perhaps find that the clothes one is no doubt wearing are in fact not one’s own.⁵

There is, however, a further, more powerful reason to resist the above account, and here the criticism may be levelled not only at Malcolm but at Wittgenstein himself. Rush Rhees took issue with aspects of Malcolm’s discussion, but he also criticised Wittgenstein in respect of an aspect of his account of language. For all the brilliance of his understanding of language, Wittgenstein had failed to pay sufficient attention to the fact that, when the child learns to speak, she can *say things*. She discovers that she can say things about the world. In a sense, as was indicated earlier, it is only through this that the world comes into view. In learning that she can say things she learns also that this is something she can share with others. She participates, perhaps clumsily at first, in this possibility: she can make judgements and test them against others; through this she comes to see that we have a common world, contested though its nature will continually be. No amount of attention to “knowing how to go on” or to what it is to follow a rule will account for this aspect of language, which Rhees understands as something that conditions language as a whole and makes it a whole. The emphasis on language games rightly stresses the variety of

⁵ It might be objected that our unease with language or our sometimes finding that words fail us occur against a default background of usage in which words stand fast. “Bring that chair!”— to take up the example Moyal-Sharrock provides— does not, in default circumstances, prompt a moment’s hesitation or thought; but confronted by some of the chairs designed by Philippe Starck, one may hesitate to use the term. The appealing novelty of the example reinforces the notion of the default setting, but it is this that is in question. Computers have default settings, but language does not—which is not to rule out speaking of “what we ordinarily say”, etc. How, in relation to the idea of a default, does one place Wittgenstein’s remarks about Wednesday being fat and Tuesday lean (*PI*, II, §274)?

things we do with words, but it risks hiding this unique importance of language for human beings.⁶ Over-emphasising the basis of language in the primitive reaction can only hide this more. The repeated insistence, rightly condemning the mentalistic picture, is itself a move in language: it is action, and it has consequences. One such consequence is its deflection of attention from what more might be said.

Thanks to the efforts of D.Z. Phillips, Rhees's interpretation of *On Certainty* has been made widely available. *Wittgenstein's On Certainty: There—Like Our Life* (Rhees, 2003) was constructed by Phillips primarily from handouts Rhees prepared for lectures he gave at the University College of Swansea in 1970, along with the notes Phillips himself took on those occasions. The title for the book was chosen by Phillips. The subtitle, which repays attention, is drawn from a paragraph late in *On Certainty*:

§559. You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).
It is there—like our life.

The remark follows further reflections on the blurring of the boundary between the empirical and the logical that is Wittgenstein's concern through much of this text. That the language-game is not based on grounds or reasons might be thought common ground amongst readers of Wittgenstein. And yet the last line lays the way for divergent readings.

Consider then Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's "The Animal in Epistemology: Wittgenstein's Enactivist Solution to the Problem of Regress" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2016). The exploration in this text of Wittgenstein's "hinge certainties" builds on her earlier impassioned identification in *On Certainty* of a "third Wittgenstein" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, 2007). She attempts to show that hinge certainties are non-epistemic, grammatical, non-propositional, and enacted—features that together bring justification to a logical stop and so solve the regress problem of basic beliefs. She has no difficulty in finding plentiful quotations that support her argument, many of which are iterations of the following thought: "I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment" (OC, §494). The upshot is emphasis on cases where doubt is either unreasonable or logically impossible. The range of propositions to which Wittgenstein appears willing to apply this remark is, however, strikingly wide, and possibly Moyal-Sharrock does not give as much attention to the implications of this breadth as it deserves, especially when she is pressing her main case. For her sense of what it is that is "there—like our life" is that this is to be understood in animal terms—a view apparently well supported by the quotation mentioned near the start of this paper: "But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal" (OC, §359).

Part of the point of stressing the animal for Moyal-Sharrock is to resist the inclination to explain this background in terms of a kind of

⁶ For further discussion, see Standish, 2015 and 2016.

contextualism, the view she associates with Michael Williams (2001), where basic certainties must stand in logical relationship to whatever judgements rest on them and be susceptible themselves to processes of justification, whether or not such processes actually occur. The assumption that basic knowledge must be secured in this way seems to entail the thought that it must therefore be propositional, and it is resistance to this especially that provokes Moyal-Sharrock's emphasis on the animal. She further invokes Wittgenstein's telling remark: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (OC, §204). The non-propositional nature of basic certainties is evident precisely in their being ways of acting and their being animal in character. Such certainties may seem instinctive or natural (for example, our certainty of having a body), and they may be second-nature, where, for example, they are the result of conditioning, as in our correct use of words (the child correctly uses the word "table"). The notion of the reflex action is invoked the better to describe this. Moyal-Sharrock writes:

With such repeated references to hinges as reflex-like ways of acting and not propositions striking us immediately as true, Wittgenstein puts paid to the picture of basic beliefs as propositional beliefs that lie dormant in some belief box tacitly informing our more sophisticated thoughts. On his view, the hinge certainty verbalised as: "I have a body" is a disposition of a living creature which manifests itself in her acting in the certainty of having a body. Certainty is a way of acting, not a tacit belief (p. 7).

As the phrasing shows, it is difficult to avoid the ambiguities attaching to the articulation of (apparently) psychological expressions—as here with "basic beliefs", "propositional beliefs", and "belief box". Moyal-Sharrock acknowledges that Wittgenstein and Moore do indeed articulate some of our certainties; but they do this, she explains, in the manner of "mentioning" them, not "using" them, and this is done heuristically in order to become clearer about the nature of thinking. Helpful though this is, there is a tidiness to the explanation that is not wholly convincing in that it is not clear that it would apply to all cases or that the distinction between mentioning and using is clear-cut. It would be a nice exercise to extend the examination to cases of "identifying", "referring", "citing", and "quoting", though perhaps even this would not yield such clear distinctions as we might like. Certainly it is right to be wary of overly legislative approaches, which can slide into an attempt to police the limits of language.

A similar concern attaches to her uncompromising affirmation of the security that basic certainty provides. The logic that basic certainty adheres to is not that of the epistemologist but a grammatical certainty, manifested in action. So far this seems right, but the claims become amplified. The groundlessness does not, it is said, imply any kind of precariousness. On the contrary, it characterizes the "the rock solidity that makes our spades turn and allows us to 'stand fast' (OC, §152) (not reel over); the certainty on

which all our knowledge is *logically* hinged” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2016, p. 10). The non-propositionality of basic certainties is at one with their being “animal”. Moyal-Sharrock recalls the question she put to Crispin Wright, following his keynote address at Kirchberg in 2003: “What have you done with the animal in *On Certainty*?”—to which he gave the dismissive response that there was no animal in epistemology. “If for Crispin Wright: ‘There is no animal in epistemology!’,” she writes, “for Wittgenstein: ‘It is there, like our life’” (p. 15).

At the close of the penultimate paragraph of her paper, Moyal-Sharrock writes:

But what *On Certainty* shows us is that our distrust of the arational (the animal) and our reliance on propositions are excessive: “I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state” (OC, §475). It is only by realising that putting ways of acting into sentences is only a heuristic tool designed to better understand the animal, that we can take, as Wittgenstein did, the uncompromisingly revolutionary step to stop the regress of justification (p. 16).

She is surely right that our distrust of the animal and our reliance on propositions are excessive. But the deflationary claim that “putting ways of acting into sentences is only a heuristic tool designed to better understand the animal” is too sweeping. The sentences in question are those that would not ordinarily be verbalised: they purport to articulate a belief, but in fact relate to a way of acting; and their articulation can serve as a heuristic in coming to see that this is so. such as “I know that the earth has existed for more than five minutes” and “I know that this is my hand.” This presumably applies to Wittgenstein’s usage of such expressions, but what of Moore’s? Are we to say that this is not Moore’s intention, but that through Wittgenstein’s discussion of Moore’s “I know that this is my hand” the sentence becomes a heuristic. Is Wittgenstein using the sentence himself or quoting Moore? If the latter, is his purpose the same? And why, after all, the hand? Is Moore, the advocate of plain speaking and common sense, just claiming that this is his hand or showing his hand?

There is some irony in the fact that the apparently intuitive or obvious appeal of the phrase “there—like our life” seems to be to something very different to her than to Rhees, who in considering the ungroundedness of the language-game evokes the examples of the practices of the Azande, the style of Michelangelo, and the stanza form adopted by Spenser in *The Faerie Queen* (Rhees, 2003, p. 83)! How can these be regarded as “primitive”? Lars Hertzberg helpfully distinguishes two senses of “the primitive” in Wittgenstein’s usage:

In some contexts, it seems, the notion has what might be called a logical sense: here, it seems to indicate the place occupied by a type of reaction or utterance in relation to a language-game. In other contexts, it rather seems to carry a sense that might be called

anthropological: to be connected with understanding the place of a reaction in the life of a human being (Hertzberg, 1992, p.).

Moyal-Sharrock herself adds to this distinction a third phylogenetic sense—primitive in the history of the human species. In fact, as Hertzberg states in a footnote, Wittgenstein’s usage of the term “primitive” in the *Philosophical Investigations* often has a comparative sense, non-taxonomical and contextual in kind: it refers not to such substantive differences but to “a form of language or a language-game that is simpler than another and precedes or underlies it (cp. §§ 2, 5, 7, 25, 554)” (p. 36, n. 3). Hertzberg’s own concern in this paper is in fact less with the use of the term and more with certain patterns of thought—in particular, “cases in which there is taken to be a difference in kind (in role or position) between the primitive and the non-primitive” (*ibid.*). An important factor here is that he frames his discussion with a cautionary note regarding over-reliance on remarks from the *Nachlass* that fall outside those works Wittgenstein prepared for publication. Hertzberg’s observation is one way of registering the dangers or pressing Wittgenstein’s words into a univocal reading.

It is a primitive condition of the practices of the Azande, the style of Michelangelo, and the stanza form adopted by Spenser in *The Faerie Queen* that they are cultural and, therefore, have a history and, that is, that at some level they are engaged in unreflectingly, are grounded in ways of acting and not ratiocination, and would fall apart if this were not so. We can examine these histories, but that is not the point. The practices must be accepted full-blown; and participation in them will depend upon an acculturation and sophistication that have made much in these practices non-reflective, familiar, and second-nature in kind. The language-game is unpredictable, and so the channels for this cultural development and sophistication, as of what becomes second-nature, are dynamic and open-ended.

It is worth paying attention, furthermore, to the problematic lines with which §475 continues: “Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.” To the extent that Wittgenstein’s remark is about language, not the language-game, it would appear to relate to the development of language, in the child and in the species. It is surely reasonable to emphasise the animal aspects of this. But the words— even the prelinguistic behaviour— the child acquires belong to language full-blown, open-ended and dynamic as any natural language is, and this in virtue of the nature of the signs human beings use. What the words “cat” and “string” (in Malcolm’s example) or “table” (in Moyal-Sharrock’s) mean to the young child will extend in fluid and unpredictable ways over part of the range of connotations they will have for the adult, but the communication *and thought* they enable will be “primitive” in only a limited sense: this is what you would expect a three-year-old to say, and that is what might be expected of a thirteen-year-old. Communication and thought of these kinds are emphatically not primitive if this is taken to imply that they belong to a language other than ours or in some way complete in itself. The significance of language and culture is underplayed in a manner that is consequential

for Moyal-Sharrock's whole account. The things that stand fast for me are of a complexity and sophistication that comes to permeate the whole. Language illustrates this *par excellence*. Moyal-Sharrock acknowledges that the notion of basic certainties should be extended to second-nature certainties, and her "taxonomy of hinges" (2007, Chapter 5) provides a typology that clarifies her position. But this is framed very much within assumptions about development (of the kind that prevails in biology and psychology), inclined towards a contrast between thinking and action that is too stark, and weighted by the gravitational pull of foundationalism. What is it that contrasts with the primitive here? If it is just the ratiocinative, then the significance of asserting this, at least as far as the present discussion is concerned, has been exhausted. "Basic certainties", "instinct", "natural reactions", "the animal"— all are expressions that can reasonably be pitched against mentalistic accounts, but there are differences between them, and the tendency to use the terms interchangeably obscures the gap between the animal and the human.⁷ Wittgenstein's "needs no apology" is of a piece with his consistent inclination to still the impulse to explanation.

Consider what I have called the open, dynamic nature of language is brilliantly illustrated in the section entitled "Projecting a word" in Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, in is that the child's take-up of a word will make connections that exceed "correct" usage of the term (Cavell, 1979, pp. 180-190). Thus, the word "kitty" will be applied to a fur stole, a furry rug, and other things that are similarly soft to the touch. In time, the child will align her use of the expression with conventional practice, but the routes of association are never closed. Consider what Moyal-Sharrock has called the grammatical certainty of animal action, which is said to provide "the rock solidity that makes our spades turn and allows us to 'stand fast'". The passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* to which this alludes yields a reading of a different kind. That passage runs: "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is what I do.'" (*PI*, §217). The interpretation of this as the securing of bedrock is at best part of the story, for it fails to attend to the tone of the passage, which is tinged with a note not of triumph but of sadness or regret. It fails also to attend sufficiently to the experience to which Wittgenstein refers (and with which, having worked as a gardener, he was surely familiar): in the turning of the spade there is a characteristic, unexpected twisting of the hand, where the smooth movement of digging is frustrated.⁸ This should at least qualify the confidence that Moyal-Sharrock evinces, just as, in the face of appeals to the animal, recognition of the complexity of human language must sound a cautionary note.

There is reason, furthermore, to question the conjoining of the animal and action. It is plainly the case that, in the elaboration of Wittgenstein's

⁷ Something animal: it would be coherent to say, with the biologist, that the human is an animal, with exceptional powers. But that usage conflicts with "animal" in the more familiar sense, where it contrasts with "human". It consequence, it disables the contrast between the animal and ratiocination on which Moyal-Sharrock (and Wittgenstein) sometimes rely.

⁸ For further discussion of this passage, see Standish (2017b).

views, ideas of instinct and the animal cannot be rehabilitated if they are understood reductively. The only credible way to avoid this, in my view, is to see instinct as sophisticated in the ways described above (in relation to Malcolm). Perhaps this would entail seeing human beings as an animal species characterised by language and reason (cf. Aristotle's *zoon echon logon*). This would admit the idea of the animal whose nature is convention. Connections between the activities of animals and those of humans can surely be made too quickly. Distinctions between behaviour, activity, and action (and *deed*) need to be drawn, a standard consequence of which is that action, related to intention and the will, and to language itself, will not be attributed to animals. Wittgenstein's expression is not wholly consistent here, but his phrasing in §359, "as it were, as something animal", has a subjunctive form that should perhaps guide interpretation, reaffirming the blurriness but sustaining the line between the human and the animal.

Taking cognizance of these facts and of the more complex picture that they yield helps to show why "it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back" (OC, §471). To go further back might lead us to a phylogenetic account or to something too simply animal. By contrast, and rehabilitating some of the terms in question, we might see as natural, even instinctive, Moore's (knowing that he is) wearing clothes and giving a lecture. Wearing clothes is part of the *world* he lives in (not part of his "habitat").⁹ Such a way of thinking would give further substance to Malcolm's position.

Before the abyss

One response to the "the rock solidity" that Moyal-Sharrock's reading offers might be to say: "Thanks, but no thanks. The security you provide with the emphasis on the animal and action is indeed some security, but it does not address our questions. It does not answer our doubts. We want reasons, not a causal account." Something along these lines is indeed found in the work of Duncan Pritchard, with whom Moyal-Sharrock's paper critically engages. Pritchard's position regarding such interpretations of *On Certainty* is one of some unease. The regress of reasons comes to an end, but not with reasons of a special foundational sort, as we were expecting. There is instead only a rationally groundless "animal" commitment (OC, §359), a kind of "primitive" trust (OC, §475). "For Wittgenstein," Pritchard continues, "understanding that this is so is meant to be the antidote to radical scepticism, and yet it must surely be admitted that, superficially at least, it looks very much like a version of radical scepticism" (Pritchard, 2016, p. 5).

Elsewhere, in co-authorship with Cameron Boult, Pritchard has suggested that the "solution" offered may fail to allay a kind of epistemic *Angst* or vertigo. Philosophical enquiry in effect "ascends" to a level "unfettered by practical concerns", where it becomes apparent, if Wittgenstein is right, that our ways of knowing are essentially local and our believing ultimately groundless. Thus,

⁹ As I have tried to show, there are gaps between communication and language, between behaviour and action, and between habitat and world that Moyal-Sharrock's account tends to cover over.

just as someone atop a high tower can fully recognise that he is not in danger, and yet fear the height nonetheless, so someone who undertakes the kind of philosophical investigation that we are conceiving of can intellectually recognise that there is no actual epistemic danger (in the sense that the kind of improvement in their epistemic situation that was initially sought after is simply unavailable), while nonetheless feeling the epistemic vertigo (Boult & Pritchard, 2013, p. 34).

This passage in their text is preceded almost immediately by their quoting Wittgenstein's remark that "the difficulty is to realise the [ultimate] groundlessness of our believing" (*OC*, §166, parenthesis added by the authors). And this is followed almost immediately by a footnote acknowledging an earlier similar insight in Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* (1979). Indeed their paper begins with the following epigraph:

An admission of some question as to the mystery of existence, or the being, of the world is a serious bond between the teaching of Wittgenstein and that of Heidegger. The bond is one, in particular, which implies a shared view of what I have called the truth of skepticism, or what I might call the moral of skepticism, namely, that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing (Cavell, 1979, p. 241).

Certainly Boult and Pritchard's sense of epistemic vertigo is compelling. The substance of these remarks from Cavell, however, clearly points in directions beyond the scope of their paper or the present discussion. It sharpens the difference between their position and that of Moyal-Sharrock, and it suggests that their emphasis on propositions may open to possibilities beyond epistemology, as conventionally construed. Fear of heights may require therapy of some kind, therapy that would quell the symptom and perhaps remove the disease. So it is not clear how far they would go with this. For Cavell, the truth of scepticism, existential rather than epistemological, touches on the mystery of existence and of the world, and its moral requires acknowledgement. "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement" (*OC*, §378). The prominence of scepticism in epistemology is a manifestation in philosophy of a more general aspect of the human condition, its tendency to call its own condition into question, which Cavell famously explores through examples drawn from literature and film. The human creature's basis in the world is then seen not as animal and not as rock solid but precarious in some degree. After all the language-game is "so to say something unpredictable" §559). So how are we to read the following lines?

The fact that I use the word "hand" and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed that I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings—

shows that the absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game. . . (§370).

Does this mean that I never stand before the abyss? Is Wittgenstein simply ruling out the possibility that I might doubt the words I am using? “[If] I wanted so much as to try doubting . . .”—does this mean that I won’t? . . . There is a comparatively simple logical point here in that you cannot play a game without accepting its presuppositions unconditionally. Move the bishop sideways and you are not playing chess. That much is rock solid. But then we might again say: “Thanks, but no thanks. That rule just looks like something arbitrary, when we were looking for a reason why the bishop must move diagonally.” And to the child who persists with these questions, we might eventually say, “Then play another game”, or perhaps, losing patience, “Just go away!” But in the language-game the parallel holds out only so far.¹⁰ A game such as chess functions through a kind of suspension of disbelief. Language-games depend upon maintaining the faith. But faith can falter, and then it will not do simply to tell the sceptic to go away. So cannot our language-games break down or stall? The question “How do I know . . .”, Wittgenstein continues, “drags out the language-game, or else does away with it” (§370); and when it does, then perhaps I do indeed find the ground giving away beneath my feet.

The evocation of the abyss brings connotations of faith and judgement, and the possibility that these might fail, that behaviouristic readings excise. Excise or exorcise. Once again, the attempt to tidy up what we say and do in these matters—rather like the legislative tendencies that beset extreme versions of resolute reading—may hide aspects of the human condition that it is philosophy’s purpose to illuminate. The struggle with words that Wittgenstein’s writings manifest bears witness to this.

Yet I do not imagine that the above concluding paragraphs to this part of my discussion will impress Moyal-Sharrock herself, and so what follows is an attempt to address what I take to be some of the barriers to understanding here. An obvious starting-point is to be found in Moyal-Sharrock’s contribution to Anat Matar’s edited collection *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism* (Matar, 2017), which has the title “Too Cavellian a Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein’s Certainty, Cavell’s Scepticism”.¹¹ This paper identifies what it takes to be four features of Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein, each of which warrants criticism.

Claims of literature and language

Cavell’s reading of the *Investigations* is, in Moyal-Sharrock’s view, permeated by: (1) *a nostalgia for metaphysics*, (2) *a dissatisfaction with language and criteria*, (3) *an ineluctable scepticism*, and (4) *existential devastation and angst*.

¹⁰ One can opt not to play chess and indeed opt not to play any games at all, but one cannot altogether opt out of language-games. In a sense, there is no outside.

¹¹ Moyal-Sharrock generously acknowledges the comments I provided on an earlier draft of her paper.

It would be accurate to say that Cavell sees Wittgenstein's philosophy as diagnosing (not as espousing) the nostalgia for metaphysics as an aspect of the human condition and as illustrating this in multifarious ways. This is there in the numerous examples of language going on holiday, of the preoccupation with how things "must" be, of the dominance of ideal models, and of the subliming of thought. Cavell not only discusses examples of this kind provided by Wittgenstein, but extends Wittgenstein's criticism especially through his own readings of works of literature and film. Generally averse to technical vocabularies in philosophy, he exploits the resources of ordinary language in a way that clearly shows his inheritance of J.L. Austin. It is, once again, a diagnosis of the all-too-human flight from the ordinary that lays the way for a celebration of the richness of what we ordinarily say and do in talking to one another, as illustrated especially in his highly original response, for example, to the Hollywood film of the 1930s and 40s—significantly the era when the "talkies" came into their own. In the light of this, Moyal-Sharrock's suggestion that Cavell has a "profound mistrust of language" seems wide of the mark: it is precisely in language that we find meaning (and sometimes lack of meaning) in our lives.

A prevalent symptom of dissatisfaction with criteria is evident today in the dominance of performativity. The obsession with testing, with quality control and feedback loops, is a response to lack of confidence in the exercise of judgement and a desire to replace it with fail-safe procedures and algorithms. There is a dissatisfaction with criteria as these operate, often tacitly, in ordinary and professional life, such that the very word has taken on a new meaning: for many people, "criteria" now refers to a check-list of behavioural performance targets, conceived in reductive terms. Wittgenstein can be credited with anticipating something of this. Cavell finds Wittgenstein to assert the importance of judgement, especially judgement in the absence of a rule. Quite reasonably, on the strength of this, aesthetic judgement comes to the fore in his work as illustrating the kind of judgement upon which practical reason must more generally rely.

Regarding the "ineluctable scepticism", the idea that there is an existential—not epistemological—truth in scepticism is plainly uncongenial to some readers. What, they might wonder, could even be meant by "existential truth"? Put simply, the view in question is that the scepticism in epistemology that has been prominent over these past four hundred years needs to be understood not just on its own terms but as a manifestation of a more general disturbance in the human condition: the human tendency to call its own condition into question, to doubt what one ordinarily knows. The explanation may make this no more congenial, but perhaps the resistance to it depends also upon emphasising some remarks in Wittgenstein to the neglect of others, especially where these are in tension with the preferred view or depend upon particular contextualisation. One articulation of Wittgenstein's response to the sceptic runs: "But if you are certain, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt?—They've been shut." (Wittgenstein, 2009/1953, p. 236^e, §331). Cavell's comments may be instructive:

[The answer Wittgenstein offers to the skeptic's question] is not generally conclusive, but it is more of an answer than it may appear to be. In the face of the skeptic's picture of intellectual limitedness, Wittgenstein proposes a picture of human finitude. (Then our real need is for an account of this finitude, especially of what it invites in contrast to itself.)

His eyes are shut; he has not shut them. The implication is that the insinuated doubt is not *his*. But how not? If the philosopher *makes* them his, pries the lids up with instruments of doubt, does he not come upon human eyes?—When I said that the voice of human conscience was not generally conclusive, I was leaving it open whether it was individually conclusive. It may be the expression of resolution, at least of confession. 'They (my eyes) are shut' as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt.—But doesn't everyone, everyday?—It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the threat of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world (Cavell, 1979, p. 431).

This phrasing, I realise, is hardly likely to be congenial to readers who are squeamish about “the existential truth in scepticism”. It may well make matters worse. But it should at least dispel the idea that Cavell sees the *Investigations* as depicting an “existential hell” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2017, p. 110). One can share Moyal-Sharrock's frustration that Cavell did not turn his attention to *On Certainty*, but if the cogent and, to my mind, persuasive Cavellian reading of that text that has been offered by Chantal Bax is taken into account (Bax, 2013), there seems good reason to believe that the book would have reinforced his views.

There is reason to remember the dangers of any one-sided diet of examples or quotations, and it seems likely that both sides of the present discussion might want to raise this objection. But the relationship between the two sides is not exactly symmetrical in this respect. My impression is that the consolidation of Moyal-Sharrock's view around something animal gravitates towards a unifying, if not systematic account; the opposing view relies more explicitly on the plurality and diversity of language-games, and it can read Wittgenstein's remarks as, here, fending off a mentalistic temptation, there, stilling the impulse to metaphysics, and, there again, resisting reductive behaviourism. It is difficult to see how Moyal-Sharrock's view can account for the remarks referred to above about an “attitude towards a soul” (*PII*, iv, p. 152); or for Wittgenstein's description of his inclination to see life from a religious point of view; or for the following from *On Certainty* (§248):

I have arrived at the bottom of my convictions.

And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.

It is true that Wittgenstein uses such expressions as “the foundations of all judging”, but the range of examples of the ways the hinges stay put is vast.

Some putative empirical propositions are never doubted or, better, never arise or are articulated at all; others are, as it were, withdrawn from circulation where, for example, amongst a group of technical specialists they have assumed the function of a hinge. They are then understood better not as tacit beliefs but rather as functioning in what a person can do.

The idea of a language-game is crucial to appreciating this diversity. I find it, furthermore, to be at odds with two aspects of the position that Moyal-Sharrock has developed more recently in “Literature as the Measure of our Lives”. Her discussion relies heavily on the distinction between saying and showing, and on the idea that the ethical depends upon the latter—that ethics is not amenable to explanation. Its aim is first of all to elucidate Wittgenstein’s views on the “unsayability” but “showability” of the ethical but then to take this further, maintaining that literature enacts the ethical in such a way as to “pierce” us, through the blood, the mind coming later in its wake. This view is illustrated with reference to the novels of D.H. Lawrence and especially by way of a moving elaboration of extracts from *Madame Bovary*.

But once again I am of the view that the discussion inclines towards a univocal account, and that we need to be taught some differences. “A poet’s words can pierce us”, it is true (Z §155, in Moyal-Sharrock, 2020, p. 227). Following Lawrence, Moyal-Sharrock suggests that there is an immediacy to this: “The idea here is to de-intellectualize the ethical, to get us to see it as an attitude, a way of being and acting, and to de-intellectualize too ethical understanding” (*ibid.*). She relies also on the idea of the artwork as perspicuous presentation. My concern about univocity is that this relies on too constrained a notion of what an artwork is. This may capture something of the compelling effects of some works of art, but not all are like this—not like this *not* because they are not of the same quality, but because this is not what they are setting out to do. Some plainly invite a response where one is searching, perhaps provoked by diverse critical viewpoints, and open to the nuances and sometimes the multivalence in the forms of expression under consideration. Sometimes the work will present cases of moral conflict where one is drawn into the perception of difficulty but in such a way that interpretation is not resolved. For example, a work such as Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* sets out to destabilise unified representation (or, we could say, enables conflicting representations in a way that is not resolved). *Rashomon* is a clear and perhaps extreme case, but would it not be right to see most of Shakespeare as having something of this quality? It is not that criticism has *carte blanche*: there are limits to what counts as a coherent response to a work; and it is constitutive of art-works that they admit variation in response; without this neither art nor aesthetic judgement would be what they are. It may be correct to say that they compel a response, but they are obviously not compelling in the way a syllogism is.

In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein states that the “mere description” of the facts of a murder “will contain nothing which we could call an *ethical* proposition. The murder will be on the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone” (LE, p. 39; Moyal-Sharrock, 2017, p. 271). This is surely wrong in that the concept of murder is itself ethically charged, and it surely conflicts with the views Wittgenstein later

comes to hold. The very notion of a language-game depends upon some sense of there being a practice in which it is *appropriate* to go on in some ways and not in others, a practice oriented (by definition) by some sense of what is good or desirable or worth doing. The ethical is already there in the language game, and this is the condition of our lives. One of ordinary language philosophy's achievements is to show how much our ethical lives depend upon our stake in words—that is, in talking to one another, extending thoughts in conversation, or writing a response, wherein there is a testing of judgement, of thought, of expression against the judgments of others. We do language, as Toni Morrison says, and that may be the meaning of our lives.

The Heideggerian overtones of Morrison's first aphorism—"We die. That may be the meaning of life."—receives less attention in Moyal-Sharrock's discussion. In fact, she is dismissive of the anguish or *Angst* that Cavell finds in the *Investigations*. This is perplexing because she actually quotes Wittgenstein's "On Heidegger's Remarks on Being and Dread":

Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. The astonishment can be expressed in the form of a question, and there is no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is a priori bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we do run up against the limits of language. . . This running up against the limits of language is ethics. (WVC, p. 68; Moyal-Sharrock, 2017, p. 95).

It is a telling point that the lines omitted in the middle of the passage show that Wittgenstein's target is "all the claptrap about ethics —whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable"—that is, what so often appears as ethical theory or moral philosophy. It is true that he continued to be suspicious of this theorising, and for good reason; this is in tune with the deintellectualising Moyal-Sharrock emphasises. But it is telling also that the lines immediately before the text quoted give the passage a different tone: "To be sure I can imagine what Heidegger means by being and anxiety. . . But the inclination, the running up against something, indicates something. St Augustine knew that already when he said: What, you swine, you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter" (Waismann 1979, 68-69).

I am left with a puzzle regarding what I have called Moyal-Sharrock's inclination towards a univocity of interpretation. In her consideration of literature as the measure of our lives, she says comparatively little that touches on the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature (see Standish, 2018a). One aspect of this concerns the differing ways that philosophers draw on literature. Many use literary examples: some sift a novel for the illustration of a point in their argument; others seek in the work a thickness of context and qualities of language that can lead the way with their reflections, opening avenues of thought that would be closed by too narrow a reliance on the logic of the argument. But another aspect concerns the qualities of philosophers' own writing. Many express their arguments with careful attention to style, and many will take the view that

the manner of expression is integral to what they have to say.¹² But much can turn on the way that this relationship is conceived, and I believe this can be illustrated with reference to a pivotal point in the above discussion.

When Boult and Pritchard write that “just as someone atop a high tower can fully recognise that he is not in danger . . .”, their mildly archaic phrasing is self-consciously poetic and has the character of embellishment, which may or may not be regarded as elegant and evocative. It is presented as an analogy. Wittgenstein’s “I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings” (OC, §390) is working from within the language, drawing thought from the language itself, and expressing something that could not otherwise have been expressed. It has the force of a conditional claim. The (psychologically-inflected) idea of epistemic vertigo is a pale shadow of the registers of thought with which Wittgenstein’s (religiously-inflected) phrasing resounds. It goes without saying that such phrasing warrants attention in Wittgenstein, as it does in Cavell.

Moyal-Sharrock’s paper is a contribution to a book about modernism, and the *Tractatus* is surely an exemplary work of modernist form. In Wittgenstein’s later writing also, it is clear that style of expression is a matter of the utmost concern and intimately related to the substance of what is being said. Still further, it is a feature of that later writing that it has a kind of dialogical form. David Stern’s luminous explanation of the form that this often takes—where (i) a brief statement of a position Wittgenstein opposes is countered by a response from a different voice, followed by (ii) an illustration of circumstances in which that position is appropriate, which is then upstaged, as it were, by (iii) a deflationary comment suggesting that the circumstances considered are quite limited and that once we move beyond them, the position becomes inappropriate (Stern, 2004, p. 10)—not only shows ways in which Wittgenstein prompts readers to thoughts of their own but complicates the idea of perspicuous presentation.

One example of different readers’ having thoughts of their own is to be found in my own response to a passage from Wittgenstein’s late writings on psychology that Moyal-Sharrock quotes: “That an actor can represent grief shows the uncertainty of evidence, but that he can represent *grief* shows the reality of evidence” (LW II, p. 67). She takes this to illustrate the fact that imitation and deception are only possible because deployed on a basis of certainty: the very possibility of uncertainty depends upon a background of certainty (Moyal-Sharrock, 2017, p. 103). I have taken it in a quite different way. The second clause emphasises our dependence upon behaviour, but the first shows the uncertainty of its significance. When Hamlet ponders the Player-King’s display of grief at the death of Hecuba, he is not confused as to whether the actor is pretending: he is pondering the nature of grief and its expression (see Standish, 2015, 2018b). In what one hopes are less charged circumstances, it is something similar that is tested out in our daily lives, in our conversations and interactions with one another. In speaking to one another, we do sometimes find that our words go astray, in everyday life as in academic exchange, and this is part of what gives that exchange its point,

¹² Still others, as Bernard Williams has recounted, believe they can get their argument straight and then add the style later.

purpose, and depth. It is on such exchange that human lives rest—on nothing more and *nothing less*. To say this is not to “mistrust” but to be realistic about and attentive to language, and to acknowledge and celebrate the significance of lives lived on its terms.¹³

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¹³ The writing of this paper was aided by participation in a discussion of Malcolm’s paper and Rhees’ response at the *Welsh Philosophy Society* meeting held at Gregynog in April 2016, when the papers were introduced by Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and Hugh Knott. Moyal-Sharrock’s comments were based in part on the paper discussed here, and Knott’s on his “Before Language and After” (Knott, 1998). I am grateful to both for the introduction they provided and to other participants in the discussion. [Moyal-Sharrock has also generously offered comments on my discussion of her work here.](#) Her remarks have helped me to refine and sometimes to correct my argument. I thank her for her thoughtful response. Parts of the present paper were presented at the British Wittgenstein Conference, *Wittgenstein and Education*, held at UCL in 2018, and I am grateful to the audience on that occasion for comments. Jeff Stickney is thanked for their comments on earlier versions, as is Suzy Harris, who has commented on the paper in its various phases.

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