

## The problem of animals in Ortega and Wittgenstein

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### Abstract

This paper is devoted to analyse the problem of animals in Ortega y Gasset and the mature Wittgenstein philosophies. The main conclusion is we should prefer the approach of Wittgenstein because it affords a discontinuous continuity picture -a degree continuity- between animals and human beings that explains better our epistemic and moral attributions to animals.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein, Oretga y Gasset, animals, discontinuous continuity, epistemic attributions, moral attributions.

## El problema de los animales en Ortega y Wittgenstein

### Resumen

Este artículo está dedicado a analizar el problema de los animales en las filosofías de Ortega y Gasset y el Wittgenstein maduro. La conclusión principal es que deberíamos preferir el planteamiento de Wittgenstein porque nos ofrece una imagen de continuidad discontinua -una continuidad de grado- entre los animales y los seres humanos que explica mejor nuestras atribuciones morales y epistémicas a los animales.

**Palabras clave:** Wittgenstein, Ortega y Gasset, animales, continuidad discontinua, atribuciones epistémicas, atribuciones morales.

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*But surely a machine cannot think! -Is that an empirical statement?  
No. We say only of a human being and what is like one that it thinks.*

L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #360.

In our tradition, even after Darwin and the rise of Ethology, the idea of discontinuity -a radical discontinuity- has been a widespread tendency in our way of thinking about ourselves in relation to animals, that is, the idea of a difference in essence, an unbridgeable gap, an ontological leap. Not a difference of degree, not continuity, but otherness: the animal as an absolute other -the brutes, the beasts. This picture is also present in our linguistic usage when we unreflectively divide organic reality into two categories, humans and animals, as if all animals make up a unique species -the nonhuman species. And obviously this image is not only a theoretical picture: important practical and moral consequences derive from it.

In this sense, it is not surprising that Descartes in the seventeenth century reduced animals to the condition of mere machines and thought that they are deprived not only of the capacity for language and thinking, but even of the possibility of having mental states. From this mechanistic point of view, animals are automats -simple matter in movement- whose behaviour is a pure reaction to external and internal stimulus, that is, a conduct explainable in a pure causal way as an effect -a mechanical response- caused by the pressure of the physical environment and the internal state of organism. Animals thereby do not participate in rationality and mental life. On the contrary, mental life and rationality would only be human features.

However is not necessary to embrace a mechanist outline to hold an ontological abyss. In the twentieth century the philosophies of *Lebenswelt*, without denying that animals -at least some of them- possess mental states or even an intelligent behaviour, have emphasised that they do not have a World. Animals, unlike humans, do not live

inside horizons of sense: languages, symbolic realities, history, traditions, values, etc. In other words: animals would only live in nature among dumb facts and confined in blind instincts. And for this reason animals would not be able to live in a first person way either, that is, from the past and towards the future, with an understanding of themselves and planning their life, with some kind of identity; neither expecting death... Animals would only be able to be just what they were at the beginning: animals are not able to want to be someone, nor over time to become someone.

It is easy to see that according to this picture -the path of radical discontinuity- we could reach the conclusion that animals lack morality -they are not moral agents, they do not have moral rights-, and so we have no moral obligation to them. Because animals do not feel and not suffer at all; or because animals, despite of feeling and suffering, are not able to give a sense to their feelings and sufferings; or because animals do not live in a World, and do not plan their lives... The ontological abyss becomes a moral abyss, and we are exempt of responsibilities: not only can we use animals for our necessities and investigations, but also for our entertainment, or in our artistic performances in order to achieve our aesthetic fulfilment.

Nevertheless this conclusion is a clear *non sequitur*, a good example of the naturalistic fallacy. The lack of relational properties does not entail the lack of moral properties: the fact that animals are not moral agents, or the fact that they are unable to live in a first person way, does not entail that they cannot be bearers of moral rights... But neither the opposite route would be correct: the possession of intrinsic properties -for instance, the capacity for feeling and suffering- does not entail the possession of moral properties. In reality, the problem is not whether animals have rights or not in an intrinsic or relational way, but whether we -human beings- recognise them as bearers of moral rights. And the case of animals would not be a special one: for instance, not only humans

beings with severe mental disabilities -or even corpses- would have moral rights because we recognise them as bearers of moral rights, but human beings in general would also have moral rights because in the long run of the history of mankind they themselves have come to recognise themselves as bearers of moral rights.

Indeed, intrinsic and relational properties can be part of a causal explanation of our moral recognition: intrinsic and relational properties sometimes work as causes of our moral recognition. However in the so-called space of reasons and justifications moral recognition will depend ultimately on recognition of membership: we recognise someone -person or animal- as a bearer of moral rights because we recognise him or her as a member of our moral community -our actual moral community or our ideal moral community. In this sense, if we can use these intrinsic and relational properties as reasons for moral rights -sometimes the border is blurred, and causes can work as reasons: for instance, when we criticise some current moral canons-, that is possible because we consider beforehand, using other standards of our moral community (actual or ideal), that such and such properties are relevant in a moral sense.

In other words: the unmasking of the naturalistic fallacy could be fallacious as well, if it holds up still the fact-value dichotomy -the cause-reason dichotomy-, and if it tends thereby to moral decisionism, arbitrariness or pure conventionalism. On the contrary, intrinsic and relational properties, among other material conditions, can explain why we are prone to recognise a being as bearer of moral rights, but these properties are already loaded with moral evaluation, a moral valuation based on the recognition of membership to a moral community. Obviously both membership to a moral community and moral valuations are open, not entirely consistent and fluctuating concepts, and for this reason our moral recognitions not only are sometimes problematical and

controversial, but they change over time. Here we have at hands a good example of the impurity of life and the impurity of philosophy.

But, let us not go so fast. This paper is devoted to the problem of animals in Ortega and the mature Wittgenstein -a minor question in their works that can however illuminate others more central aspects of their thoughts-, so that it seems convenient that we continue our comments with explicit references to their arguments and remarks. In this sense I will defend a Wittgensteinian view, because in my opinion his approach provides a good philosophical comprehension -a good picture- of the human-animal relationship, a picture that articulates both the idea of moral recognition as recognition of membership and the idea of a discontinuous continuity. It is easy to understand the link: recognition of membership is incompatible with radical discontinuity, because to appeal to the idea that *only of a human being or what is like one* -or only of one of ours, or what is like one- calls for some degree of continuity, a discontinuous continuity.

Well, in 1934 in *Ideas and Beliefs*, just in the path of philosophies of *Lebenswelt*, Ortega asserts that animals, unlike humans, do not have a World. It is worth following his exposition, as well as the context from which this picture comes. *Ideas and Beliefs* is a brief essay where Ortega affords us some intuitions in certain kinship to the central ideas of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. Specifically, the view that human beings live inside basic beliefs, and that some of them, despite not being irremovable, are like hinges for the rest of our beliefs and ideas, that is, certainties that, in fact and unconsciously, we accept -and we must accept- in order to speak, know and act.

As it is well known, Ortega takes as a starting point of his reflections the radical reality of human life: the individual existence situated in a world of circumstances which we must face, an individual perspective. In fact, perspective is the being of the World,

because Reality is only accessible as perspective, individual perspective. Perspective is thereby absolute: absolute, yes, but partial, because only throughout the social and historical dimension of each individual existence is possible to discover the truth. The reasoning is the following: things do not have a being by themselves, and humans must to give them a being. Things are a system of facilities and difficulties (circumstances, concerns or urgencies, not substances with a hidden being), and as human beings are disoriented and have an imperative necessity of knowing what to do, they must save them and at the same time save themselves. That is the seriousness of life: coincidence and fidelity with one's perspective.

Circumstances and perspective also include beliefs and ideas -a historical repertory-, because human nature is historical. Every existence has a historical pre-existence, and therefore tradition (beliefs and ideas) and circumstances form the World in which our lives befall. Specifically, beliefs make up the framework, while ideas (concepts) are ephemeral creations -unrealities, phantasmagorias, in Ortega's words. But there is nothing irremovable: a great deal of our beliefs would have been ideas in the past. Ortega focuses on socio-cultural beliefs such as the faith in the power of reason and science, and the political egalitarianism. Nevertheless, with the examples of the wall or the street, Ortega also points out beliefs such as the permanent and independent existence of material objects, that is, basic beliefs in a more epistemological sense.

To sum up: human beings have a mission of truth -authenticity- that takes as a starting point the World or the perspective (circumstances, beliefs and ideas) in which they live, and their goal is to agree with -to feel as their own- this World or perspective, that is, to coincide with these beliefs and ideas by using them to create solutions -salvations- for the urgencies or concerns that circumstances consist of. Ortega characterises this vital project like to live in oneself: to escape from the primary

unauthenticity, perplexity, disorientation or alienation of human life. In other words: an authentic first person existence.

And what about animals? Animals do not have a World, they do not live in a World -animals do not live in a perspective-, and so they are incapable of authenticity or a first person life. In *Ideas and Beliefs* (Ch. II, #2) Ortega explains this abyss between humans and animals from the metaphysical concept of reality. In his view, the true and primary reality is an enigma, a mystery (something without shape), and for this reason something that does not deserve the name of "World". On the other hand, the World -perspective- emerges with humans, and specifically through their imagination, his creative imagination. And that is the point: animals do not possess imagination. Animals always live bound to the senses, confined in the net of facilities and difficulties which the true and primary reality consist of. In other words: animals always live out of themselves. On the contrary, human beings live in themselves.

Obviously this is a curious explanation not exempt of contradictions. Animals do not live in a horizon of significances -a World-, but they live in the true and primary reality. Does that mean that animals, unlike humans, know reality in itself? Here reality in itself seems to be an anti-Parmenidean mix of Anaximander's *to apeiron* and Heraclitus's *panta rei*: the constant happening of what is undetermined and without shape. Or was Ortega's intention to say merely that animals live in 'a', not in 'the', true and primary reality? Ortega says that animals live confined in a net of facilities and difficulties, but the question is: is not a net of facilities and difficulties a determined reality, a reality with shape? And is not this reality in some sense a horizon of significances, even though a non-linguistic horizon of significances?

In effect, it seems possible to say -as Wittgenstein suggests- that animals have a form of life, and they live in a world -a horizon of significances-, though this world is not linguistic, and their form of life is not a linguistic form of life. Moreover, it is also possible to say that between their worlds and our world -between their forms of life and our form of life- there are transitions: sometimes the pre-linguistic form of life of animals exhibit proto-linguistic characters. And these transitions are what allow transactions between humans and animals such as understanding of behaviour, emotional relationship, the ascription of mental life to animals and domestication.

This is clearly a picture of discontinuous continuity, a picture the first element of which should consider humans as animals. Yet this recognition is not enough. No, what is decisive here, as Wittgenstein says openly in *On Certainty*, is to explain the form of life of human beings paying attention to the fact that human beings are animals:

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: Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination. (OC, #475)

Form of life (*Lebensform*) is, for Wittgenstein, an articulation of spontaneous natural actions and reactions and cultural patterns of behaviour, beliefs and attitudes etc., an articulation that cannot always be understood as a simple affix or aggregation, but rather in an interwoven way for a great deal of relevant cases -for instance, the more basic strata of language. In this sense, we might say that our linguistic activities have grown from our natural actions and reactions, sometimes replacing them, sometimes enriching them, sometimes fine tuning them, and always making them more sophisticated. And so it is sometimes difficult, or impossible, to separate what is natural and what is cultural in our behaviour. In this sense, it is not surprising that Wittgenstein says in *Philosophical*

*Investigations* that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (PI, I, #19).

But what does the concept of form of life mean

If we focus on natural actions and reactions, it is easy to see that the human form of life is, in a very nominalist way and contrary to essentialist views of human nature, a kind of *a posteriori* universal: the set of natural actions and reactions in which human beings, as a matter of fact, tend to coincide. The shared behaviour -the non-reasoned agreement- that permits us to agree in our linguistic activities, that is, in definitions and grammatical judgements, although not necessarily in our opinions: the system of reference that permit us to learn our own language, and interpret unknown languages (PI, I, #206, #241 and #242). The human form of life is the given, and so what has to be accepted in our analysis once the justifications are finished: the bedrock where our philosophical spade is turned (PI, I, #217 and II, #345). Language is part of our form of life, that is, humans -even in the case of deaf people- are animals that talk or, better, that play language games: language is part of our natural history (PI, I, #23 and #25).

In Wittgenstein's view, actions and reactions must not be understood in a causal way as effects to the stimulus caused by the constituents of a reality itself -metaphysical realism is nonsense. On the contrary, human actions and reactions are what give sense to talking about objects, properties and facts, that is, human actions and reactions divide, identify and re-identify the entities we speak about. On the other hand, human natural actions and reactions are constitutive of the rules that govern their activities, linguistic or not. In brief, the spontaneous, symbolic, creative and intentional actions and reactions of human beings create a basic world -a basic horizon of sense- in which they live. And this basic world becomes over time a highly sophisticated cultural world through the history of mankind, so that, as we can read in *Lectures on Aesthetics*, to understand and judge, for instance, moral or aesthetical language games it would be necessary to know -

describe- a specific tradition, a whole cultural environment, a whole way of living, a cultural form of life (LC, I, #25-#36).

But, let us focus on the natural form of life, because this is what interests us most in relation to animals. As we have said before, animals would also have a form of life, that is, a set of natural actions and reactions constitutive of a horizon of meanings. Moreover, between the animal form of life and the human form of life there would be transitions and transactions. In this respect however we have to bear in mind that it is not possible to speak about transitions and transactions without paying attention to the particular kind of animals we are considering: a chimpanzee is not a sardine, a dog is not a lion and neither is a dolphin a snake. Proximity or remoteness in the evolutionary scale, and above all the specific actions and reactions of animals upon the natural environment, makes profound differences.

Yet Wittgenstein is not so all-encompassing: he is not building a theory about animal mind. His remarks -the majority of which are about dogs- are only promoting a discontinuous continuity picture. So, in *Philosophical Investigations* he writes:

It is sometimes said: animals do not talk because they lack the mental abilities. And this means: "They do not think, and that is why they do not talk". But -they simply do not talk. Or better: they do not use language -if we disregard the most primitive forms of language. -Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat, are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (PI, I, #25)

The main border between humans and animals is the human linguistic praxis: although animals -some animals- can possess primitive forms of language -expressive, intentional behaviour-, there is nothing in this behaviour similar to human language games. At this point our natural history separates from their natural history. However this is not a reason to deny that they have mental life, because "*if one sees the behaviour of a living being, one can see its mind*" (PI, I, #357), and their behaviour in the relevant aspects

is similar enough to ours for this attribution. In other words: under such-and-such circumstances -in the right surroundings-, it makes sense to attribute mental predicates to not only human beings but also what is like one (PI, I, #360).

In effect, the expressive, intentional and even intelligent behaviour of animals, or at least some animals, permits us to recognise in them a mental life in some sense similar to human mental life -sensations, perceptions, emotions, memories, attitudes, desires, beliefs, etc. Nevertheless the fact that they do not have the sophisticated human language -our linguistic form of life- entails that they do not possess, and we cannot attribute them, the sophisticated beliefs, attitudes, feelings, concepts and skills that depend on intentionality, a holistic connection of concepts and beliefs, and knowledge of the rules of language. Here are some very illustrative examples of Wittgenstein:

"The dog *means* something by wagging his tail". -What grounds would one give for saying this? -Does one also say: "By drooping its leaves, the plant means that it needs water"? (Z, #521)

We should hardly ask if the crocodile means something when it comes at a man with open jaws. And we should declare that since the crocodile cannot think there is really no question of meaning here. (Z, #522)

If someone behaves in such-and-such a way under such-and-such circumstances, we say that he is sad. (We say it of a dog too). (Z, #526)

We say a dog is afraid his master will beat him; but not: he is afraid his master will beat him tomorrow. Why not? (PI, I, #650)

One can imagine an animal angry, fearful, sad, joyful, startled. But hopeful? And why not? A dog believes his master is at door. But can he also believe that his master will come the day after tomorrow? -How do I do it?- What answer am I supposed to give to this? Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the manifestations of hope are modifications of this complicated form of life. (PI, II, #1)

Why can a dog feel fear but not remorse? Would it be right to say "Because he can't talk"? (Z, #518)

A child has much to learn before it can pretend. (A dog can't be a hypocrite, but neither can it be sincere). (PI, II, #363)

Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is it too honest? Could one teach a dog to simulate pain? Perhaps it is possible to teach it to howl on particular occasions as if it were in pain, even when it isn't. But the right surroundings for this behaviour to be real simulation would still be missing. (PI, I, #250)

A dog might learn to run to N at the call "N", and to M at the call "M", but would that mean he knows what these people are called? (OC, #540)

[Someone] might surely be taught e.g. to mime pain (not with the intention of deceiving). But could this be taught to just anyone? I mean: someone might well learn to give certain crude tokens of pain, but without ever spontaneously giving a finer imitation out his own insight. (Talent for languages) (A clever dog might perhaps be taught to give a kind of whine of pain but it would never get as far as conscious imitation). (Z, #389)

According to Wittgenstein, the recognition of a mental life in animals is not a mere projection of our mental concepts -an unjustified humanization of animals. But neither the result of some methodological approach: for instance, that this is the best way -the best hypothesis- in which we can explain and predict animal behaviour. No, this recognition is rather an expression of our natural attitude to animals, an expression of our natural form of life: our attitude to human beings and what is like one. However, as we just have said, the attribution of mental life to animals sometimes can exceed the behaviour of animals and creates equivocal ascriptions, because mental predicates have grown in our linguistic form of life, and their use in the case of animals might suggest that what would normally be considered nonsense is possible.

And what about the possibility that some animals develop a language? In certain occasion Wittgenstein wrote: *"If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it"* (PI, II, #327). Why not? Is it so because their form of life is very different from ours, and so if lions talk, their language would be incommensurable for us? Is that not what happens with whales? We perceive in their behaviour something that looks like a language, but we are unable to understand it. What would the language games of whales or lions be? Ortega in *Hunting* (1949) says that dogs learnt to bark in the long process of domestication, maybe as an imitation of the expressive features of human voice: unlike howl, barking would not be a previous natural behaviour as the existence of dumb dogs in some human primitive communities shows (see #6). And so, can we consider barking

as a proto-language? But what would the language games of dogs be? No, animals do not talk: an expressive voice, or an expressive barking, is not yet a language.

The recognition of a mental life in animals is an expression of our natural form of life: specifically, an expression of our attitude to a human beings and what it is like to be one. Now, could we say the same about the moral recognition of animals? No necessarily: moral recognition belongs to the cultural patterns of our form of life, and in the space of reasons, as we saw, moral recognition depends ultimately on recognition of membership: we recognise someone -person or animal- as bearer of moral rights because we recognise him or her as member of our moral community. Moral recognition thereby is independent of the recognition of mental life, and so it is possible to recognise that an animal has mental life, but not moral rights: this is probably the attitude of the majority of lovers of hunting or bullfighting. And in this case, unlike the exploitation of animals in experiments or in factory farming, justifications are usually understood in terms of aesthetic or traditional values. Or even in relation to some kind of human authenticity. Here Ortega's point of view is illuminating.

In *Hunting* (see #7) Ortega asserts that the aim of sportive hunting -hunting nowadays in the West- is not for entertainment nor for food, but to return to the most authentic and primary form of life -Ortega also uses this concept in this context- of human beings. Men were and are hunters, and so hunting would be the opportunity for a short-lived return to our origins without abandoning our historical achievements. This fact would explain the happiness that hunting produces in human beings. Moreover -and at this point Ortega's moral justifications begin- hunting manifests and reproduces the destiny, the tragedy of life: to hunt and to be hunted, that is, men have to hunt and animals have to be hunted. In nature -and in society as well- egalitarianism does not exist, but a natural hierarchy, aristocratism. For this reason, Ortega considers a perversion the recent

British fashion -so refined- of shooting photographs to animals as a substitute of authentic hunting.

In turn, in *Bullfighting*, apart from the aesthetic spatial and cinematic values derived from the more or less bullfighter's innate understanding of the bravery of the bull -the onslaught of bulls-, Ortega considers bullfighting from the point of view that the best moral homage to animals is sometimes to kill them in an ritual way: specifically, in the case of bullfighting, a ritual dance of death -the death of bull- in which the bullfighter at the same time dances in front of the possibility of his own death. That is the authenticity, the existential depth of bullfighting: an authenticity that would express both the severity of life for human beings and a profound existential respect towards the bull -an existential respect without moral rights.

Surely in these narratives Ortega was influenced by some kind of romantic spirit: destiny, tragedy of life, death as a test of true existence, authenticity, etc. And specifically in the case of bullfighting Ortega bore in mind a very bizarre conception of the equally bizarre idea of a Spanish soul. However, fortunately none of that is necessary, and it is possible to see the matter differently: for instance, to consider animals -at least some animals- as an opportunity for our moral improvement: to recognise animals as bearers of some moral rights can make human beings more human. Likewise it is possible to think that abuse and mistreatment of animals -cruelty- tends to cancel in us our own moral ideals. This is a challenge to our form of life: to recognise animals -at least some animals- as members of our moral community.

And in this recognition, as we have said before, although intrinsic and relational properties cannot work as pure reasons or justifications, however can be part of a causal explanation of our moral recognition of animals, and so they also can sometimes work as

reasons -impure reasons, of course-, insofar as intrinsic and relational properties are already loaded with a moral valuation based on the recognition of membership to a moral community. Moral recognition thereby is not a pure conventional reality, but it is connected to -has grown from- very general facts of nature: for instance, the expressive, intentional and intelligent behaviour of animals -at least some animals- that permits us to recognise in them a mental life in some sense similar to human mental life. To sum up: the impurity of life, and the impurity of philosophy too.

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