

producing the evil, in contriving the hurtful, was at least equal to the evidence tending to show the use of intelligence in the creation of what we call good.

This century will be called Darwin's century. He was one of the greatest men who ever touched this globe. He has explained more of the phenomena of life than all of the religious teachers. Write the name of Charles Darwin on the one hand and the name of every theologian who ever lived on the other, and from that name has come more light to the world than from all of those. His doctrine of evolution, his doctrine of the survival of the fittest, his doctrine of the origin of species, has removed in every thinking mind the last vestige of orthodox Christianity. He has not only stated, but he has demonstrated, that the inspired writer knew nothing of this world, nothing of the origin of man, nothing of geology, nothing of astronomy, nothing of nature; that the Bible is a book written by ignorance - at the instigation of fear. Charles Darwin conquered the intellectual world, and his doctrines are now accepted facts.

A fact never went into partnership with a miracle. Truth scorns the assistance of wonders. A fact will fit every other fact in the universe, and that is how you can tell whether it is or is not a fact. A lie will not fit anything except another lie.

Robert Ingersoll had great admiration for science, referring to "Reason, observation, and experience; the holy trinity of science". But he was no intellectual snob. As you can deduce from this address to farmers, he believed that everyone could play a valuable role in society: I'll close now with a summary of Ingersoll's philosophy, in his own words:

**Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so.**

---

## **IF A LION COULD TALK, WE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND HIM** **Richard Baron**

*Lecture to the Ethical Society, 4 December 2005*

Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in Vienna in 1889, and died in Cambridge in 1951. He had a varied career. He started by studying aeronautical engineering, but soon turned to philosophy. In the First World War he fought in the Austrian army, and while he was a prisoner of war he wrote the *Tractatus*. It is a short book that presents a ruthlessly logical view of the world. Then in the 1920s he gave up philosophy, because he thought that all philosophical problems had been solved. He worked as a schoolteacher and as a gardener. By 1929, he realised that life and the world were more subtle and complex than he had thought. He returned to Cambridge and to philosophy. At his death he left a large collection of material, which his colleagues assembled into books.

## The Philosophical Investigations

The first book to appear was the *Philosophical Investigations*. This book contains the remark that if a lion could talk, we could not understand him (in part II, section xi). The book ranges over many topics. It is a collection of thoughts that help us to understand why language and the world can puzzle us, but it does not set out a complete theory. It lacks the clear structure and driving logic of the *Tractatus*.

In particular, when language puzzles us we need to look at how it is used. Wittgenstein wrote about language games, meaning the ways in which we use language. For example, we can use language to tell stories or to give orders. We cannot understand what is being said unless we know this context. Speaking is part of a way of life, not something detached from life. Therefore in order to understand speakers, we need to have a way of life in common with them. Someone from a community which had no practice of storytelling would simply not understand what was going on if he heard a mother say to her children "Once upon a time".

Wittgenstein claims that we understand an unknown language by reference to the common behaviour of mankind (*Philosophical Investigations*, part I, paragraph 206). This seems to be right. For example, any human language is likely to have ways of talking about eating, about the family and about giving advice. Because we are human we eat food, have families and give and receive advice. Therefore we can make sense of talk about such things. But if lions could talk, this common way of life would not be there. Lions do eat. They live in prides, which might be analogous to our families. But they probably do not give or receive advice. And they may do things that would be just as foreign to us as giving advice would be to them. This is why Wittgenstein thinks that we could not understand a talking lion. His point is not just about lions. We would face the same difficulty in trying to understand any rational beings with a way of life that was very different from our own.

However, we should not just accept this claim. We can ask whether it is true that we could not understand other rational beings. We can also ask precisely what differences might impede our understanding and how we might gain as much understanding as possible. I will explore these questions with the help of three different lions.

### The Basic Lion

The basic lion can talk, but otherwise he has the mental talents that we could expect a real lion to have. He has a very straightforward consciousness, in which one event follows another. He has no sense of himself as an individual in the world, and he cannot think through alternatives so as to choose a plan. The basic lion can think "hungry – antelope – attack – eat", but not "I will feel hungrier later and the antelope will stay by the pool until sunset, so perhaps it would be better to come back and attack then".

One argument against Wittgenstein's claim is that if the lion said "Ludwig, I am going to eat you", Wittgenstein could easily understand what the lion meant, and would hope that the lion was joking. The basic lion could indeed say this, and Wittgenstein could understand him, but he could not be joking. He could say it because it would simply be a read-out of the processes in his brain before pouncing. Wittgenstein could understand him because those brain processes could be captured in simple concepts like pouncing and eating. We can have concepts

like those in common with lions, because they are defined entirely in terms of bodily actions. We can therefore understand those concepts without having any idea about the lion's inner thoughts or his view of the world. But the basic lion could not be joking. He would not have the intellectual sophistication to pretend to be planning an attack, while actually planning not to attack.

The fact that the basic lion's thought processes are very bland, and can be described using concepts that are defined in terms of bodily actions, means that we could understand him. But it also means that he would be very uninteresting. However, the price of making lions more interesting is that our chances of understanding them will fall.

### **The Enhanced Lion**

The enhanced lion has our mental capacities. He has a sense of himself as an individual in the world, he can consider alternatives and choose plans, and he has a sense that other beings are also individuals who make their own plans. This means that, just like us, he can have thoughts that are not spelt out in bodily actions. So there would be no guarantee that we could understand him.

If the enhanced lion threatened to eat Wittgenstein, he could be joking. He would be able to hold in his head the twin possibilities of eating and not eating. He might also see the situation from Wittgenstein's point of view, anticipating the relief that Wittgenstein would feel when he realised that the threat was only a joke. A lion like that, who was similar enough to us to realise what we would find funny, would be a counter-example to Wittgenstein's claim. We could understand such a lion.

However, the enhanced lion's sophistication could take him in a very different direction, making him impossible to understand. He could use his talents to build social structures and a personal view of the world that would be very different from ours. They could be so different that we could not understand what he was talking about. I cannot give examples that we would not understand, because I cannot describe the indescribable. But we can get some idea if we imagine that there has never been any religion in human society. Then a lion comes along and explains to us the Church of Lions, in which they all worship the God Leo and selected lions, the priests, formulate doctrine about this unseen god. If we had never come across religion in human society, we would not understand what the lion was telling us.

### **Understanding The Enhanced Lion**

We might or might not be able to understand the enhanced lion. How could we do as well as possible in making him comprehensible, without fooling ourselves into thinking that we understood when in fact we did not understand?

If the lion spoke a human language, over a long conversation, and it all made sense, we could be confident that we had understood him. But it is more likely that the lion would speak a strange language, which we would have to interpret from scratch. We would engage in radical interpretation, a concept formulated by the American philosopher Donald Davidson (1917 – 2003). The idea is to observe the sounds made by the lion, his actions and the surrounding circumstances and to make

sense of all of these things as a package. At the most basic level, if the lion always made a certain sound when there was an antelope around, but never when there was not, that sound would probably mean "antelope". We would however need to go a lot further than that, given the lion's intellectual sophistication. We would, for example, need to distinguish between his statements of fact, his expressions of desire and his commands.

The trouble with radical interpretation is that it is very hard to get started without some guidance. One piece of guidance is the principle of charity. This principle says that we should assume that speakers mostly tell the truth and get things right. However, it is not clear that we could safely apply this principle to lions, because what they counted as getting things right might be very different from what we thought was getting things right. For example, we think that an obvious thing to get right is to recognise the animals around, so we would look for a word that meant "antelope" and a different word that meant "wildebeest". Lions, on the other hand, might think that what you need to get right is the quantity of food. So they might use the same word for one wildebeest or two antelopes. Their word would not be a word for an animal at all. It would mean "a meal for six lions". If we usually observed lions with wildebeest, and only rarely observed them with antelopes, we could easily make the mistake of thinking that the word meant "one wildebeest".

Another piece of guidance in radical interpretation is the principle of humanity. This says that when trying to interpret an alien language, we should assume that the speakers are like us, so far as we can. We assume that they have the thoughts that we would have, if we lived like them, and then we look for speech to fit those thoughts. It really would be cheating to apply the principle of humanity to lions. We know that they are not like us. If we applied the principle, we would be at great risk of fooling ourselves into thinking that we had understood them, when we had not done so.

The fact is that we could never be quite certain that we had understood the enhanced lion. However, if what he said all made sense, and we had not cheated by using the principle of humanity, it would be fair to assume that we were getting it right.

### **The Radical Lion**

The radical lion is potentially the most interesting lion of all, but we will never understand him. He has the sophistication of the enhanced lion. He has the same brain-power as a lion who has a sense of himself and others as individuals, who can contemplate the world and who can choose plans. However, he does not use that brain-power in the same way. He has some other way of living, not thinking in terms of himself, other selves and the external world. I have no idea how he could do this. The idea of overturning the standard picture of ourselves as beings in the world is too radical for us to comprehend. But we cannot rule out the possibility of truly radical alternative points of view. At the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote "What we cannot speak of, we must pass over in silence". So we must be silent about the radical lion.

**Note:** Richard Baron is an independent philosopher living in London. His website is at [www.rbphilo.com](http://www.rbphilo.com)