

Seeing Souls: Wittgenstein and Cavell on the “Problem of Other Minds”

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The human body is the best picture of the human soul.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*

[...] not to believe there is such a thing as the human soul is not to know what the human body is [...]

CAVELL, *The Claim of Reason*

Introduction

The so-called “Part I” of *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*) contains many claims concerning the grammar of psychological predicates, and particularly about the conditions for ascribing them to others. The following are some of the most well-known (and also most representative) among such claims: (i) “only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious”;¹ (ii) “An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria.”² The content of these and other kindred remarks has led a great number of readers to ascribe some kind of “externalistic”³ account to the author of the *Investigations*.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), §281.

2. *Ibid.*, §580.

3. I mean this in a very broad sense, so as to cover many different attempts of including in the analysis of the *content* of (presumably “inner”) mental states some features of the subject’s larger. (“external”) environment, such as her behavior, her community’s standards, the constitution of the objects with which she relates, etc.

Now, “externalism” comes in many flavors. One can, for instance, think of a reductionist or eliminativist version: in this case, the suggestion would be to *replace*, in the philosophical analysis of our psychological predicates, any reference to (supposedly) troublesome “inner” entities (private mental contents or experiences, souls, etc.) for a reference to ontologically “well-behaved” ones, such as movements of our bodies in space. Although some of the earlier attempts to present (later) Wittgenstein’s stance might have burdened him with such a view,⁴ there is now a broad consensus about its exegetical incorrectness; the reason for mentioning it is that I want to compare it to a much more widespread interpretation, according to which the cumulative effect of Wittgenstein’s remarks would be to remind the reader that our practices of ascribing mental states is, *as a matter of fact*, based on “external criteria,” contrary to what one is tempted to think when guided by certain (distorted) philosophical *pictures* of the relationship between inner and outer, mind and body.

From this perspective, the (Wittgensteinian) criticism would focus exclusively on the influence of those pictures, leaving intact, so to speak, the very category of the “mental” or “inner”; the way out of philosophical confusion is not to eliminate or reduce that to any other category, but rather to understand its distinctive grammar, separating it from false analogies that it naturally gives rise. That result, in turn, could serve as evidence to extract from the *Investigations* a kind of grammatical refutation of skepticism concerning other minds, which would be seen as a position based on a confused picture of the “inner” as *hidden* and *inaccessible*. “Nothing is hidden”⁵ — this would be the motto of that reading.⁶

4. I am thinking particularly of Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), but he was surely not alone.

5. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §435.

6. The main contention of the reading I have in mind was expressed by Jack Temkin this way: “Wittgenstein has *solved*, or at least provided the conceptual machinery required to solve, the epistemological problem of other minds. He has done this, the received view continues, with his concept of criteria” — “Wittgenstein on Criteria and Other Minds,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28:4 (1990): 561. The main exponent of that “received reading” is Norman Malcolm — see esp. “Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations,” *The Philosophical Review* 63:4: 530-59; “Knowledge of Other Minds,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 55:23 (1958): 969-78; and *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays 1978–1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) — but perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say, again with Temkin, that it is ‘almost universally held by those writing on Wittgenstein and the problem of other minds’ (ibid.). In particular, I think it is fair to ascribe it to Peter Hacker’s influential interpretation, well synthesized in the claim that criteria are “logically good evidence, which is, in certain circumstances, *de-feasible*. But if not defeated, the criteria confer certainty” — *Wittgenstein on Human Nature* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 38. So, for example, “to see another writhing and groaning after being injured is to know ‘directly’ that he is in pain — it is not an inference from the fact that he has a prescription for analgesics” (ibid., 41); or again: “when one observes someone writhing in agony, one does not infer that

My goal in this paper will be to pave the way for an alternative view of Wittgenstein's remarks concerning psychological predicates, one which is inspired by Stanley Cavell's seminal interpretation of the *Investigations*. I shall do that first by offering a close reading of a number of key passages, aimed at highlighting some under-appreciated connections between what Wittgenstein has to say about human behavior and the human soul in *PI* I and his later treatment of those topics in the discussion about aspect-seeing in *PI* II (sections 1-2). The second half of the paper offers two lines of argument: the claim that Cavell would be willing to run with the idea of continuous aspect-perception in the context of other minds (3); and the claim that Peter Strawson's argument about freedom and resentment might be criticised from this Cavellian-Wittgensteinian position (4). By calling attention to these connections I hope to contribute to an understanding of that distinctive Wittgensteinian claim which serves as my first epigraph – one that is incompatible with the “externalistic” motto that “nothing is hidden.”

1. The Problem of Other Minds in *PI* I

At the beginning of *PI*, Wittgenstein raises a question which (come to think of it) seems to underlie quite a big deal of what goes on under the label of “philosophy of mind,” namely: “What gives us *so much as the idea* that beings, things, can feel?”⁷ As it often happens with Wittgenstein's writings, I believe that question was carefully crafted in order to elicit certain sorts of philosophical responses from the readers; in this particular instance, the intended responses would give vent to a sense of astonishment, on the one hand, and to a kind of anxiety or restlessness, on the other.

The first response would come from the realization of a remarkable (although normally unnoticed) feature of our linguistic practices – namely, that we *do* ascribe feelings (or, more generally, psychological predicates) to *mere things*, i.e., mere bunches of matter, which as such are not intrinsically different from other such

he is in pain from his movements – one sees that he is suffering. *Pain*-behaviour is a criterion of being in pain, as *joyous* behaviour is a criterion of being joyful” (ibid., 43).

7. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

bunches — stones, plants, tables, computers, etc.⁸ As to the second kind of response elicited by Wittgenstein’s question — i.e., anxiety or restlessness — perhaps the best way to express it is by means of some further questions, such as these: If *this* is how our ascriptions of psychological predicates work, how can they be justified? On which grounds? Are we not being victims of a systematic and universal illusion — call it animism? Again, should we not give up those psychological descriptions in favor of some more “objective” or “scientific” — say physicalistic — ones?

Those are only a few examples of the kinds of skeptical doubts which one would naturally face when trying to understand the logic of our psychological ascriptions *from a particular perspective* (more on this in a moment).

Having prompted those doubts by means of his initial question, Wittgenstein immediately offers a pair of hypothetical answers, as if to be tested:

Is it that my education has led me to it [i.e., “the idea that beings, things, can feel”] by drawing my attention to feelings in myself, and now I transfer the idea to objects outside myself? That I recognize that there is something there (in me) which I can call ‘pain’ without getting into conflict with other people’s usage?⁹

What we have in this passage is the raw material for what is known in philosophy as the “argument by analogy” for the ascription of “inner” (psychological) states to “external objects” (such as other persons). Now a very common charge raised against that argument is that it is question-begging, in that the correlation between mind and behavior that it assumes is precisely what needs to be *proved*. However common, that is not a charge Wittgenstein himself will consider in this context. Rather, what he seems to be aiming at is an idea — or, more precisely, a *picture*¹⁰ — which not only underpins the whole argument, but also (and more importantly) prompts the initial question which puts it in motion, namely the picture of the *privacy of the mental*,

8. There are, of course, lots of *extrinsic* differences among living and non-living things, such as the degree of organizational complexity and behavior, and we shall soon explore them at some length. Right now I will only advance that those differences, far from quenching our astonishment, are rather apt to increase it: after all, how could such subtleties account for a (supposedly) *absolute* metaphysical difference between living and non-living beings?

9. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

10. See esp. *ibid.*, §115 (and its surroundings) and *ibid.*, II.§xi for the precise, quasi-technical use of this term.

which is indeed a central target of this region of the *PI*. (Wittgenstein has hinted at it at least as early as in: “In what sense are my sensations *private*? — Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.”¹¹).

Now that picture is apt to present itself very naturally when we think about the difficulties we sometimes face in understanding what happens to others around us, be it because they are unable to express their true feelings, or because they intentionally hide them from us. Moreover, each of us has probably experienced that same (in)capacity in one’s own case. Fixation on those (real, N.B.) difficulties can make it seem as if all well-succeeded interpersonal communication were a matter of mere chance, as if there was a metaphysical *and* epistemological gulf between myself and my own (private) experiences, on the one hand, and other (so-called) “people” and their (so-called) “experiences,” on the other.¹²

For some philosophical sensibilities that possibility would be relatively easy to dismiss: the fact that our communication *works* (in general) would be more than enough for practical purposes. Yet Wittgenstein characteristically does not take such an easy way out of a philosophical difficulty. What he does instead is to press it further, drawing attention to some possible consequences of the picture under analysis which would affect much more directly our relations with others — if only we gave it the attention it deserves. One such consequence is brought to the fore again through a pair of questions: “Are we perhaps over-hasty in our assumption that the smile of a baby is not pretence? — And on what experience is our assumption based?”¹³ Given the lack of an unassailable (“intra-experiential”) ground implied by the latter question, the insistence on the need to “make assumptions” — i.e., to *infer* from one’s own case how things really are with others (see the argument above) — would ultimately lead to doubt whether (other) people really have *minds* at all: “If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word ‘pain’ means — must I not say *that* of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?”¹⁴ The lesson here seems to be: I cannot (or *should* not) generalize so irresponsibly. This is the core of the problem of other minds.

11. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §246.

12. That is precisely the sort of description a solipsist would use to formulate his position. Wittgenstein himself has put that description in a solipsist’s mouth in the *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 59.

13. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §249.

14. *Ibid.*, §293.

2. Outward Criteria, and Their Limits

Now does Wittgenstein have an answer to that problem in *PI*, and, if so, what is it? I assume most readers would want to answer ‘yes’ to the first part of my question; as to its second part, if I am allowed to set the details aside, I take it that the traditional answer would go roughly as follows: (i) as it happens with most, if not all of the issues dealt with by philosophers, skepticism about other minds is just another instance of a *pseudo*-problem, a “disease of the intellect”¹⁵ which Wittgenstein wants to cure by means of grammatical or logical elucidation; (ii) now the *general* strategy he employs to that end is basically that of turning our attention away from a set of pictures underlying the formulation of those (so-called) questions, ultimately showing their emptiness or senselessness; finally, (iii) in the particular case under analysis, that result would be achieved by a battery of methodological devices designed to emphasize the internal or criterial relation between *overt* behavior and the sensations or states of mind it expresses.¹⁶

A very clear example of that strategy would be offered immediately after the passage analyzed above (“What gives us *so much as the idea...*”), where Wittgenstein claims that:

I do not transfer my idea to stones, plants, and so on.

Couldn’t I imagine having frightful pains and, while they were going on, turning to stone. Indeed, how do I know, if I shut my eyes, whether I have not turned into a stone? — And if that has happened, in what sense will *the stone* have pains? In what sense will they be ascribable to the stone? Why indeed should the pain have a bearer at all?!

15. See P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, revised edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 215.

16. This is not the only kind of therapeutic device he employs to that end. Another well known strategy is the deconstruction of the model of sensations as *private entities* — see esp. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §293-94, the passages presenting the thought-experiment of the “beetle in the box”; the point of that strategy, as the traditional reading would have it, is quite simple: if sensations are construed as private *somethings*, i.e., as entities which are accessible only by the ones who *have* them, they become as useless in our language-game(s) — as the (supposed) “thing” named by the word “beetle” in the case imagined by Wittgenstein. That is precisely the situation of the defender of the “argument from analogy” who accepts the picture of privacy, including the model of sensations as private *entities*, but insists on doing that “irresponsible generalization,” ascribing sensations thus construed to other persons.

And can one say of the stone that it has a soul [*Seele*], and *that* is what has the pain? What has a soul [*Seele*], or pain, to do with a stone?¹⁷

Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains.¹⁸

To most readers convinced of the general view I presented above the moral of the latter passage has seemed very clear: the reason why we do not transfer our idea to stones, plants, etc., is that these things do not behave like a human being. Behaving like a human being, therefore, is a *necessary* condition for the ascription of pains — or, more generally, “souls” — to things. But is it also a *sufficient* condition? If it were, then we would be automatically justified, even compelled, to ascribe sensations or souls to beings such as androids or replicants.¹⁹ — Well, are we not?

Apparently the Wittgensteinian answer would be: yes, we are. Take, for example, the following passage:

Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. — One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number! — And now look at a wriggling fly, and at once these difficulties vanish, and pain seems able to get a *foothold* here, where before everything was, so to speak, too *smooth* for it.²⁰

The final part of this passage seems to license a reasoning along these lines: well, if one can ascribe sensations such as pains even to *flies*, what about beings as complex as androids or replicants? Do we have any reason to deny that those beings have souls which would not amount to a reason to deny the same of our *paradigmatic* cases, i.e., (other) human beings?

17. I have here decided to keep Anscombe’s original choice of the word “soul” to translate “seele,” instead of Hacker and Schulte’s “mind.” The latter justify their change in the Preface to the new edition, claiming that in §283 “what is at issue is *mind*, not *soul*, and the problems of mind and body, not of the soul and the body” (xiv). I simply do not share their sense of obviousness about this point; in fact, I take it that this might be yet another symptom of a reading which does not pay due attention to the connections between Wittgenstein’s treatment of the conditions to ascribe psychological predicates in this context and in Part II.

18. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

19. A replicant is a (fictional) bioengineered being created in the universe of the movie *Blade Runner* (1982).

20. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §284.

Here we arrive at an interesting point about the conditions for ascribing souls to things: even in hypothetical scenarios where the behavioral criteria indicated above are fully met — think of *Blade Runner* (1982) — one can still avoid treating the things which display that behavior *as* human. In fact — and this is the most important point — apparently one can avoid treating even human beings *as* human, if only at a great practical cost. This is what I gather from passages such as the following:

But can't I imagine that the people around me are automata, lack consciousness, even though they behave in the same way as usual? — If I imagine it now — alone in my room — I see people with fixed looks (as in a trance) going about their business — the idea is perhaps a little uncanny. But just try to hang on to this idea in the midst of your ordinary intercourse with others — in the street, say! Say to yourself, for example: "The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism." And you will either find these words becoming quite empty; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort.

Seeing a living human being as an automaton is analogous to seeing one figure as a limiting case or variant of another; the cross-pieces of a window as a swastika, for example.²¹

In analyzing this passage I would like to emphasize three points: (i) it offers an *explicit* parallel between the experience of seeing aspects in figures and the experience of seeing aspects of living beings (i.e., seeing them *as* automatons / *as* humans); (ii) it also indicates that the change in our perception depends on a larger context (the change is easier "alone in my room," but more difficult "in the street," in the midst of my "ordinary intercourse" with others); (iii) finally, it shows that this change comes, if at all, only at a great cost — that of risking emptiness, or the production of "uncanny feelings."

I will have more to say about points (i) and (ii) below. Right now I would like to highlight a connection between the last point and a rather more familiar Wittgen-

21. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

steinian contention — namely, that our perception of living beings as “ensouled” is a matter of *attitude*, not *opinion* or *belief*. That contention is expressed in passages such as the following (among many others):

(1) Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead is not the same. All our reactions are different.²²

(2) “I can only *believe* that someone else is in pain, but I *know* it if I am.” [...] Just try — in a real case — to doubt someone else’s fear or pain.²³

(3) “I believe that he is suffering.” — Do I also *believe* that he isn’t an automaton? [...] Suppose I say of a friend: “He isn’t an automaton.” — What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a *human being* who meets him in ordinary circumstances? What information *could* it give him? (At the very most, that this man always behaves like a human being, and not occasionally like a machine.) “I believe that he is not an automaton,” just like that, so far makes no sense. My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul.²⁴

22. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §284.

23. *Ibid.*, §303.

24. *Ibid.*, II.§iv (§§20-22, in Hacker and Schulte’s edn.). Appearances notwithstanding, I do not think Wittgenstein’s purpose in these and related passages is to draw a quasi-technical distinction between “attitude” on the one hand, and “belief” or “opinion” on the other — in that sense I agree with Peter Winch, “Eine Einstellung zur Seele,” *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* LXXXI (1980-81): 1-16. What Wittgenstein is willing to criticize is a *certain understanding* of the (supposed) “belief” or “opinion” — namely one whereby (i) to take human beings *as such* and (ii) to believe that a *particular human being* is, e.g., suffering would be, so to speak, at the same level. To take (or to avoid taking) a human being as a being that has a “soul” is a much more fundamental attitude, in the sense that it is a condition of possibility so that, on particular occasions in a language-game, one can be certain *or* in doubt about whether the other is suffering or not. In other words: if, at any particular time, one has good reasons to question whether the other is human or an automaton, then, on that particular occasion, it would not make sense to argue over whether, say, the other is *really* suffering, or is simply *faking* it. We would lack the background against which that kind of “empirical” doubt could arise. Descartes, in a famous passage of *Meditations*, argues that it is strictly incorrect to say that *we see* men through the window, because what we do is in fact a *judgment* — we judge, that is, that those spectra we see through the window are real men. I think that statement perfectly exemplifies the kind of opinion against which Wittgenstein is arguing in passages as these. To respond to other human beings as beings endowed with “souls,” and not as “mere automatons,” is not to make a kind of *inference* from observation of something more “basic” or “immediate,” such as the perception of the behavior of certain “spectra or fictitious men who move only by springs.” The logical priority is being inverted on the Cartesian analysis. — Only against the background of certain *attitudes* we take relatively to the world and others (empirical) doubt *and* certainty can arise. (I shall here postpone the question whether one can really and legitimately have doubts other than those.)

The emphasis conveyed by these passages on our attitudes or reactions (as opposed to opinions or beliefs) brings to the fore a central aspect of Stanley Cavell's thinking about the "problem of other minds" — namely, that 'the problem' is not a matter of (mere) *knowledge*, but rather of *acknowledgment*. Cavell introduces the latter concept in "Knowing and Acknowledging" as follows: "your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer — I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what '(your or his) being in pain' means."²⁵ Whence the conclusion that "the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him."²⁶

These formulations are meant to emphasize that we — that is, each of us — have an active role and an irreducible (although all-too-easily evadable) *responsibility* in adopting a certain attitude in the face of others. This, I take it, is an important first step toward explaining why, even when *all* the behavioral criteria for the ascription of "humanity" are met, one can still avoid adopting that 'attitude towards a soul' of which Wittgenstein speaks, treating those living beings instead as mere automata. Cavell calls that possibility "soul-blindness."²⁷ In the next section I shall try to clarify our understanding of that possibility presenting a more detailed comparison with the case of aspect perception.

3. Aspect Perception and the Problem of Other Minds

In part IV of *The Claim of Reason* Cavell sums up his reading of *PI* II §xi as follows:

25. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 263. As Mulhall clarifies: 'acknowledgement is not something other than knowledge but an inflection of it — a way of emphasizing the fact that another's pain makes a claim upon me' (1996: 47).

26. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 389.

27. See *ibid.*, 378ff. Cavell intends that notion to be parallel to Wittgenstein's notions of "aspect-" and "meaning-blindness." The first is introduced in *PI*, II.§xi as follows: "Could there be human beings lacking the ability to see something *as something* — and what would that be like? What sort of consequences would it have? — Would this defect be comparable to colour-blindness, or to not having absolute pitch? — We will call it 'aspect-blindness'" (*PI*, §xi/257). Roughly: an aspect-blind person is one who cannot experience the switch between two or more aspects of an ambiguous picture; similarly, a meaning-blind person is one who would be unable to experience the switch between two or more meanings of a word, such as the German "Bank" (*ibid.*, §xi/262-63).

To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the *Investigations* is that this is not a matter of “mere knowing.” I have to read the physiognomy, and see the creature according to my reading, and treat it according to my seeing. The human body is the best picture of the human soul — not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul.²⁸

Now, if knowing other minds really involves interpreting — or better: reading²⁹ — a physiognomy, and thus *seeing* a human body *in a certain way*, then of course it must be possible *not* to do so. That attestation might lead one to conclude that there is, after all, a perfect parallel between the experience of seeing aspects in ambiguous pictures and the experience of seeing aspects in human (or, more generally, animated) bodies, in that in both cases one can fail to see the ‘thing’ in question *as X* (as a rabbit, as an animated / ensouled / human being, etc). An important concern of Cavell in the final part of *The Claim of Reason* (and also in more recent writings³⁰) is to explore the limits of that parallel, thus aiming at identifying the real difficulty underlying the “problem of other minds” (the real obstacle to our acknowledgment of others).

I suggested above that it is natural, or, in any case, not wholly unnatural for us to express a discomfort with (what we take as) the limits of our knowledge of other minds as if it were a result of their being hidden, unaccessible by our naked eye. In *PI*, Wittgenstein characterizes that feeling — “I can’t know what is going on in him” — as “above all, a *picture*,” which is further identified as “the convincing expression of a conviction.”³¹ Taking that description as his starting point, Cavell invites us to de-

28. Cavell, *Claim*, 356.

29. Mulhall has criticized Cavell’s use of the word “interpreting” in this context on the grounds of its misleading connotations — as if aspects were less immediately presented to us than the objects perceived see Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990), 79ff. Espen Hammer defends Cavell against that criticism, to my mind convincingly, by indicating that the latter’s usage of the notion of *interpretation* must be itself interpreted in a different light, given Cavell’s explicitly stated view that “my relation to the other’s soul is as immediate as to an object of sight” (*Claim*, 368) — see Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 70-72.

30. See his essays “Companionable Thinking,” in Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) and “The Touch of Words” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81-98.

31. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II. §xi.

velop Wittgenstein's thinking a step further, by asking what exactly is the conviction at stake — “What does the picture of internality, or of unreachable hiddenness, express?”³² His own answer is “[t]hat the body is a veil, or a blind, a dead end. [...] The myth of the body as a veil expresses our sense that there is something we cannot see, not merely something we cannot know.”³³

Implicit in Cavell's analysis at this point³⁴ is the suggestion that the human body can actually be *seen as* a veil by some particular other human being, in certain particular contexts — that this is a *real*, however uncommon and uncanny possibility in our lived experience, and not merely a ‘philosophical invention’ devised to put forward skeptical arguments. Yet by entering that suggestion he does not mean to imply that when one raises skeptical doubts concerning other minds one is (or should be) actually *seeing* others *as* automatons. Not at all; yet, calling attention to that fact will not impress our skeptical philosopher, who is already impressed by the sheer *possibility* of that kind of “aspect-change,” which in his/her view brings to the fore the fragility or groundlessness of his/her ordinary attitude toward the other, thus (and understandably) prompting anxiety.³⁵ Now it was just that kind of anxiety that Wittgenstein was tempting the reader to experiment in *PI*³⁶ and he did that precisely by facilitating or precipitating a series of aspect-changes — “what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and

32. Cavell, *Claim*, 368.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Explicit elsewhere — e.g., in his reading of *Othello* at the end of *Claim*.

35. As Cavell says in another context “The anxiety lies not just in the fact that my understanding *has* limits, but that I must *draw* them, on apparently no more ground than my own.” (*Claim*, 115). To have to draw those limits in the case of our relation to one another is what Cavell calls our ‘exposure’ — “To accept my exposure in the case of others seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be.” (*Claim*, 439; see also 432, 435). A further projection of that useful concept has been recently provided by Cora Diamond, thus extending its application to the case of our relation with non-human animals: “Our ‘exposure’ in the case of animals lies in there being nothing but our own responsibility, our own making the best of it. We are not, here too, in what we might take to be the ‘ideal’ position. We want to be able to see that, given what animals are, and given also our properties, what we are like (given our ‘marks and features’ and theirs), there are general principles that establish the moral significance of their suffering compared to ours, of their needs compared to ours, and we could then see what treatment of them was and what was not morally justified. We would be *given* the presence or absence of moral community (or thus-and-such degree or kind of moral community) with animals. But we are exposed — that is, we are thrown into finding something we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise. There is here only what we make of our exposure, and it leaves us endless room for double-dealing and deceit.” (In Cavell et. al., *Animal*, 72). The reason for calling attention to that passage here is to register another discussion that I believe could be clarified by means of an exploration of its connections with Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect-seeing.

36. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §283.

other objects”³⁷ — first by comparing animated beings with inanimate ones (stones, plants), and then back again (recall that “wriggling fly”³⁸).

Now can we really take in the suggestion that human beings are somewhat analogous to ambiguous pictures? Cavell himself reminds us of Wittgenstein’s claim that “One doesn’t ‘*take*’ what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery,”³⁹ and asks accordingly if it would not go “against the Wittgensteinian grain to say, for example, that I see a person as angry who just is obviously angry, with no two ways about it?”⁴⁰ The objection raised by this question brings to the fore the need to distinguish more precisely between two different manifestations of the phenomenon of aspect perception which interest Wittgenstein in *PI*,⁴¹ namely the *dawning* of aspects and *continuous* aspect perception. As Mulhall explains:

The former is a very specific visual experience with characteristic forms of verbal expression (or *Äusserungen*); the latter is an attitude whose presence is sometimes revealed in an individual’s susceptibility to aspect-dawning experiences, but which also finds expression in a variety of other fine shades of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. This attitude is certainly not a continuous sequence of aspect-dawning experiences — not a continuous trying or aiming at something; and neither is it a matter of taking something to be the thing it is — a turn of phrase which implies the availability of an alternative way of taking it, which is precisely what the attitude of continuous seeing as is defined as excluding.⁴²

In sum: continuous aspect perception is “a further species of our ‘regarding-as’ response to pictures”⁴³ — one might say it is our *default response*⁴⁴ to them; the experience of aspect-*dawning*, on the contrary, is an exception which proves the rule.

37. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi.

38. *Ibid.*, §284.

39. *Ibid.*, II.§xi/123.

40. Cavell, *Claim*, 370.

41. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi.

42. Mulhall, “Seeing Aspects,” in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 264-65.

43. Mulhall, “The Work of Wittgenstein’s Words: A Reply to Baz,” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 265.

44. Mulhall says that “our general relation to pictures is one of continuous aspect perception” (see *ibid.*), meaning (I take it) that this is the kind of relation that we *normally* (i.e., *except in*

With that distinction in hand we can formulate more precisely the analogy between the possibility of “aspect-change” involved in our experience of other (living) bodies and the experience of seeing aspects more generally. Clearly, we (that is, most of us, most of the time) do not (ordinarily) *take* that we know as human beings *for* human beings, as it would happen in an experience of aspect-dawning. (Human beings are not, *in this sense*, analogous to ambiguous pictures.⁴⁵) Yet, as *PI* illustrates,⁴⁶ in very special circumstances we can stop (avoid, fail) to see human beings as such, and this would be analogous to the (similarly uncanny) experience of making familiar words lose their meanings after much repetition.⁴⁷ What that (exceptional) possibility of aspect-change shows, therefore, is that we *continuously see* human beings *as* human, and *in this sense* one can say (as Wittgenstein did) that “[s]eeing a living human being as an automaton is analogous to seeing one figure as a limiting case or variant of another.”⁴⁸

With that point in mind, let us finally turn to the question of what can be the obstacle preventing one to see the human body *as* a “picture of the human soul.” As Cavell was possibly the first to state clearly, what prevents one of seeing a given aspect in an ambiguous figure is precisely another aspect of it. Now I think that point, together with Wittgenstein’s claim that “what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other ob-

extraordinary contexts — such as those of aspect-dawning) take to them. One of the main tenets of Mulhall’s analysis is to show that the paradoxicalness involved in the experience of aspect-dawning stems precisely from that general tendency: we take it entirely for granted that pictures depict something or someone, and relate to them as we do to the thing/person depicted, “to the point at which we naturally transfer responses appropriate to what is depicted to their depictions” (ibid.); thus, “when it suddenly dawns on us that this particular picture-rabbit is also a picture-duck, when we express our experience quite as if it registers the picture-rabbit’s actually becoming a picture-duck, our sense that everything about it has changed (despite our knowledge that nothing has changed) can be seen as an unusually extreme expression of our general tendency to regard a picture of a rabbit as being as different from a picture of a duck as a rabbit is from a duck” (ibid).

45. In this sense, too, one might say with Gould that: “It makes no sense for me to think of myself as deciding — in each case of a possible ‘other,’ as the other presents itself to my capacity for apprehension — whether or not the other’s words (and gestures and actions) are ‘expressive’ of something, call it a mind or a soul.” — “An Allegory of Affinities: On Seeing a World of Aspects in a Universe of Things,” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74. And yet, as I shall soon try to show (apparently *contra* Gould), that does not imply that soul-blindness is not a *real possibility* for beings like us.

46. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

47. What Wittgenstein seems to be aiming at by reminding us of that possibility is just how remarkable is the fact that words (normally) *have* meanings, as it were on their own faces; that seems to be the effect of the language-game of *PI*, §1, where some (extra) degree of *mechanization* is employed in the description precisely in order to remind us of what is going on in our ordinary life with words. (I am here echoing a point made by Steven Affeldt in his contribution to *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*.)

48. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

jects,”⁴⁹ might help us get a clearer understanding of the issues under analysis. One implication I would like to emphasize is that changing the background against which one looks at something (a picture, a living body) can help one to see a previously hidden aspect of it, precisely by helping one to make different connections between it and other objects. At least figuratively, that is precisely what Wittgenstein tries to do when dealing with philosophical pictures, such as the one of the body as a veil. This is what happens when he, in Cavell’s words, reinterprets or replaces that “myth,” keeping some fragments of the original picture — namely, the idea that the soul is something that can, at least in principle, *be seen* — while attempting to shift the location of the “block” to our vision. The expected result is to show that the body does not *hide* the mind, but rather *expresses* or *depicts* it. It is in the (human) body that the (human) ensouled aspect can be seen, if only one draws the right connections. By the same token:

The block to my vision of the other is not the other’s body but my incapacity or unwillingness to interpret or to judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other. The mythology according to which the body is a picture implies that the soul may be hidden not because the body essentially conceals it but because it essentially reveals it. The soul may be invisible to us the way something absolutely present may be invisible to us. [...] We may say that the rabbit-aspect is hidden from us when we fail to see it. But what hides it is then obviously not the picture (that reveals it), but our (prior) way of taking it, namely in its duck-aspect. What hides one aspect is another aspect, something at the same level. So we might say: What hides the mind is not the body but the mind itself — his his, or mine his, and contrariwise.⁵⁰

Recall once again that passage about seeing others as automatons.⁵¹ There Wittgenstein distinguishes two contexts: in the first we are invited to imagine ourselves “alone

49. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II.§xi/247.

50. Cavell, *Claim*, 368-69.

51. Wittgenstein, *PI*, §420.

in our rooms,” and in the second “in the midst of our ordinary intercourse with others.” Now suppose we agree with Wittgenstein’s judgment to the effect that in the latter context it would be much more difficult to imagine others as automatons. Why would that be so? Is it not the reason that in the second context the *ensouled* (animated) aspect of the bodies we perceive would be, so to speak, on display in such a (live) situation?

Notice, however, that even under such circumstances the *possibility* of seeing others as automatons remains open; what that indicates is that whether or not an aspect will be hidden depends not *only* on the context or background against which the perceived object stands, but also on something about the person who is looking at it — it has to do with the connections she draws, or fails to draw. Now, when the skeptic about other minds presents her problem as one of *knowledge* — as if what we needed was more *evidence* of some kind, something that (*per impossibile*) would allow us to go *beyond* the other’s (mere) body, or maybe *through* it, thus reaching a “naked soul” — what she is tacitly repressing or avoiding is precisely the burden of trying to *draw* those connections. A metaphysical puzzle thus arises from the sublimation of a practical or existential difficulty.⁵²

4. Soul-blindness (or: “Living Our Skepticism”)

I hope the preceding considerations are enough to suggest that *discrete* occurrences of soul-blindness are real (if uncommon and uncanny) possibilities for beings like us. A further question that might be raised is whether one can make sense of the possibility of *systematical* soul-blindness. I take it that Cavell’s answer to that question would also be positive, much against the grain of widespread analytical dogmatism, including orthodox Wittgensteinianism; only the cost of that attitude would be higher: instead of “uncanny feelings,” the result would be the brutalization of the individuals suffering that “blindness,” which is precisely the stuff of tragedy.⁵³

52. “In making the knowledge of others a metaphysical difficulty, philosophers deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another’s gaze, or bear of it. Doubtless such denials are part of the motive which sustains metaphysical difficulties.” (Cavell, *Claim*, 90).

53. A striking illustration that comes to mind is the way John Merrick (John Hurt) is treated in the David Lynch’s movie *The Elephant Man* (1980) by some of the main characters, particularly by the manager of a Victorian freak show called Bytes (Freddie Jones).

In order to understand the radicalism of Cavell's proposal I would like to compare it briefly with the well-known (and, I take it, representative) account offered by Peter Strawson in his essay "Freedom and Resentment."⁵⁴ The argument presented in that essay is framed by the dispute between Determinists and Libertarians on the issue of free-will. It might, accordingly, seem very distant from the topics examined above. But in order to see the connections that are relevant for our purposes I propose to set the "frame" of the argument aside, looking directly at the center of the picture. What we then find is an investigation of the conditions of human action grounded on the analysis of some particular instances of interpersonal relations and attitudes — most notably those of gratitude, resentment, and forgiveness. One of the central features Strawson highlights about those attitudes is that they are apt to be radically modified according to the way the actions that bring them about are qualified⁵⁵. Those modifications can be brought about in a large number of (very common) situations in our human relationships; but there are also some less common situations where our ordinary reactions would not only be modified but rather altogether suppressed.

This would happen, for instance, in those cases where one might be willing to describe an agent who performed an action that harmed oneself by using phrases such as: "He wasn't himself," "He has been under very great strain recently," "He's only a child," "He's a hopeless schizophrenic," "His mind has been systematically perverted," "That's purely compulsive behaviour on his part," etc.⁵⁶ By drawing our attention to the sort of excuses expressed by those phrases, Strawson wants to make us aware of situations in which someone's actions would invite us "to suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes toward the agent," seeing him "in a different light from the light in which we should normally view one who has acted as he has acted."⁵⁷

54. P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-28.

55. The following case illustrates this point: "If someone treads on my hand accidentally, while trying to help me, the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence or with a malevolent wish to injure me. But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind and degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first. If someone's actions help me to some benefit I desire, then I am benefited in any case; but if he intended them so to benefit me because of his general goodwill toward me, I shall reasonably feel a gratitude which I should not feel at all if the benefit was an incidental consequence, unintended or even regretted by him, of some plan of action with a different aim." (ibid., 6).

56. Ibid., 8.

57. Ibid., 9.

With a view to simplify the analysis of such cases, Strawson presents (what he himself describes as) “crude dichotomies”⁵⁸ separating the kinds of attitudes that we can have in relation to other human beings. For our present purposes the most important such dichotomy is that which distinguishes “the attitude (or range of attitudes) of involvement or participation in a human relationship,” on the one hand, and the “objective” or “detached” attitude (or range of attitudes), on the other hand.⁵⁹ About the latter sort of attitude Strawson has the following to say:

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided [...].⁶⁰

Usually, there is no problem about adopting such an attitude — on the contrary, as Strawson himself acknowledges, we can sometimes use it “as a resource,” e.g., “as a refuge [...] from the strains of involvement; or as an aid to policy; or simply out of intellectual curiosity.”⁶¹ A problem would appear, however, if that attitude took complete precedence over that of involvement or participation in human relationships — if, i.e., we systematically stopped seeing others (and ourselves) as *persons*, as *human beings*, and started seeing them (ourselves) as mere “objects of social policy,” or “mechanisms.” The problem posed by such an extreme change is, in short, that it would require a radical change in our normal inter-personal relationships, and with them our very human nature; and the price of such change, as Strawson has it in another context, “would be higher than we are willing, or able, to pay.”⁶²

Now I take it that Cavell would sharply disagree from that view, insisting that where knowledge of “other minds” is concerned I cannot *but* “live my skepticism,”⁶³

58. Strawson, *Freedom*, 9.

59. See Strawson, *Freedom*, 9.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, 10.

62. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 34. Strawson also describes that change as one which “does not seem to be something of which human beings would be capable, even if some general truth were a theoretical ground for it” (*Freedom*, 12). The main candidate to such a ground examined (and dismissed) by Strawson in this paper is, of course, the “theoretical conviction of the truth of determinism” (*ibid.*, 14).

63. Cavell, *Claim*, 437.

in that I simply cannot *wait* for (absolute) certainty or (complete) justification in order to act,⁶⁴ and yet I also cannot allow myself to become “accommodated” with my doubts since “the surmise that I have not acknowledged about others, hence about myself, the thing there is to acknowledge, that each of us is human, is not, first of all, the recognition of a universal human condition, but first of all a surmise about myself.”⁶⁵ As a consequence, being “accommodated” or “permitting myself distraction” from my limitations concerning *acknowledgement* would amount to compromising my own integrity as human being.⁶⁶

But what is precisely the alternative (to accommodation, i.e.) concerning doubts about “other minds”? What does it mean to ‘live my skepticism’ in this case? It means, first and foremost, to recognize — and, if one is to avoid tragedy, to accept — one’s *real separateness* from others — the fact, i.e., that there is no ‘metaphysical shortcut’ to other’s minds, or souls, or “inner lives” — thus realizing that it is always *up to me* to acknowledge the humanity in the other, and (thus) in myself. Of course acknowledgement might not be forthcoming, and *that* might incline one to think (or to fantasize) that this is because “the inner” is metaphysically and / or epistemologically hidden, perhaps hidden by the other’s body, by the human body as such. As I hope the considerations above shall suffice to suggest, Cavell would not exactly deny that in those cases the inner *is* hidden — surely Desdemona’s faithfulness *is* hidden from Othello, in a limited but very real sense; yet, as we saw, he would (following Wittgenstein) disagree as to the *source* of one’s blindness, placing it on the side of the perceiver, internalizing it, making it one’s own responsibility.

Part of what I am trying to get at here is that, *pace* Strawson — for whom “in order for self-conscious thought and experience to be possible, we must take it, or *believe*, that we have knowledge of external physical objects or other minds”⁶⁷ — it is *not*, or not *simply*, knowledge or (ordinary) belief or (natural) inclination that *really* matters wherever the “ascription” of “human status” is concerned. Recall Cavell’s say-

64. In fact, to *wait* for that kind of justification is one of the possible causes of *tragedy*; that is precisely Othello’s problem: no “evidence” of Desdemona’s faithfulness is really lacking, yet acknowledgement is not forthcoming; that is the horror of his situation. This is what Ted Cohen calls “the true currency of skepticism” — “Some Philosophy, in Two Parts,” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays on Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), 394. (Thanks to Paulo Faria for reminding me of that paper.)

65. Cavell, *Claim*, 438.

66. See *ibid.*

67. Strawson, *Skepticism*, 21.

ing: “the alternative to my acknowledgement of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him.”⁶⁸ What might be lacking when acknowledgement is not forthcoming is attunement — and again this is not, or not simply, a matter of belief or natural inclination, but rather something that, as Anthony Rudd has said: “may depend on one’s willingness to be attuned; or to acknowledge one’s attunement or to acknowledge the other.”⁶⁹ One might say: where acknowledgement (or its denial) is concerned, knowledge or belief come always too late — notwithstanding our self-indulgent rationalizations to the contrary.

(Let me try to be clear about one point: I really think we should grant to Strawson that there would be something rather unwelcome or even untenable involved in the generalized adoption an “objective” or “detached” attitude toward others — many of us would certainly prefer not to *live* in a world where that attitude became standard; yet that is very different from saying that such change would be “practically impossible,” or unnatural, or inhuman. And let us not go astray about the latter qualification: granted, we often do describe attitudes that we would rather not see other human beings taking as “inhuman”; yet, as Cavell correctly reminds us, “only a human being can behave inhumanly.”⁷⁰ In other words, we cannot *but* acknowledge that such — outrageous — acts and attitudes are as human as any other — if, i.e., we are sincere in our assessment, and do not try to repress our knowledge about which possibilities are open to beings like us.⁷¹)

Having stated those shortcomings in Strawson’s position, I can try to explain what I take to be wrong with the kind of response to skepticism that his work illustrates — i.e., one of quick disposal, and refusal to pay attention to what Cavell would call its

68. Strawson, *Claim*, 21.

69. Anthony Rudd, *Expressing the World: Skepticism, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger* (London: Open Court, 2003), 155.

70. Cavell, *Claim*, 438.

71. Again, this is a point that Cavell himself made clear in a passage where he comments on the nature of slavery and Nazism: “The anxiety in the image of slavery — not confined to it, but most openly dramatized by it — is that it really is a way in which certain human beings can treat certain others whom they know, or all but know, to be human beings. Rather than admit this we say that the ones do not regard the others as human beings at all. (To understand Nazism, whatever that will mean, will be to understand it as a human possibility; monstrous, unforgiveable, but not therefore the conduct of monsters. Monsters are not unforgivable, and not forgivable. We do not bear the right internal relation to them for forgiveness to apply.) To admit that the slaveowner regards the slave as a kind of human being bases slavery on nothing more than some indefinite claim of difference, some inexpressible ground of exclusion of others from existence in our realm of justice. It is too close to something we might at any time discover.” (*Claim*, 377-78).

truth.⁷² Sticking with the case of skepticism about “other minds”: does not the fact that it is *possible* to abandon completely the non-detached attitude toward (some) others show that the ground for acknowledgement is as weak (or as strong) as our capacities to take (or relinquish) interest on others and on ourselves — on that which is shared by us — hence that it is (only) human after all? And does not that realization show that some instability, hence some doubt, hence the possibility of skepticism, are so to speak *internal* or *intrinsic* to our (finite) epistemic condition? Yet, if our attitudes — both detached and non-detached — toward others are not grounded in anything beyond ourselves, then the burden and the responsibility for creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, hence a community, lies at least partially on me, on each of us.

Now *that* kind of burden can understandably make one anxious, and that anxiety might well incline one to avoid the real issue, by denying or repressing it — as Strawson the “Humean naturalist” seems inclined to do — or else by sublimating or rationalizing it — preferring, as Cavell would say, to transfigure “a metaphysical finitude into an intellectual lack,”⁷³ which is precisely what I take (some versions of) skepticism as doing. (And yet notice that, as I see this dispute, a skeptic would have a clear advantage against his/her dismissive opponents, in that the former would at least recognize that there is a real difficulty, and one that simply cannot be solved by acquiring more *knowledge* — since there is no reason to suppose that we know something that the skeptic ignores — let alone by simply adducing our ordinary beliefs, or natural facts about us, or by describing our conceptual scheme.)

The upshot is that, contrary to what Strawson (as well as many Wittgensteinians) seems to suggest, personhood and humanity are not just “predicates” that one “ascribes” or refrain to “ascribe” to others based on the evidence at one’s disposal, but rather something that one *acknowledges* or *refuses to acknowledge*.⁷⁴ Human souls

72. Epitomized in the claim 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” (*Claim*, 241).

73. Cavell, *Must We?*, 263.

74. And as Mulhall says: the humanity “of all human beings is in the hands of their fellows; their accession to human status involves their being acknowledged as human by others. They can fulfil all the criteria, but they cannot force an acknowledgement from those around them.” I quote from a paper originally published on the Internet: “Picturing the Human (Body and Soul): A Reading of *Blade Runner*.” Online, http://brmovie.com/Analysis/Picturing_the_Human.htm. The paper underwent important changes and was published as a section of *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008). The revised version of the passage quoted above is on page 35 of that book. The film *Bicentennial Man* (1999), which is based on a novella of the same name by Isaac Asimov, provides another good case

are there to be *seen* — all it takes is to keep our eyes (and minds) open to them. Yet, the very fact that we *can* fail to do so shows something important about our condition — something we should not try to repress in our philosophizing, nor elsewhere.⁷⁵

(besides *Blade Runner*) to reflect on these issues. That robot (?) adapts it(?)self to various criteria to become a person — including the criterion of being mortal — and yet that right is denied him. Why is that so? I do not have an answer to that question, as I am not “essentialist” enough to provide one.

75. I would like to thank Paulo Faria and the participants in the Colloquium “Una nueva forma de ver: Wittgenstein y el pensamiento del siglo XXI” (held in Lima in 2010) for the helpful suggestions made to previous drafts of this paper.