FORMS OF LIFE: FOUNDATIONS OF MEANING IN WITTGENSTEIN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract:

This paper explores the notion of forms of life in Wittgenstein's later philosophical works, a concept crucial for comprehending his subsequent philosophical ideas. Despite its significance, the literature on Wittgenstein's philosophy offers diverse interpretations of this concept. Notably, the term 'form of life' is mentioned only five times in the Philosophical Investigations, the principal text of his later philosophy. There is an ongoing scholarly debate regarding whether forms of life can serve as the foundation of meaning for our understanding of language. This paper addresses this issue. According to Wittgenstein, individuals from different conceptual communities can engage in dialogues with one another. We argue that our understanding of language is contingent upon our shared behaviours, particularly the form of life. Wittgenstein posited that truth is intrinsically connected to this complex form of life, or the fundamentally human perspective. His view on truth remains perspectival. Members of different conceptual communities can engage in dialogues, and other 'forms of life' are accessible to "us," enabling members of diverse groups to modify their perspectives. I will show how the form of life can be the foundation of our language and behaviour. "The form of life is not grounded on something more fundamental; it is the fundamental.'' (Conway,1989)

Keywords: Language, Form Of Life, Culture, Meaning, Wittgenstein, Language Game.

Introduction:

The concept of a 'form of life' is pivotal to comprehending and valuing Wittgenstein's later philosophy. This notion serves as the foundational basis from which discussions of key concepts, such as meaning and use, rules, and knowledge, originate. In the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein redefined language as a collection of varied 'language games,' a concept that is pivotal for understanding the idea of 'forms of life. "For Wittgenstein, words cannot be understood in isolation from the context in which they are used. This is so because 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'' (Wittgenstein, 1953).

The term "language game" is particularly apt for highlighting that the act of speaking is integral to a form of life. This is because individuals who participate in such games must already be actively engaged in various life activities and possess the capability to partake in them. Ludwig Wittgenstein posits that numerous traditional philosophical issues can be addressed and ultimately resolved through an analysis of human language use or the engagement in language-games. These language-games are closely associated with Lebensformen, as evidenced by their usage in his works, including the "Philosophical Investigations," "Lectures on Religious Belief," and "On Certainty."

The concept of Lebensformen should not be construed as a factual theory pertaining to specific biological, psychological, or cultural phenomena. Rather, forms of life constitute the formal framework that underpins society and culture, yet they do not contribute to any sociological theory. Lebensformen do not address 'why' questions and lack explanatory power. They are encountered as foundational elements at the conclusion of any explanatory sequence. Wittgenstein's focus is on the meaning of life and the concepts we employ, rather than their causes, empirical content, or ontological status.

Lebensformen are distinct from cultures or normative systems. They do not represent moral frameworks that can be articulated or used as justifications or evaluative criteria. Instead, they represent potential ways of human existence: lifestyles that, in our context, encompass patterns of thought, desire, and behaviour. In language, words denote objects, and

sentences are constructed from these names. This perspective on language leads to the notion that each word possesses a meaning. This meaning is linked to the word itself and represents the object it signifies.

To comprehend the meaning of a word, it is essential to observe its application within the 'language game' in which it is employed. This observation allows one to discern how the word is utilised by individuals within the collective activity of their linguistic community. Understanding the meaning of a word in any specific context necessitates attention to the various non-linguistic activities and practices undertaken by that group, as it is within this framework that any given language is employed, and any given language will be interwoven with such activities and practices. The use of words, in conjunction with these non-linguistic activities, constitutes 'language games.' Speaking a language is an integral part of an activity and, consequently, a form of life.

The human form of life inherently encompasses behaviours such as breathing, eating, walking, hoping, and dying, as well as speaking, thinking, issuing commands, posing questions, narrating stories, and engaging in conversation. This collective behaviour constitutes a universal "system of reference" that influences what may be termed, in obvious contrast to Chomsky, the "universal grammar" of mankind to understand a foreign language. This common behaviour includes what Wittgenstein called patterns of life (Chomsky, 1989).

The phrase 'patterns of life' is often considered synonymous with 'forms of life.' However, Wittgenstein explicitly clarifies that language itself is not a form of life but rather a component of a form of life: "... the word 'language-game' is used here to emphasise the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (PI 23).

Wittgenstein does not intend to suggest that all activities constitute forms of life. For instance, actions such as eating bread or calling for an ambulance do not represent forms of life, although they are components of certain forms of life.

The question of how many types of sentences exist–for instance, assertions, questions, and commands–arises. In reality, there are innumerable types, with a vast array of uses for what we term "signs," "words," and "sentences." This diversity is not static or permanently established; rather, new forms of language, or what may be referred to as language games, continually emerge, while others become obsolete and forgotten.

To understand a sentence, Wittgenstein says, is to understand a language and to understand a language, he more or less also says, is to understand a form of life.

If we posit the existence of multiple 'forms of life,' the question arises as to how individuals within one 'form of life' might recognise another as such. To identify and distinguish another 'form of life,' there must be a mechanism for recognition. If the other 'form of life' is cognitively inaccessible to us, we would be unable to acknowledge it as a 'form of life' or interpret the practices that define it. For instance, if a lion were to speak and we failed to comprehend it, we would not be justified in asserting that it belongs to another 'form of life.' Our inability to understand would merely highlight the limitations of the intelligibility inherent in our own 'form of life.' These 'forms of life' must be cognitively accessible to us. According to Wittgenstein, alternative worldviews, ways of seeing, or forms of life are not beyond the imaginative comprehension of individuals from different 'forms of life.' Wittgenstein advocated for such imaginative engagement. 'Life proceeds differently' within various 'forms of life,' and our imagination is capable of traversing among them.

Religious affiliation constitutes a form of life, whereas speaking in religious terms does not. Rather, it involves articulation from the perspective of the religious form of life. This does not imply that one must belong to a particular form of life to comprehend it; however, it necessitates the ability to share one's perspectives.

According to Wittgenstein, the meaningful application of language entails rule-governed practices of utilising expressions linked to specific objectives and purposes. These practices are embedded within particular natural and social contexts and are intertwined with, and indeed manifest, distinctive forms of life. The context of a form of life is neither causal nor static like décor; rather, it is dynamic and evolving. In this regard, one might refer to a lifeform, as Cavell does: the manifestations

that life assumes under discerning observation, the "whirl" of our existence within language, or the vitality of ordinary language, for instance, not merely a collection of meanings or social conventions.

In Wittgenstein's work, the term background is employed to denote a foundational context for description that elucidates the nature of actions. It is important to distinguish between asserting that the application of a rule is causally determined by a background and asserting that it is describable within the context of human actions and interconnections. We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules; we are taught judgments and their connections with other judgments. A totality of judgments is made plausible to us. (OC) The established background or consensus within a form of life does not dictate our actions; however, it enables us to perceive them clearly if we engage in careful examination and attentiveness. This approach involves allowing events to unfold naturally while simultaneously bringing them into focus.

Discussion: Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life,' although referenced only seven times across his published works, is regarded by prominent Wittgenstein scholars as the most pivotal concept in his later philosophical contributions. The term "form of life" and its plural "forms of life" appear only five times in the Philosophical Investigations. These instances are:

It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. Imagining a language means imagining a form of life. [PI, 19.]

Here, the term 'language-game' is used to emphasise that speaking is part of an activity or a form of life. [PI, 23.]

So, you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? It is what human beings say that is true and false, and they agree in the language they use. That is not an agreement in opinions but in the form of life. [PI, 241.]

Do only those who can talk hope? Only those who have mastered the use of language. That is to say, hope is a modification of this complicated form of life. [PI, p. 174.]

'Mathematics is indeed of the highest certainty–though we only have a crude reflection of it'..... What has to be accepted, the given is, so one could say, forms of life. [PI, p. 226.]

Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgement?' [LC, p. 58.]

Now, I would like to regard this certainty not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. But that means I want to conceive it as something beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal. [OC, 358-59.]

In his assertion that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life," Wittgenstein does not intend to equate the two concepts. Rather, he implies that language is intrinsically linked to a form of life: language cannot exist independently of a form of life from which it originates and which furnishes the essential context for conveying meaning. As Cavell puts it, "When a form of life can no longer be imagined, its language can no longer be understood" (Cavell, 1969). And he goes on:

... 'speaking religiously' ... is to speak from a particular perspective, as it were, to mean anything you say in a special way. To understand ... an utterance religiously, one has to be able to share its perspective. ... The religious ... should be thought of as a Wittgensteinian form of life. (Cavell,1969)

The concept of Lebensform is integral to the Investigations, particularly when considering Wittgenstein's assertion that "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life."(PI I, §19). In "The Blue and Brown Books," the notion of imagining a language is equated with imagining a 'culture,' positing this as the locus through which meaning is conferred. "The Brown Book" sequentially presents language games, implying a quasi-evolutionary, additive, anthropological perspective on meaning. In "The Brown Book," the act of imagining a language is synonymous with imagining a culture, reflecting

Wittgenstein's approach to elucidating meaning through an examination of language use. This suggests his assertion that understanding language use is contingent upon cultural context, with its inherent rules and social practices.

While all humans share a fundamental biological framework, within this shared biology, behaviour, and environment, there exist opportunities for diversity and variation, manifesting in various forms of human life. As Conway puts it, "there is a multiplicity within a fundamental unity, a plurality within limits" (Conway,1989). While language acquisition is intrinsic to the human condition, the mastery of cartography, algebra, or the conduct of parliamentary elections is specific to certain cultural or societal contexts.

Language acquisition can be characterised as a form of tacit knowledge that requires minimal cognitive engagement. It resembles a process of training and practice, similar to the conditioning of animals. Additionally, the expression of pain is intrinsically linked to facial expressions and other physiological responses. Consequently, owing to the evolutionary history of the human species, individuals communicate through a universal language of pain.

Wittgenstein's claim that learning a language (i.e., learning a culture) is acquiring 'a knowledge of natural history' (OC, 534; BB, pp. 98, 134; PR, p. 59).

Our language game extends primitive behaviour. (For our language game is behaviour.) (Instinct.) [Z, 545.]

Commanding, questioning, recounting, and chatting are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, and playing. [PI, 25.]

Wittgenstein's statement that hope is a 'general phenomenon of natural history' (Z, 469) compares favourably with 'phenomena of hope are modifications of this complicated form of life' (PI,174).

Wittgenstein's concept of 'natural' behaviour is not exclusively biological; rather, a significant portion of what is considered 'natural' is actually 'second nature', a term Baker and Hacker describe as 'culturally natural'. This refers to behaviour that is acquired through training and has become automatic or reflexive.

Wittgenstein's concept of Lebensformen can be examined through the lens of contemporary psychological or sociological theories that seek to elucidate the interplay between nature and culture. If forms of life are explicable in terms of physiology and psychology, it would be conceivable to comprehend the phenomenon of a talking lion (PI, 223); if forms of life could be elucidated through known cultural facts, it would enable us to comprehend the inhabitants of an unfamiliar country whose language we have mastered (ibid.); however, in each instance, Wittgenstein claims that we could not understand them. Not even God could tell us about something outside of its proper context, that is, a human language game and a particular form of life (OC, 554).

As Bernard Williams put it, language, on Wittgenstein's view, is an 'embodied, this-worldly, concrete social activity, expressive of human needs' (Williams,1981). Language games are embedded in a form of life. A form of life is the bedrock or given. It is the irreducible basis for any inquiry into language and, as Wittgenstein says, 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' (Wittgenstein,1953). In Wittgenstein's Blue and Brown Books, the concept of language is equated with the concept of culture (Wittgenstein,1958). Culture is the 'totality of communal activities into which language-games are embedded' (Glock,1996). To the extent that language possesses any foundation, this foundation is not abstract in nature. Rather, it is rooted in communal activity itself.

According to Baker and Hacker, [Wittgenstein's] concept of a form of life is not primarily biological but cultural. There is no uniquely human form of life characteristic of the species; rather, there are multiple human forms of life characteristic of different cultures and epochs. (Baker and Hacker, 2009b) For Baker and Hacker, there is only a plurality of forms of human life, and they are historico-cultural: A form of life is a way of living, a pattern of activities, actions, interactions, and feelings that are inextricably interwoven with and partly constituted by uses of language. It is based on very general and pervasive

facts of nature. It includes shared natural and linguistic responses, broad agreement in definitions and judgements, and corresponding behaviour. (Baker and Hacker,2009a)

A 'form of life' encompasses not merely a singular mode of behaviour, characteristic of a group of organisms (such as speaking, calculating, or consuming food), but must also incorporate numerous other shared behaviours that collectively establish the essential background, context, or foundation of meaning. The givenness, indubitability, or fundamental nature of certain facts of living is contingent upon the coherent context of a specific form of life.

As consistently emphasised throughout the book, explanations of meaning are provided not solely through analytical definitions. Any explanation of a word's meaning constitutes a rule for its use. How is the intrinsic relationship between a rule and its correct application established? Notably, the answer lies in practice, through the habitual activity of employing the word within the context of life, through consensus in its usage, and in what is deemed correct usage. This represents an agreement in the form of life.

Also in the cultural camp, H.J. Glock defines Wittgenstein's notion of 'form of life' as "a culture or social formation, the totality of communal activities into which language-games are embedded" (Glock,1996).

Culture does not arise subsequent to the advent of language; rather, culture and language are intrinsically intertwined and constitute an integral aspect of the human condition. No human existence is devoid of cultural elements, as culture is inherently connected to the human species. The human condition is fundamentally sociocultural in nature.

Consequently, typical human behaviour encompasses sociocultural actions. The human form of life is distinguished by these 'universal customs.' [The term universal, as used here and throughout this paper, refers specifically to our human form of life, rather than to all conceivable worlds.]

John Canfield discusses the concept of "universal customs," positing that if language is a collection of customs in which words play a significant role, and if language evolves from an earlier set of proto-customs, it is reasonable to hypothesise that certain customs are present in every human society. Specifically, the hypothesis suggests that every existing or historically documented human culture engages in language games involving greeting, requesting, responding to requests, refusing, responding to prohibitions, make-believe, intention-utterance, responding to intention-utterance, and possession claiming. Despite the considerable diversity among human cultures, certain customs and other elements are universally shared. (Canfield,2007)

Nevertheless, a fundamental alteration of culture is evident in the existence of distinct languages, which inherently suggest distinct cultures. When Cavell writes, "To imagine a language means to imagine a modified form of talking life" (Cavell, 1996), he is articulating a conceptual distinction between the intrinsic connection of language to a form of life and the intrinsic connection of a specific language to a particular form of life. Consequently, it is not possible to conceive of a language without concurrently envisioning a form of life. However, conceptualising the Italian language necessitates envisioning a modified form of communicative life, specifically, a distinct form of human existence.

The concept of a 'form of life' is intended to emphasise the interconnection between language and cultural concerns. According to Wittgenstein, it is not feasible to dissociate a community's cultural practices from its linguistic practices and, ultimately, its collective mindset. The 'form of life' shared by individuals encompasses the concepts through which they organise the world, the language they employ for communication, as well as their cultural practices and values.

As previously discussed, language and culture are fundamental attributes of the human form of life. The inherent historico-cultural context of human beings necessitates their participation in various forms of human existence. While there may be numerous manifestations of human life, there exists only one overarching human form of life, which collectively defines all of humanity. Wittgenstein clearly had this understanding of the form of life in mind when he wrote, "[t]he common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (PI 206).

Wittgenstein is trying to locate the stopping-place of doubt and testing, the place of 'complete agreement' (PPF 347). Language acquisition in humans is contingent upon certain foundational elements. These elements, referred to as forms of life, are intrinsically linked to language and are associated with specific activities. They constitute the basis upon which human consensus is built and represent fundamental aspects that must be acknowledged.

Despite its apparent differences in purpose, shareability is a fundamental characteristic of any truth. Understanding 'other forms of life' involves the ability to integrate them into our own experiences, allowing us to empathise with those who concur with these judgments. This approach does not entail rejecting truth in favour of consensus; rather, it facilitates the exploration of new dimensions of truth by enabling the sharing of novel truths.

The perception of phenomena is fundamentally influenced by language, as it serves as the medium through which experiential data are represented. Members of a linguistic community are expected to reach a consensus in their judgments regarding the nature of reality, facilitated by their shared concepts and representational forms. This consensus is contingent upon individuals participating in a common 'form of life'.

What has to be accepted is that life comes in various forms. (PPF 344-45)

Wittgenstein posits that the concept of human life, as he seeks to articulate it, is inherently tied to the notion of a form of life, wherein its meaning cannot be discerned independently of its articulation by those who embody it. According to him, the meaning of the concept of the human is partially determined through first-person statements such as 'we do such and such' or 'we can fail to do such and such,' through which we articulate the concept of the form of life that we ourselves manifest. This does not imply that, in Wittgenstein's view, the concept of the human is synonymous with 'our' understanding of 'our' form of life. Rather, he contends that the meaning of the concept of the human cannot be ascertained independently of the use of such 'we' statements. The content of a thought that encompasses the concept of the human, according to Wittgenstein, is fundamentally reliant on these 'we-thoughts'.

Wittgenstein's inquiry into 'the nature of truth' should be considered independently from the issue of cognitive relativism. He asserted that truth is fundamentally anchored in human discourse and the perspectives individuals hold, ultimately residing within this intricate form of life, which is inherently a human viewpoint. Forms of life constitute the basis for the meaning of our language.

It is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists of steady ways of living and acting. (Wittgenstein,1993)

Conclusion:

It can be concluded that the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein is best characterised as a descriptive phenomenology of forms of life, rather than as an explanatory discipline concerned with investigating the potential causes of phenomena and events. Wittgenstein envisioned both a singular and plural application of the concept, positing that, in relation to humans, there exists a singular human form of life characterised by a multitude of human life forms.

Forms of life, or Lebensformen, are not mere facts of life; rather, they constitute the formal conditions and patterns that underpin the meaningfulness of the world. If language games are influenced by forms of life, it follows that language games themselves cannot be equated with forms of life. The meaning of an utterance is inherently tied to its usage; these uses are situated within language games, which are in turn embedded within the human form of life and its various manifestations. Consequently, the validity of language meanings is fundamentally grounded in life.

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