

Language as Environment: an Ecological Approach to Wittgenstein's Form of Life

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The paper works out a new way of seeing at the concept *Lebensform* in Wittgenstein's later writings. The literature dedicated to the term offers a range of possible interpretations; in particular we could divide, as Cavell (1996) did, between ethnological and sociological readings, or between empiricist and transcendentalist readings (Hutto 2004). In an article dedicated to the argument Hunter listed four possible interpretations of *Lebensform*: language-game account, socio-historical account, natural-history view, behaviour package view (Hunter 1968). In the recent years many authors had gave a pragmatic turn to the interpretations in particular those starting from the occurrences contained in the Nachlass, overall from OC 358-9 and from Wittgenstein's quotation of Goethe's Faust: "In the beginning was the deed". This pragmatic interpretation considers the *Form of Life* as the 'deed' that as to be accepted (PI p. 192).

In this paper I try to explore this interpretation starting from an article by Susan Hurley (Hurley 1998). I advance some hints for an account in which we can give up the dualistic accounts of the notion without falling in the mistakes of the pragmatic account. In particular I'd follow the hints contained in Gier (1981) and begin a comparison, even if at great distance and based only on some points, between the form of life and the philosophy of practical holism (Dreyfus 1980; Stern 1991) or better, the ecological approach to anthropology and psychology contained in the works by Bateson (1970), Ingold (2000), Gibson (1979). My aim is to show how we could talk about ecology of language in which the term *Form of Life* plays the part of the *Ur-Bild* or mythological image.

The Regress in Action: Hurley's critic to the Form of life

Hurley argues against the so-called 'theory of Form of life' maintaining that it could work only when considered as a *pars destruens* but not as a *pars costruens*. Like other philosophers recently (Stroud 1996) Hurley takes the term as a synonym for '[given] action', meaning it as something that stops the regress in interpretations. Taken from this point of view the appeal to the 'form of life' is a good way to avoid the problems connected with Platonism and Cartesianism but could not avoid another possible regress in actions. Following Hurley if we can interpret any rule in infinite ways, why couldn't we consider an action in infinite ways? Paraphrasing PI § 201 we could say: "any action could be made out in accord with another action". I think that Hurley's critic is not functioning when we consider the context and the period in which Wittgenstein actually used the concept *Lebensform*, but they function if we consider the works of Middle Period and in particular the Brown Book.

The works of this period are characterized by the application of the language game-method (PI § 48). The point is that this method is only sufficient to win battles against the dualism language-world; but it doesn't win the war. In particular the compared analysis of *Brown Book* and the subsequent 1936's manuscript of *Eine Philoso-*

phische Betrachtung (MS 115) gives us an idea of how the same Wittgenstein would have realized a sort of *saturation of the method* and tried to turn his thought into an anthropological analysis using the term *Praxis* as a substitute for the English 'language game': "Dies ist leicht zu sehen, wenn Du ansiehst, welche Rolle das Wort im Gebrauche der Sprache spielt, ich meine, in der ganzen Praxis der Sprache" (EPB p. 157) – in the *Brown Book* Wittgenstein used 'whole language-game' (BrB p. 108). In this way we realize that the works of the middle period are only a preparation to the practical holism considered by Stern (1991) because Wittgenstein just had prepared some conceptual tools of this strand of thought, namely: (i) consideration of life as a range of possible activities related to a context of possible choice in which the organism take part as a whole; (ii) definition of *Umgebung* as the practical environment constituted by the relations and inter-actions of the organisms embedded in it (EPB p. 120). Although all these considerations, in the thought of this period was still missing the image or more likely the *Ur-Bild* that collect all the parts of the mosaic in an organic account. There is a passage in EPB that confirm this analysis: speaking about the understanding of the arithmetical addition Wittgenstein uses the term "Akt der Entscheidung" (EPB p. 216) but suddenly expresses his dissatisfaction for that term because he's probably conscious of the same problem addressed by Hurley. In this period Wittgenstein had to do with the dualistic vocabulary and needed a deep reconsideration of any use of language.

I mean that the subsequent use of the term *Lebensform* in the MS 142 gives us this image and that we could properly speak of a practical holism or, better, of an ecology of language only from this moment. The basic thought of the theory of action expressed by the concept *Lebensform* is that any action could be an action only if it is considered in the stream of other actions and on the ground of a wide formal system of possible actions (LSPP 250), a system that coincides with our 'Form of Life'. The analysis of the beginning of the PI is a genealogical analysis on the origin of the term in Wittgenstein's work and a theoretical analysis on the connection between action, language and reality.

The conversion to 'Form of life'

Wittgenstein, whom used the term very rarely, applies it twice in the first 'chapter' of his work. This is not a casuality but a choice that shows how he confides on this notion to get his reader in the right attitude towards philosophical analysis. As Wittgenstein writes in LSPP 256: "Schon das Erkennen des philosophischen Problems al eines logischen ist ein Fortschritt. Es kommt die rechte *Einstellung* mit ihm, und die Methode". *Einstellung* belongs to a wide conceptual field of other words used by Wittgenstein: *Anschauung*, *Annahme*, *Stellungnahme*, *Überzeugung*. The *Einstellung* is an attitude towards something that is not definable; it is not towards an object and isn't modalized as true or false. It could be used with an image (*Bild*) but not to an Idea (*Idee*) (PU § 1). I consider image as a 'perceptuous presentation' [*übersichtliche Darstellung*] (PU §

122) of the misconceptions about language (Baker-Hacker 2005: p.1), that is to say, something similar to the notion of paradigm (Mulhall 2001) or akin to a mythology [*Mythologie*] (UG 95). The beginning of the PI could be seen as a rhetorical argument that tries to convince the reader to embrace the right point of view towards the relation language-world:

“Von der Richtigkeit einer Anschauung manchmal durch ihre *Einfachheit*, oder *Symmetrie* überzeugt wird” (UG § 92)

The strategy is double-faced and deals with the primitiveness, or simplicity [*Einfachheit*] of the language §2, and the symmetry [*Symmetrie*] between the reader's relation with that language and Augustine's position towards *his* language learning. The point of Wittgenstein is to realize a conversion [*Umstellung*] (Baker 2004) to the *Lebensform* as the environment dwelled by the speakers who inter-act each-other. As he wrote in the first manuscript of the PI:

“Die Unruhe in der Philosophie...kommt daher, dass wir die Philosophie falsch ansehen, falsch sehen...Die Umstellung der Auffassung macht die grösste Schwierigkeit” (TS 220 § 116).

The argumentation is developed around two points: the learning of language and the account of language as *action*, instead of as a means of giving information [*Mitteilung*]. As Williams had just noted (Williams 1999) the concept of learning plays an enormous significance in the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein: it has a causally grounding role if considered from a semantic point of view. The *Abrichtung* is just the way to learn the meaning of the words, and different kind of instructions give us different senses of the words we use (PI §6). But the ecological thinking allows us to see a more profound dimension. We could consider the process of learning as an enskilment in which the practitioners learn not definitions, as supposed by the russellian theory, but also are directly engaged in an interaction with the environment (Ingold 2000). Environment that is the range of possible situations in which they *live* – the term *Leben* in Wittgenstein is used as a synonym of activity to which we could give a meaning, and it follows from T 5.621. Choosing to translate the German *Abrichtung* with Enskilment we arrive to see two dimensions of

learning as strictly interwoven: an ontogenetic dimension of the growing of an organism in an environment, and the ontological commitment of the linguistic practices in building the world. To learn a language means to grow as person and to dwell an environment.

This first point could run the risk to follow some metaphysical temptations, and to give up to the allure of linguistic idealism (Anscombe 1981, Bloor 1996) or to the expressivist interpretations of the semantic in the later writings (Lawn 2004). This risk could be avoided interpreting at the letter the PI § 16 in which Wittgenstein condenses the semantic reflections collected in some remarks of PG and goes further substituting the dualism language-world with the image of the ‘form of life’ in which language and world are embedded into each other. In PG Wittgenstein destroyed the myth of representation [*Vertretung*] noting that there isn't an ontological difference between the symbol and the object represented: the same object could at the same time be the object represented or the means of representation (PG § 51). Wittgenstein used the distinction between *Sprache* and *Wortsprache* to figure out a distinction between the *process* of using symbols considered as ‘bits of linguistic behaviour’ [*Sprach-handlungen*] and the *event* in which signs [*Zeichen*] – could be words or gestures– are considered only as mere artefacts that stands for something outside them. In section IV of PG Wittgenstein brings the reader to the conclusion that *Sprache* is a process in which meaning is build step by step by the interaction between the dwellers of a common environment that is not pre-formed in the mind or in the books of grammar.

The general conclusion I would reach is that the term *Lebensform* works in the direction of destroying the dualism language-world but, contrary to the opinion in Hurley, the practice is something always embedded with the form, with rules and norms – even the so-called rules of thumb or practical norms – because we could only speak of life when our actions can be judged by the other components of our community. The regress in action is something possible *as an experiment* but not in the interaction with other beings. The life of the community is the ground against which an action could be judged as an action.

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