

# *Lebensform* as a Wittgensteinian Way of Understanding Culture - Theoretical Perspectives for the (Intercultural) Dialogue

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## **1. *Lebensform*: the initial exposition**

There are two fundamental obstacles when we are trying to make use of Wittgensteinian notions in contemporary philosophical debates. The first one concerns the succinct manner in which those notions are treated; the second one, the problem of interpreting them in the context of Wittgenstein's methodology and basic philosophical ideas. It can be said that we have to add more than we have expected in order to make the interpretation comprehensible and useful for further discussions of the matter. I guess that the same is true for the notion of *Lebensform*. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, the canonical text of Wittgenstein, the form of life category appears only a few times in various contexts (Wittgenstein 1998, I, § 19, 23, 241; II, 174, 226). The mere word 'form' suggests that we deal with a kind of pattern, model or style of life which has been preserved because of some mechanisms; however, from the data we have in hand, it is not clear what the elements of that form are.

Paragraph 19 of the *Investigations* gives us an opportunity to place the relation between language and a form of life. Wittgenstein reminds us that language can play different roles and it can be used for various purposes, and these purposes vary, because they can be situated within different frames, different *Lebensformen*. Such a formulation already suggests that there are many forms of life. The interrelation between a form of life and the use of language, which is underlined also in the second part of the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1998, 174), can be seen as a metaphysical claim here. On the one hand, language can be viewed as something autonomous

playing a crucial role in forming our world-seeing (Wittgensteinian grammar plays the metaphysical role here). Additionally, language constitutes all imaginable mental activities which can be performed by humans. On the other hand, because of the capacity of using language, we receive access to the form of life. When we are playing many language games, we share our form of life. Only because of language the elements of a form of life can be comprehensible to us. We can make sense of the Wittgensteinian lion's world; however, we cannot fully understand it for we are not capable of playing the game he plays (Wittgenstein 1998, II, 223).

In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* Wittgenstein shows that the way of seeing things is rooted in our form of life. From paragraph 23 of *Investigations* we know that speaking language, or more precisely, playing a language game, is always an activity. Such an activity can be recognised as meaningful because of different kinds of behaviour which it is accompanied by. It is worth reminding here that for Wittgenstein language is something sophisticated. It has developed in its complicated forms from more primitive ones during the long history of humankind. In the beginning, the most primitive forms were simply activities, or in Wittgenstein's words deeds (Wittgenstein 1969b, § 402). All language games seem to be based on some extra-linguistic matters which make formulating thoughts in language possible in the first place. For example, according to Wittgenstein, understanding is also a kind of a specific behaviour in which certain circumstances and a certain suitable environment are always assumed (Wittgenstein 1994, VII). Everything that has to be assumed is treated here as a substitute for a form of life, where a form of life moulds a certain ground for playing a language game. According to paragraph 241 of the *Investigations*, a form of life cannot be seen as something people can agree on. The category of agreement, of making judgments is comprehensible only when we are dealing with a form of life which people already share. Hence, agreement is not something people achieve using words, but something which can be achieved within a form of life which is already there, shared by them (Wittgenstein 1994, 343).

Does a form of life as a specific kind of ground has to be something, at least partly, linguistic? So far we do not know what such a ground consists of. Does Wittgenstein mean a shared use of language which presupposes sharing definitions and life experiences (the same way of being brought up

in the same culture)? Or does he rather mean shared cognitive equipment which is rooted in biological origin? Or maybe, he means both? A form of life is obviously not a ground traditionally understood. But it can still be seen as a ground which is needed for making judgements, playing language games, getting agreement, etc., the ground which has been established within a long history of humankind and which functions as something indisputable now. It could be different and there are elements of it which probably can be changed, but only when we manage to describe the use of words involved in those elements and make reflection upon them. Let us postpone this thread of thought for the time being.

## 2. Biological vs. Cultural

Discussing the problem of understanding the Wittgensteinian notion of a form of life, Baker and Hacker write, “*if Wittgenstein’s conception of human nature is not predominantly a biological one, then a fortiori his concept of a form of life is not biological, but cultural*” (Baker, Hacker 1997, 241). There is a tradition in philosophy of differentiating as fundamentally different the biological and the cultural. It applies to substances, domains, aspects, features, laws, etc.. Does it refer to Wittgensteinian notion of a form of life? More precisely, is a form of life something biological or something cultural? Let me start from some general remarks. On average, the biological is treated as something which cannot be changed and which applies to all human beings regarded as organisms, something which cannot be disputed, because generally it cannot be controlled, but something which is still universal. It is also assumed that the biological might be explained by science and there are laws to be discovered in the biological domain. In contrast, the cultural is something contingent, basically something possible to control and discuss, something diverse in distinct historical points of time, and finally different for many communities and groups of people. The cultural element can be described by sociology, anthropology, and ethnology, without hope of finding some strict laws there. Baker and Hacker together with some others interpreters (Glock, Gier, and Cavell among others) claim that a form of life has to be something cultural or ethnological. There are also adherents of treating a form of life as something organic and biological (for example J.F.M. Hunter). It seems that there are

some strong arguments on both sides. Wittgenstein seems to underline that a form of life is an activity always connected to language usage (Wittgenstein 1998, § 23), facts of living (Wittgenstein 1980b, § 630), ways of living, and shared ways of acting in various areas of human life (including making judgements), which are all facts of culture. However, from time to time he emphasizes that a form of life is something which lies beyond justification, something which makes judgements possible at all. If so, it has to be something beyond reasoning (a cultural aspect of humans), hence something organic, something animal (a biological aspect of humans) (Wittgenstein 1969b, § 358-359). His famous example of a lion, who we would not be able to understand even if he could talk, can be read twofold. As a proof that humans can make lions' concepts comprehensible; however, due to the process of nurture, those concepts cannot be useful to human beings. Or it can be read as a proof that because of different biological equipment and history, lions and humans do not share the same interests, hence cannot understand each other.

As you probably have already noticed, following the authors who use the biological/cultural division, I have tacitly assumed that *the biological* and *the cultural* do not need to be explained or defined. I have assumed that we all understand them easily and that everyone is able to give an example of something biological and something cultural. But let us not proceed too fast. The theoretical advantage of the cultural/biological division lies in the possibility of describing the cultural in opposition to the biological and vice versa. Taking all problems with determining the scope of these notions into account suggests that it is worth keeping the division. But at the same time we are faced with a more general problem of stating exactly when something (feature, activity, behaviour) is strictly biological and when it is strictly cultural. It is extremely difficult to do it in the case of humans. It is far more reasonable and harmless to claim that there are deep inseparable interrelations between the biological and cultural equipment in human history. However, saying that one must remember that there are properties which can still be characterized much more easily when using only one of the perspectives, either biological or cultural description (Sluga 1995, 855-859). It seems to me that the Wittgensteinian form of life, in order to play an explanatory role, has to be understood as a ground which contains both the biological and the cultural. In that sense, it cannot be

equated with the notion of culture seen as an opposition to nature (biology). Following the Wittgensteinian naturalistic proposal, as I call it, the natural is neither biological nor cultural, it rather contains all elements which have formed human beings during the history of human species, including the biological and the cultural, both of which have made the use of language possible.

To call the Wittgensteinian approach naturalistic helps to understand his view, but without stating further reservations it can also be misleading, especially when taking into account the sheer number of different naturalistic theories we can find in contemporary philosophy. Let us assume the following as the most basic thesis of naturalism. Everything that is in existence is natural, which means that everything belongs to the world of nature. This general statement will be explanatory only when we specify what 'nature' and 'natural' mean (Feldman 1999). Taking naturalism at its face value, one may claim that there are no supernatural entities which philosophy has a privilege to study (Wittgenstein 1969a, 29). In other words, philosophy is not the so called first science, and there are no such entities as Plato's ideas, Descartes' *res cogitans* or Kant's noumena. Wittgenstein's unique naturalism consists of several tightly connected claims. He underlines the need for idiosyncratic attitudes in philosophy (instead of constructing general theories) (Wittgenstein 1969a, 47). He treats forms of life, meanings, thoughts, mental processes, logic as common phenomena which can be studied in practice. The social context is for him an important factor in describing them, and he does not look for hidden essence or fundamentals. Philosophy in his view is a kind of therapy and a special kind of description. There is no place for enthusiasm about scientific methods incorporated into philosophy here, and there is no idea of progress which should be applied to the philosophical theories. In this perspective we do not use an adjective 'natural' as an equivalent to 'biological'; however biological elements of human cognitive capacities are important in realizing what a form of life is. In such an approach we can avoid a regress ad infinitum, which we have to face, while using the cultural as a notion which explains everything. On the other hand, in order to describe any fact about humans in the context of a form of life (for example the value of dialogue between different communities and traditions), we have to take into account many

detailed features and circumstances, and to provide such a description may sometimes become difficult if not impossible.

### **3. Universalism vs. Relativism. When is the Dialogue Theoretically Possible?**

There are two interpretations of the notion of a form of life which are deprived of its possible explanatory power and make our attempts of using it in formulating theoretical foundations for the intercultural dialogue hopeless. An important question arises when a form of life is treated as a given, unchangeable, primary, indispensable groundless ground within which all human activities can only be achieved. Is there one such ground or are there many grounds? If there is only one for all humans, the lack of dialogue among different communities of people should not be possible at all. For we all would speak 'the same language'. If there are many and they create the foundations of many cultures, and there is no meta-ground which would make translation of judgements among them comprehensible, the intercultural dialogue would be impossible by definition. Saying that, we come to the point where in fact we are playing the same old philosophical game of the opposition between universalism and relativism. From such a perspective, both using the notion of a form of life in singular form and in plural form, will not help us in making use of the Wittgensteinian concept here.

It is plain to see that it is impossible to define the notion of a form of life, especially when we understand it as a complex set of interrelated biological and cultural elements, and in fact there is no such need. What we want is the description of these elements of a form of life which would help us to specify the matters and problems about humans we want to understand. What can we put to use from a form of life for our purpose? First of all, it seems that that category is quite a general one, since it serves as a ground for everything which can be played within the language game. Such a ground is something indisputable and it is taken for granted by participants of a given language game when they play that game. But Wittgenstein does not treat it in a traditional metaphysical way; hence, he does not look for the essence of it and he does not reach one correct description or one possible theory. He does not believe that it can be given once and

for all. In that sense there is nothing universal about a form of life, though we can still say that there is something common for a certain group of people. In a very minimal sense we could also say that there is something in common for the whole humankind, namely, the capacity for using language, which seems to be a fundamental feature of humans.

According to Wittgenstein the aim of a philosophical theory is to gain full description of the phenomenon we investigate in its day-by-day usage. As a result, we will have many theories and many answers to the question of what a form of life consists in; answers which are initially determined by the assumptions we have already taken. Studying the assumptions of theories is the most important part of a philosophical job as I, following Wittgenstein, understand it. Although we cannot reflect upon all assumptions and claims which build our final vocabulary (Rorty 1989) for there are always some theses which we will not be aware of at the moment, we still can analyse some of them and change them if there are good reasons for doing that. It seems that if we can reflect on some elements of a form of life, which constitute the language game we play, we can also change them. It gives us some hope for making the intercultural dialogue possible without taking for granted that there must be one universal form of life in order to reach it.

There are many philosophical proposals which can be shown as the examples of a non-traditional approach to the problem of dialogue. Apart from different philosophical traditions where proposals come from, they have one important thing in common, and that is the idea of changing our stereotypic understanding of the dialogue between humans. I can very shortly mention just one of them, namely Josef Mitterer's proposal.

Mitterer analyses the long history of Western philosophical theories and claims that philosophy is an arbitrary activity, where the dualistic way of speaking is developed and the rhetoric power plays a very important role (Mitterer 1992). Specifically, while refining notorious philosophical debates set in oppositions (realism/antirealism, realism/constructivism etc.), he shows how to avoid stalemate situations in the philosophical discussions and how to gain positive theoretical results (which he treats as something desirable). In the dualistic way of thinking we take for granted the opposition between the description and something which has to be described (usually object). In the argumentative process there is a certain point, when

the dualist has to refer to the object itself (essence, nature, etc.) which cannot be disputed and is treated as something obvious or epistemologically unobtainable. As a result there is nothing more to discuss, there are only convictions which may or may not be taken for granted. The real dialogue cannot be carried on, because the parties involved in the dialogue are not able to find a common rudimentary level they can base their dialogue on. If we want to try to get beyond philosophy in its dualistic shape, we have to employ another strategy. When we realise that we as people always deal with something on a cognitive level, namely with descriptions, we will understand that something which we call an object (essence, nature) is in fact given by the so called *description so far* (Mitterer 2001). This description can and should be re-worked again if we want to avoid a stalemate situation. When we want to keep a conversation going we do not look for something in common which is already there, but we are trying to establish something new which we could share from now on. It will take shape of *the description from now on*, acceptable for all involved in the dialogue. In other words, we can communicate even when we differ in fundamentals, because we can establish something new which will be shared in the process of the dialogue. Let us call it a new element of a form of life. So, in order to remain comprehensible for each other, we need a so called common ground. However, it can be created as something new from the elements which we already have, and does not have to be given in advance. In the case of the (intercultural) dialogue it would be important not to concentrate on looking for shared values and ideas (which can be a dead-end), but on determining common interests and possibilities of acting. I believe it can be done.

Personally, I think that Wittgenstein would agree that philosophy is an important human activity because of its practical results. It is worth doing philosophy only when philosophical solutions influence practice. Philosophy can be significant, because it forms certain ways of reasoning, it preserves certain ideas, it gives them importance, and hence it affects various areas of human life. The therapeutic character of the Wittgensteinian philosophy can be interpreted as a postulate for doing critical metatheoretical considerations in philosophy. When approaching philosophy from such a perspective, you have to be careful about your own assumptions, about the status of your own convictions. As a result, we can hope that there are



some linguistic traps from which we can escape. We may expect that even though we will always be bewitched by means of language, we will sometimes be able to change the language order and change the claims which are based on them. Especially when those claims interfere with someone else's values. Wittgenstein's works should not be just a source of attractive quotations, which help to illustrate almost every thought and every theory. There are many theoretical traces and important philosophical issues developed in his books. We simply must learn how to derive conclusions from them for our own philosophical works.

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