

## Whether and How the Wittgensteinian Notion of Form of Life Should Matter to Us

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/4339>

DOI: 10.4000/12yvs

ISSN: 2036-4091

**Publisher**

Associazione Pragma

**Electronic reference**

Luigi Perissinotto, "Whether and How the Wittgensteinian Notion of Form of Life Should Matter to Us", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], XVI-2 | 2024, Online since 19 December 2024, connection on 20 December 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/4339> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/12yvs>

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# Whether and How the Wittgensteinian Notion of Form of Life Should Matter to Us

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- 1 This slim volume by Anna Boncompagni (part of the Cambridge University Press “Elements” series) is certainly (and primarily) a very useful tool for anyone, scholar or student, who wants to engage with the Wittgensteinian notion of form (or forms) of life and the ways in which it has been understood and interpreted over the decades.
- 2 Here I would like to propose some thoughts that were stimulated by reading Anna’s book, without trying to give them an orderly or even systematic form. They are little more than reading notes with which I try to respond to Anna’s book and to shed some light, first and foremost within myself, on this notion (*Lebensform*), which by now has a long and complex critical-interpretive tradition behind it. I would also like to point out at the outset that I agree with much of what Anna writes and, above all, with the approach she adopts in this work. The differences between her reading and mine are often a matter of nuance and detail. But one should never forget that it is often in the nuances and details that the most important things are hidden.
- 3 1. The first thing I would like to point out is a perplexity that I often experience when I come across works that deal with the notion of *Lebensform*. Almost all scholars have noted something similar in letter and spirit to what Boncompagni writes in the very first lines of her work, namely that “[t]he question of what Ludwig Wittgenstein meant by ‘form of life’ or ‘forms of life’ has attracted a great deal of attention, although it is an expression that Wittgenstein himself employed only on a relatively small number of occasions” (Boncompagni 2022: 1). Implicit in this observation is the question to which the various interpreters seek an answer: How is it possible that this notion, which seems to be “at the core” (*ibid.*) of Wittgenstein’s philosophy (or at least of his later philosophy), should have made so few and scattered appearances in his manuscripts and typescripts? My perplexity stems from the fact that one of the possible answers is not considered by many, namely that it is not as important and central as everyone or

almost everyone has assumed. Moreover, it is an answer that may seem more plausible than the one the author suggests at the beginning and end of her book (*ibid.*: 1, 54), namely that Wittgenstein did not need to clarify it explicitly because it was already variously in use in the culture of his time. Here, however, I do not wish to dispute the importance of the notion of form(s) of life and the questions it raises and to which it refers. Rather, I would like to highlight how the tendency to see great relevance in this or that notion (“form of life,” but also, and above all, “language game”) may perhaps stem from the desire to find in Wittgenstein’s thought some fixed points or points of condensation that mitigate its magmatic nature. After all, concentrating on certain notions is a way of making Wittgenstein a more traditional and “manageable” philosopher than he is generally said to be. From this point of view, it is not necessary to declare, as Anna recalls Hacker does, that the notion of form of life “in itself is of no great moment” (*ibid.*: 57); rather, it should be emphasised that if it is, as Anna believes and argues, and if it is a useful tool (*ibid.*: 57-64), one must at the same time guard against the temptation to make it a universal tool, suitable for all purposes and uses. But I will return to the idea that the notion of form of life is a methodological tool later.

- 4 2. This general perplexity is reinforced by reading section 3 (*ibid.*: 32-51) of the book, in which Anna very clearly and effectively draws a reasoned map of the different interpretations that have been given in the literature to the notion of form(s) of life, highlighting the different interpretative options. In particular, as Anna shows well, there are at least three issues on which interpreters have been divided: (a) whether the notion is to be understood in a cultural or natural (biological or organic) sense; (b) whether it has a transcendental or an empirical function; (c) whether Wittgenstein’s discourse is formulated in the singular (there is only one form of life) or in the plural (there are multiple forms of life); and, in the case of the latter option, whether Wittgenstein is interested in emphasising the multiplicity of human forms of life or whether he would rather distinguish the human form of life from the animal form(s).
- 5 What is immediately striking is that it is very difficult to point to passages in which Wittgenstein would, at least implicitly, ask such questions. With regard to (c), for example, we can see that there are many passages in which Wittgenstein highlights the differences between humans and animals. For example, he observes that while we seem to have no problem saying of a dog that he “believes his master is at the door,” we certainly avoid saying that a dog “believes that his master will come the day after tomorrow” (PPF: §1). And if we ask ourselves the reasons for this difference, one answer might be that “[o]nly those who have mastered the use of a language” (*ibid.*) can hope, projecting themselves into the future, as it were. We could also say that hope only finds a place in that “complicated form of life” that is human life, of which the mastery of language is an essential part. What is clear is that Wittgenstein is interested here in clarifying our concept of hope, and one way of doing this is to ask why, while we can imagine “an animal angry, fearful, sad, joyful, startled,” we cannot (where this “we cannot” does not simply indicate our empirical-psychological inability) imagine it “hopeful” (*ibid.*). All this seems clear enough to me. But it is also clear that this does not mean that Wittgenstein’s problem here is to draw attention to the general difference between the human form of life and the animal form. This was not a problem to which Wittgenstein was interested in finding an answer, even if he thought it could have a general answer.

- 6 Moreover, it should not be forgotten that there are several passages in which Wittgenstein draws attention to what unites humans and animals rather than what distinguishes them. For example, in the *Brown Book*, after observing that “[t]he child learns this language [i.e. that language which serves the ‘communication between a builder A and his man B’ which reappears in the famous §2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*] from the grown-ups by being trained to its use,” Wittgenstein specifies that he uses “the word ‘trained’ [in German Wittgenstein uses the participle *abgerichtet* and the noun *Abrichtung*] in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things. It is done by means of example, reward, punishment, and suchlike” (BrB: 77). Nor should it be forgotten that one of the methodological maxims that Wittgenstein expounds in *On Certainty* is to regard the human being as an animal: “I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination (*Raisonnement*). As a creature in a primitive state. [...] Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination” (OC: §475). It deserves to be pointed out that in an earlier set of annotations, Wittgenstein, after observing that he would like to regard the confidence with which someone, for example, recognises that this in front of him is a chair “not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as (a) form of life,” adds that this, even if “badly expressed and probably badly thought as well,” means that he wants to conceive of this confidence “as something animal,” that is, “as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified” (OC: §358-9).
- 7 Something very similar can be said about point (a). There is nothing to suggest that Wittgenstein is interested in drawing any kind of line between nature and culture. Nor is there anything to suggest that when he speaks of “form of life” he is concerned with placing it on the side of culture or on the side of nature. Here again we find in the literature a problem that was not such for Wittgenstein. For example, there is a continuity and overlap between what Wittgenstein calls the “very general facts of nature” (PPF: §365) and what he calls the “facts of living” (PPF I: §630; as Anna reminds us (2022: 26), these “facts of living” become “forms of life” in PPF: §345). For example, one of these facts of living is that we “take an interest in others’ feelings” (RPP I: §630), but the way in which this interest manifests itself or takes shape is in turn related to the fact that human beings, unlike stones or chairs, cry, laugh, grimace in pain, and so on. It is, in short, a fact of nature that human beings cry, even if the reasons, the circumstances and the ways in which people cry may vary – let us say for the sake of brevity – according to the customs in force and the different cultural traditions, but also according to the different individual sensitivities. For some, holding back tears is a sign of dignity and courage, while for others it can be a sign of cynicism and indifference.
- 8 In short, I suspect that the way in which the notion of form of life has mostly been understood and treated has ended up making Wittgenstein a philosopher preoccupied with a set of problems (e.g. whether there is more nature or culture in human life) that were in many ways foreign or indifferent to him. It seems to me that Anna is suggesting something very similar when she insists on the methodological character or significance of the notion of form of life. At the same time, it seems to me that Anna falls a little into this trap when, in section 4.3, she reconstructs a three-stage line of development of the notion of form of life from its first appearance in the years 1936-1937 to its appearance in *On Certainty*, with the section of the *Philosophical*

*Investigations* about “following a rule in between.” Now, in all that Anna writes (but it should not be forgotten that these are very few pages in a small book), there is not much that seems to justify this division into three phases, let alone allow one to speak of an internal development in Wittgenstein’s thought. In particular, despite my love of *On Certainty*, I have many doubts about the idea, which Anna seems to adhere to, that a third Wittgenstein appears in these late annotations. But this is not the main point. Rather, what I want to point out is that, despite her preference for the methodological reading over any substantive one, in her reconstruction Anna ends up attributing much of the substantive reading to Wittgenstein. For instance, it does not sound very methodological to state, as Anna does on page 56, that in the remarks written after the Second World War what emerges is “the fundamentality and inescapability of forms of life as the level at which philosophical analysis must stop.” Those who read passages such as these can easily be led to think that the form(s) of life are the object of philosophical analysis, what the analysis encounters when it reaches its end or conclusion.

- 9 3. There is also another point I would like to make here. As Anna clearly shows (2022: 12-3), in the *Brown Book* Wittgenstein, who is writing in English, uses the word “culture” in contexts in which he would later use the expression “form of life.” The crucial moment is the partial and soon abandoned German translation of the *Brown Book*. Having to translate the point where it is suggested that to imagine a language is to imagine a culture (this is the identification that will be sanctioned in one of the most famous passages of the *Philosophical Investigations* [PI I: §19]), Wittgenstein at a certain point chooses to translate “culture” as *Lebensform* or, alternatively, *Form des Lebens*. I think it is interesting to point out the problem that Wittgenstein faces here. In the context of the *Brown Book*, “culture” easily evokes the anthropological concept of culture, which has its origins precisely in the field of English anthropology. After all, what Wittgenstein is inviting us to imagine is a language (a culture) that, unlike our language (our culture), “establishes a chasm between dark red and light red” (MS 115: 239), and to ask ourselves what consequences this might have in the lives of those who use that language (or are born into that culture). Now, translating “culture” as *Kultur* would probably have meant resorting to a philosophically challenging word. As Anna points out on page 13, in the German-speaking world of those years (much more so than in the English-speaking philosophical world of the 1930s), *Kultur* was indeed associated with Oswald Spengler and his famous distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. Wittgenstein knew this very well, since he had explicitly referred to this distinction in the so-called “Sketch for a Foreword,” now collected in *Culture and Value*. Here he had declared that his was “a time without culture” (*Zeit der Unkultur*) if, following Spengler, culture was understood as “a great organization which assigns to each of its members its place, at which he can work in the spirit of the whole, and his strength can with a certain justice be measured by his success as understood within that whole” (CV: 8-9). If those who read Wittgenstein in German had detected a Splengerian echo in the word *Kultur*, they would certainly have been misled. For if it is true that Wittgenstein wondered how to live and philosophise in a time without culture, or, as he says in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, in a time marked by “poverty” and “darkness” (Boncompagni 2022: 4), it is also true that these references to his own poor and dark time, which is that of “the prevailing European and American civilization” (CV: 8), remain in the background, relegated to prefaces or forewords, and do not become part of Wittgenstein’s actual philosophical work,

although it is intriguing, as Wittgenstein himself seems to suggest, to link this reference to the darkness of his own time with the idea that pervades his life and philosophising, that clarity is not a means, but “an end in itself” (CV: 9).

- 10 These considerations can be used to take a position on the age-old question of whether or not Wittgenstein is a conservative thinker. In my view, it is misplaced to both pose this question and to look for an answer in the body of Wittgenstein’s philosophical work. For example, when Wittgenstein states that “[w]hat has to be accepted, the given, is – one might say – *forms of life*” (PPF: §345), “are facts of living” (RPP I: §630), he is not suggesting that we should not try to change our lives or the society in which we find ourselves living. And why should he suggest this to us or be interested in doing so? In short, that “accepting,” as Anna (2022: 25-88) suggests, has no ethical or political connotation, even if some of the facts of living listed by Wittgenstein have or may have ethical or political relevance, for instance the fact that we “*punish certain actions*” or “*give orders*” (RFF I: §630). Although we cannot develop the point here, it seems to me useful to note that accepting here is not simply opposed to rejecting, or even to modifying, but rather to explaining, especially if explaining means reducing these alleged facts to more basic facts (e.g. physical or biological). Although Anna does not quite put it this way, it seems to me that much of what she says is along these lines.
- 11 This does not completely remove the question of Wittgenstein’s conservatism. As I have already said, the texts containing Wittgenstein’s concrete and detailed philosophical work are not the most appropriate place to look for a possible answer. Perhaps it would be more interesting to reflect on some of the things that Wittgenstein says in the margins of his philosophical work (in prefaces, for example, or in conversations with friends and pupils). As we know, in many of these places Wittgenstein declares that the “constructive” spirit of his time is alien and uncongenial to him (CV: 8). However, there is nothing in what he says and writes to suggest that he was politically conservative or reactionary, backward-looking, but neither is there anything to suggest that he recognised himself in the socialist ideals and programmes for the revolutionary transformation of society, despite the idea he once expressed at one point of living in the Soviet Union as a worker. Above all, this lack of evidence speaks against the idea that Wittgenstein thought it was incumbent on a philosopher to take a stand on these or similar political issues. In short, what Wittgenstein notes in brackets in a passage from *Zettel* also applies here, namely that “[t]he philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas (*Denkgemeinde*). That is what makes him into a philosopher” (Z: §455).
- 12 4. As mentioned several times, Anna’s volume often recalls and culminates, so to speak, in the thesis that there is no substantive notion of form of life in Wittgenstein, that it is an essentially methodological notion, an instrument of that grammatical inquiry (PI I: §190) which, according to Wittgenstein himself, constitutes the whole of (his) philosophising. As anticipated, I find this methodological reading convincing in many respects and in line with much of what Wittgenstein writes about philosophy and the way he practices it. However, I would first like to ask what a substantive notion would actually be. If I understand it correctly, it would at least be a notion that should interest us as such, in the same sense that the notion of culture should interest an anthropologist. We should therefore decide on the various alternatives that have marked the history of its interpretations: is there one form of human life (as distinct from animal life) or does human life, like animal life (there is no doubt that there are

many different things that separate a mosquito from a horse), have many forms? Is it an essentially natural (i.e. organic, biological) notion, or does its cultural meaning prevail? Or could we not put it this way: should we recognise that life, although biologically one, can take (culturally) different and contrasting forms? To give an example: humans feel pain (and this is part of their nature, their physiology), but this suffering takes different, culturally mediated forms. There is a sense in which the pain felt by those who see it as a test sent to them by God is not the same as the pain felt by those who see in it as merely the effect of the illness they have been diagnosed with, although there is a sense in which it is exactly the same.

- 13 Now, if a substantive notion is supposed to tell us what a form of life is and what, so to speak, it is made of (nature or culture?), what would it mean to treat it as a methodological tool? We can immediately note that, from a certain point of view, most of the concepts or notions used in the sciences (e.g. in anthropology) could be said to be methodological tools, or, as Wittgenstein also says, objects of comparison, a kind of yardstick (PI I: §131), even if, in the sciences as in philosophy, the (dogmatic) tendency to predicate “of the thing what lies in the mode of representation” (PI I: §104) is just as widespread. It is also worth noting that the question one usually asks about a tool is whether it is suitable for the purpose one wants to use it for. For example, a screwdriver is a tool that is suitable for screwing or unscrewing a screw, but not for slicing salami. But what is the purpose of this tool, which would be the notion of a life form? Anna does not tell us much about this, perhaps assuming that the answer is quite obvious: it is used to solve philosophical problems, which, unlike the problems of science, “are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with” (PI I: §109). For example, let’s say we are faced with a philosophical problem such as “How can we ever know what the other feels, given that his or her feelings are, like ours, private,” a problem that seems unsolvable if the privacy of feelings is treated metaphysically as a kind of superprivacy (and this happens when by “privacy” is meant not “nobody can know them [my feelings] unless I show them,” but rather “if I don’t want to, I needn’t give any sign of my feeling but even if I want to I can only show a sign and not the feeling” [NPL: 447]). In this case, Wittgenstein might observe that the idea of superprivacy is the way in which the metaphysician refuses to accept what is a fact of living, namely that we see the other person’s joy or suffering (and not merely his or her signs of it) in his or her face, even though it is also a fact of living that in certain circumstances we suspect that the other person is pretending or lying to us (or even to him- or herself). Now, if this is what it means that form of life has a methodological function, perhaps Wittgenstein would have done better to dispense with the expression and resort, as he does when using English, to more neutral, less demanding expressions, such as “a way of living” (Boncompagni 2022: 17), since “form of life,” as the history of its interpretations recounted by Anna documents, easily runs the risk of leading us to believe that Wittgenstein had at some point made the important discovery that there are forms of life.
- 14 I would also like to note that the distinction between substantive and methodological leaves somewhat in the background, or at least leaves open, an issue that has greatly divided interpreters in recent decades. In short, we could ask Anna whether, in her opinion, “methodological” is equivalent to “therapeutic,” or whether the therapeutic purpose is only part of a more extensive philosophical work of clarification, as her final

pages (*ibid.*: 62-4) on the possible political “uses” of Wittgenstein’s thought would suggest.

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