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Forms of Life: What Use Should We Make of Them?

Elena Valeri

1 Anna Boncompagni's book *Wittgenstein on Forms of Life* (2022) – published in the CUP series "Elements in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein" – can be divided into two main parts: the first part, consisting of the Introduction and Sections 2 and 3, has a primarily critical-exegetical purpose; the second part coincides with Section 4, in which the author elaborates and briefly defends her own interpretative proposal on Wittgenstein's use of the notion of forms of life, the *pars destruens* of which consists in the assertion that "throughout his whole body of work, Wittgenstein never seems interested in a substantive notion of forms of life" (*ibid.*: 57), while the *pars construens* consists in the assertion that "[u]ltimately, [...] for Wittgenstein, the notion of forms of life is a methodological tool" *(ibid.)*. The book is very interesting to me from many points of view, both internal to Wittgenstein's philosophy and external, in the direction of its use and development, and it is certainly a valuable tool both for students approaching the subject for the first time and for scholars already familiar with Wittgenstein's texts and the related critical literature. It is also to the author's credit that she always combines philological care with her own well-documented interpretations.

2 Much of what Boncompagni writes and argues I agree with and would not hesitate to endorse. Here I will dwell on a few points on which I am less convinced and immediately in agreement, leaving aside the many things with which I agree. This may make what I write here seem more critical than it is or is intended to be. But, as we know, when discussing a book we tend to focus on the passages that seem most controversial to us, and not for the sake of criticism but out of a desire to understand.

3 1. There is no doubt that "form(s) of life" is an expression that belongs to the second phase of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Indeed, as Boncompagni (*ibid.*: 12) recalls, it first appears in the mid-1930s in the context of the attempted German translation of the *Brown Book*. It is therefore not surprising, indeed understandable, that Boncompagni devotes very little space in her book to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the so-

called "early" Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there would have been something that could have been said or that would have been interesting to say about Wittgenstein's first book and "the thoughts that are [t]here communicated" (TLP, Preface: 4). There are at least two propositions in the *Tractatus* in which Wittgenstein seems to allude to themes and problems reminiscent of those that would later gather around the notion of form of life. I refer first to proposition 4.002, and in particular to its second paragraph, which states that "[e]veryday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it" (TLP: 4.002b). I think this is an important remark to recall here, both because it brings into play the idea that the human organism plays a certain role, as Boncompagni (2022: 3-7) shows, in certain ways of understanding the notion of form of life, and because it is closely related to the way Wittgenstein understands the origin of philosophical problems and confusions. According to Wittgenstein, it is precisely because language is part of the human organism, and just as complicated as the human organism, that "[i]t is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is" (TLP: 4.002c). Incidentally, I would like to point out that the second paragraph of proposition 4.002 might recall the phrase "this complicated form of life" (PPF: i, §1) which Wittgenstein will use much later. I also find possible links with proposition 6.372, in which the opposition between those who recognise that explanations have "a clear and acknowledged terminus" and those who (illusorily) assume that "*everything* [is] explained" (TLP: 6.372b) sets up a distinction that will return later, when Wittgenstein speaks of the forms of life as "[w]hat has to be accepted, the given" (PPF: xi, §345).

4 I would also add one last thing here. The word "form," which appears in the compound word "Lebensform," is certainly an important word for philosophy in general and for the *Tractatus* in particular, where the notion of logical form and other related notions (such as those of pictorial form or representational form) play a fundamental role. Of course, it can be argued that it would be a waste of time to look for a link between these two different occurrences of the word "form." But to those who argue this, I would say that it would be worth wasting some time, if only to rule out any link between the two. To reiterate, we can easily stop this search for a link at the outset and say that there is no point in trying to find a similarity between two completely different notions simply because they both have the word "form" in common; but it seems to me that, on a closer reading, we can see that these notions are not so different and that, if there is any similarity at all, it is related precisely to the fact that the notions of form of life and logical form both have to do with something that we cannot but accept. We can then say that the attitude that informs the two notions is the same, because in both cases we are dealing with something that cannot receive any deeper foundation: just as for the *Tractatus* it would be impossible to go further than logical form, since it is given with the very giving of language, so form of life indicates the place where every foundational (reductive) project founders. A fundamental idea of the *Tractatus* is that the logical form is "mirrored" (TLP: 4.121a) in the propositions of our language. This is why, in contrast to what Russell maintains in his Introduction to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein rules out any attempt at or claim of "constructing a logically perfect language" (TLP, Russell's Introduction: xxii), and states that "all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order" (TLP: 5.5563a). This would show that the impulse which led Wittgenstein to introduce the notion of form of life – albeit, if Boncompagni is right, in a methodological sense – was already present at the time of his first work. Moreover, it is not far-fetched to also ask of the notion of logical

form what Boncompagni asks of the notion of form of life, namely whether it is a substantive or a methodological notion.

5 Of course, the preceding remarks are not meant as a criticism of Boncompagni's work, but as an indication of its development or integration.

6 2. As mentioned at the beginning, Boncompagni repeatedly argues that the notion of form(s) of life in relation to Wittgenstein is to be understood not in a substantive but in a methodological sense. The first question that comes to my mind is the following: is Boncompagni suggesting that in the critical literature on Wittgenstein and forms of life, which she reconstructs so well in Section 3 (2022: 32-51), a basically substantive reading of form of life has prevailed, or are there instead traces of a methodological reading on which she relies or to which she refers in offering her interpretative proposal? The question is of some interest, because if we were to conclude that the interpretations given so far are substantive, and if, as it seems, the methodological reading is more in keeping with Wittgenstein's way of understanding and practising philosophy, we would have to conclude that it is precisely around the notion of form of life that one of the most obvious betrayals of Wittgenstein's philosophy took place. I ask this question because I have the impression that Boncompagni's reconstruction of the most relevant readings of Wittgenstein's notion of form of life suggests the first hypothesis, namely the prevalence of a substantive reading. If this is not the case, and if this impression is false, who, if any, would be the forerunners of the reading Boncompagni calls "methodological"? The question also arises from the fact that Boncompagni, in the part devoted to the reconstruction of the various interpretative positions on the notion of form of life, does not take the distinction between the substantive and the methodological as an explicit criterion of classification.

7 Another question concerns the very meaning of the adjective "methodological." I realise, of course, that to say anything really significant about this is to question what philosophizing meant to Wittgenstein, so I will limit myself here to a few general considerations. The first thing I would like to ask (although this is not the most important question to ask) is whether this distinction between the substantive and the methodological has anything to do with the debate carried out in the recent decades provoked by the emergence of the so-called "neo-Wittgensteinian" reading. To give just one example I could recall the opposition between Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's reading of *On Certainty* (e.g. Moyal-Sharrock 2016) and James Conant's (e.g. Conant 1998). It seems quite clear to me that, if we use the substantive/methodological distinction, Moyal-Sharrock's is a substantive reading, while Conant's is a methodological reading. It is no coincidence that the former reading has even given rise to a new epistemology, the so-called "hinge epistemology," while the latter is radically inimical to any positive use of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Is this what Boncompagni has in mind when she distinguishes the substantive from the methodological?

8 But there is more. Those who insist on the methodological character of Wittgensteinian notions can do so in two ways. On the one hand, there are those – the neo-Wittgensteinians – who combine this insistence with the idea that the only task Wittgenstein assigns to philosophy is a therapeutic one. Alice Crary makes this clear from the outset in her Introduction to the volume *The New Wittgenstein*, by presenting the common assumption of all (but one) of the collected papers: "without regard to the period (or periods) of his work with which they are concerned, they agree in suggesting that Wittgenstein's primary aim in philosophy is – to use a word he himself employs in

characterizing his later philosophical procedures – a *therapeutic* one" (Crary & Read 2000: 1). On the other hand, there are those whom the neo-Wittgensteinians call (with some contempt) "standard" or, worse still, "irresolute" readers, who believe that therapy is only one side of the philosophical coin, and identify the other side with the task of (conceptual) clarification of which Wittgenstein already speaks in the *Tractatus*. For both of these groups, the non-theoretical character and the therapeutic commitment of Wittgenstein's philosophy are well established, but the "standard" readers, unlike the neo-Wittgensteinians, believe that philosophical therapy is only a part or a moment of Wittgenstein's philosophical work of clarification. This latter position seems particularly justified in the case of the later writings, for example those on the philosophy of psychology, in which Wittgenstein is engaged in elaborating a "[p]lan for the treatment of psychological concepts" (RPP II: §63), or those devoted to the concepts of knowledge, certainty and doubt collected together in *On Certainty*.

9 It is not entirely clear to me whether Boncompagni is leaning towards the first or the second meaning of "methodological." Some of what she says in the very last pages of her book would seem to favour the second, although it is true that in those pages she is not talking about Wittgenstein as such, but about a possible development of his methodology. My impression is that Boncompagni, at least with regard to the notion of form of life, is inclined towards the second meaning of "methodological," but refrains from making her preference explicit for fear that it might slip back into a substantive reading of this notion. I would ask, however, what is wrong with a substantive notion, if by that is meant a notion that is capable of positively illuminating or clarifying certain features or aspects of our lives, particularly our conceptual lives. For instance, once we have freed ourselves from the metaphysical influence of the internal/external paradigm on our psychological concepts and the philosophical problems it raises (e.g. those related to the scepticism of other minds), is there really nothing left to say about our psychological concepts or the various psychological judgements we make in all the different circumstances of our individual and collective lives? After all, if we do philosophy, is it not also to understand all this – although in this case understanding does not necessarily mean, as naturalists and reductionists of various schools believe, explaining, founding or, in general, constructing scientific theories? Our understanding of our (conceptual) life is something that must not yield to (metaphysical) foundations or the infinite regress of (scientific) explanations, but neither must it shy away from a clarifying description of how things in our lives are. Wittgenstein is telling us precisely this when, in a passage from his *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough*," he writes: "Here one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like" (RGB: 121).

10 It is clear that what Wittgenstein wants to warn us against are the paradoxes, puzzles and confusions that the impulse to explain (scientifically) or to found (metaphysically) produces. To illustrate this point, we can use a simile that Wittgenstein will use some years later, in 1941 to be precise: "People who are constantly asking 'why' are like tourists, who stand in front of a building, reading Baedeker, and through reading about the history of the building's construction etc. etc. are prevented from *seeing* it" (CV: 46). However, this simile should not be read too one-sidedly. Once the tourist has been persuaded to lift her eyes from the Baedeker, much remains to be done if she is to see the building in front of her, since she can look at it without actually seeing it. In this sense, for Wittgenstein, as for the phenomenological tradition in a way, philosophising is the practice or exercise of seeing, and this practice or exercise is far from easy, even if the difficulties encountered in it are different from those encountered in science,

both in working out theories and in conducting experiments in the laboratory. Using the simile of the tourist and her Baedeker, we could then ask whether, for Boncompagni, the purpose of Wittgenstein's methodology is simply to make us throw away the Baedeker, or whether it is also to help us see or notice what we are "unable to notice [...] – because it is always before one's eyes" (PI: §129).

11 All these perplexities are, first and foremost, perplexities that I myself feel as a reader and scholar of Wittgenstein. One of the merits of Boncompagni's book, which derives not only from the author's profound knowledge of Wittgenstein, but also from the clarity of her exposition and argumentation, is that it forces readers to go beyond the easy formulae and interpretative loopholes to come to terms with these "knots" in Wittgenstein's thought. After all, one might say that the above-mentioned oscillation between the purely therapeutic and the clarifying returns in the critical literature because it is already to be found in Wittgenstein's works.

12 3. There are, of course, many other aspects of Boncompagni's book that deserve to be addressed and discussed, although it is not possible to do so here. I am referring, in particular, to the few but dense pages (2022: 40-4) in which Boncompagni addresses two questions that have long preoccupied interpreters. On the one hand, the question of whether Wittgenstein was a relativist, and on the other, the question of whether he was a conservative, both in philosophy and in politics. In both cases I find Boncompagni's approach largely convincing, although it perhaps needs further investigation. Beyond her specific considerations, it seems to me that the lesson to be drawn from her pages, and from her general methodological approach to Wittgenstein's notions, might be the following: Wittgenstein was not interested in establishing whether relativism (or conservatism) was a correct or plausible position, but rather in asking why one might be tempted, for instance, to read his appeal to the facts (or forms) of our lives in a relativistic sense. In short, for Wittgenstein, this temptation stems from a failure to recognize that there is no point in seeking a foundation for what does not need a foundation at all. For Wittgenstein, "without foundation" is not the same as "unfounded." That is why the facts of our lives are never like clothes that can be worn or discarded at will.

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