

# Forms of Life and Other Minds

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In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that the given--what has to be accepted--is *forms of life*. To the extent that Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be said to have a foundation, the foundation is forms of life. Yet there is considerable mystery in the secondary literature about just what a form of life is supposed to be, and what is the relation between forms of life and the rest of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In this paper I will try to elucidate Wittgenstein's concept of a form of life and show the role it plays in one area of his later philosophy: the positive account that Wittgenstein gives of an important example of our knowledge of other minds--our knowledge of other people's pain.

Wittgenstein speaks of a form of life as an "activity" (PI 23), (1) or "fact of living" (RPP vol. I, 630) or "way of living" (PO p. 397). Most of his examples involve overt behavior (including verbal behavior), e.g., greeting (MS 165, pp. 110- 111), punishing, establishing a state of affairs, giving orders, reporting, describing colors (RPP vol. I, 630) or the use of language itself (PI, p. 174). But Wittgenstein also includes phenomena that we usually think of as states of mind, such as certainty (OC 358) or taking an interest in others' feelings (RPP, vol. I, 630). As we'll see, however, these states of mind, in their root form, also turn out to involve overt behavior, on Wittgenstein's view.

What is the criterion for calling all these ways of acting or states of mind "forms of life"? Wittgenstein's clearest answer appears in *On Certainty*, where he speaks of a form of life as "something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal" (OC 359). A form of life is "beyond being justified" in the sense that it is not the product of reasoning, but rather provides an ultimate justification for other things we do (OC 110). In *these* circumstances, we greet each other; in *those* circumstances we punish. We justify greeting someone or punishing someone in a particular case by appeal to our general practices of greeting or punishing in certain circumstances. But what justification do we have for these general practices? None at all. This is simply what we do. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, this is where "the chain of reasons comes to an end" (PI 326). It is in this sense that a form of life is "beyond being justified." Wittgenstein also says that a form of life is "beyond being *unjustified*." The meaning of this phrase can be taken from the central theme of *On Certainty*, which is that certainty itself is a form of life (OC 358). Being certain of some propositions--e.g., that here is a hand, or that objects don't just disappear--is "beyond being unjustified" in the sense that no one could use reasons to talk us out of it, or to convince us to give it up. No one could, by giving reasons, shake our certainty about such propositions (Cf. OC 356). Our eyes are closed in the face of doubt (PI, p. 224). Nor could someone, through ratiocination, convince us that we ought never to greet people, or take an interest in the feelings of others. In this sense, a form of life is something rationally unshakeable--or as near to unshakeable as anything could be. If the facts of nature changed drastically, our forms of life might also change as a natural result--but not because we had decided to change them on the basis of reasons. Other persons might influence us *causally* so as to bring about a change in our forms of life, e.g., through a process of conversion, but this would not happen simply through the use of reasons (Cf. OC 612). Reason alone is powerless against a form of life, which is, in this sense, "beyond being unjustified."

A form of life is also a shared way of acting, and this is an important feature of Wittgenstein's idea. There is a deep similarity among human beings in their ungrounded and rationally unshakeable behaviors. Wittgenstein calls this similarity "agreement" in form of life (PI 241). Such agreement --including

agreement in judgments--must exist for the practice of justification to take place (PI 242). For a justification is always a justification *to* someone, who must, in the end, share our ultimate basis for justification.

Forms of life, then, are shared ways of acting which are neither based on reasons nor subject to rational revision. It is in this sense that they are "something animal." In using this phrase, Wittgenstein does not mean to limit forms of life to behavior we have in common with other animals. For the use of language is a form of life (PI 241), and animals do not use language (if we except the most primitive forms of communication). The point is that animals do not act on reasons, nor can they be persuaded or dissuaded by reasons. To the extent that human behavior is like this, Wittgenstein speaks of it as "something animal."

Wittgenstein also uses the terms "primitive" and "instinctive" to refer to behavior of this kind. In speaking of the development of language-games, Wittgenstein says, "I want to regard man here as an animal; a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination." (OC 475)

Here, "instinct" is used not to suggest behavior which is unlearned, but ungrounded and rationally unassailable. Among human beings, the use of language is instinctive in this sense. For it is "as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (PI 25). At its foundations, language is not the product of reasoning. For language itself is required for reasoning. Man is a linguistic animal, so some (though not all) human forms of life involve the use of language. Here, of course, language is being considered in the context of the behavior and circumstances into which it is woven. Language in this sense is a vast family of "language-games"--rule-governed social practices involving the use of words. And these language-games, which at their roots are not the product of reasoning or subject to it, are also forms of life.

Wittgenstein does not mean to deny that there is a role for reasoning *within* a language-game; he is only saying that the language-game itself is not based on reasoning (Z 391). Reasoning can be used to extend a language-game and thus to further a particular form of life. The languages of science and mathematics include many such extensions, where terms and procedures and forms of discourse are invented for particular purposes. But the language-game as a whole--of scientific inquiry or calculation--is beyond justification. Such a language-game is an example of what Wittgenstein calls a "complicated form of life" (cf. PI p. 174). Contrast this, for example, with ideology (e.g., Nazism or bourgeois liberalism), which is at least partly based on reasons, e.g., some conception of the good, and is therefore not a good example of a form of life.

On this account of forms of life, the use of language always involves a form of life but a form of life need not involve the use of language. In this respect, my account differs from the one offered by S. Stephen Hilmy, who identifies forms of life with "activities or loci of linguistic practice." (2) There is simply no basis in Wittgenstein's later writings for limiting the notion of a form of life in this way to language or activities involving the use of language. Although Wittgenstein says that "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (PI 19), this does not necessarily mean that to imagine a form of life is to imagine a language. On the contrary, Wittgenstein strongly suggests that forms of life include not only linguistic activities, such as "commanding, questioning, recounting and chatting" (PI 25), but also such activities as "walking, eating, drinking, playing" (PI 25), which do not necessarily have any connection to the use of language. G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker come closest to the truth when they say, "The notion of a form of life is connected with that of a language-game, but is more general and elemental. A form of life is a given unjustified and unjustifiable pattern of human activity (part of human natural history)." (3)

The "general and elemental" character of forms of life is also what prevents them from being defined as "cultural forms, styles and structures," as Nicholas Gier would have it. (4) For Wittgenstein's examples of "forms of life" include such activities as "greeting" or "taking an interest in the feelings of others," which are transcultural--i.e., which appear in all or nearly all cultures. This is not to deny that some aspects of culture--in some sense of this notoriously vague word--might be *examples* of forms of life, e.g., a preference in food, dress or music. But Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life is broader and deeper than culture. It also includes ways of acting which are not merely cultural, but *human*, in the sense that nearly all human beings in nearly all cultures engage in them. It even includes ways of acting that we share with other animals, e.g., playing (PI 25).

My account of Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life differs not only from the "cultural" interpretation of Gier and others, but also from the "biological" or "organic" account offered by J.F.M. Hunter. Hunter defines a form of life as "...something typical of a living being: typical in the sense of being very broadly in the same class as the growth or nutrition of living organisms or the organic complexity which enables them to propel themselves about...." (5)

This interpretation makes biological origins essential to the notion of a form of life. This might work for "walking, eating, and drinking," but Wittgenstein's examples of forms of life also include such behaviors as greeting, punishing and using language, whose "biological origins," if any, are a matter of pure speculation.

Fortunately, Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life does not require biological origins for such complex behavior. If I am right, the concept of a form of life constitutes a new *category* of conduct--one which cannot be reduced to such familiar classifications as culture or biology. This is not to deny, of course, that forms of life may have causal roots in biology or culture or both. But the notion of a form of life is to be understood not by its relation to biology or culture but to rationality. Any shared activity--biological, cultural or otherwise--can be a form of life so long as it is "beyond being justified or unjustified" in the sense I have tried to explain. Some of forms of life are very simple, and constitute the origin of more complicated ones. As Wittgenstein puts it in *Philosophical Occasions*,

We have an idea of which forms of life [*Lebensformen*] are primitive, and which could only have developed out of these. We believe that the simplest plough existed before the complicated one. (PO p. 397)

Among the simplest forms of life are "reactions" or "primitive reactions" (Wittgenstein uses these terms interchangeably). Wittgenstein mentions these reactions in *Culture and Value*, where he says,

The origin and the primitive form of the language-game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language--I want to say--is a refinement. "In the beginning was the deed." (CV p. 31)

A primitive reaction is a rudimentary form of life consisting of a simple response to our environment or to other people. Wittgenstein explains the notion of a primitive reaction in *Zettel*, where he discusses our primitive reactions to the pain behavior of other people, e.g., to their "gestures and cries" (PO 381).

"But what is the word 'primitive' meant to say here? Presumably that this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought." (Z 541)

Wittgenstein is not always consistent in the way he uses the term "primitive reaction." In the passage quoted above from *Zettel*, he speaks of a primitive reaction as "pre-linguistic," but in the *Philosophical*

*Investigations*, he says that a primitive reaction "may have been a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word" (PI, p. 218). In general, however, Wittgenstein's use of this term is fairly clear. Like "instinctive" or "animal" or "natural" (Z 545) he uses it to refer to behavior that is ungrounded and rationally unchallengeable--"a prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought." What distinguishes primitive reactions from other forms of life is that they are always *responses* to someone or something and that they are *simple* behaviors from which more complex behavior, including verbal behavior, may develop.

Wittgenstein's clearest examples of primitive reactions have to do with our responses to the pain behavior of other people. It is an important fact about human beings that we are not naturally indifferent to other people's pain behavior. On the contrary, Wittgenstein tells us, it is a "primitive reaction" to the pain behavior of other people to tend or treat them. As he puts it in *Zettel*,

It is a help here to remember that it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain; and not merely when oneself is--and so to pay attention to other people's pain behaviour, as one does *not* pay attention to one's own pain behaviour. (Z 540)

Rudimentary "doctoring" behavior, then, is a form of life--an ungrounded and rationally unshakeable practice, like greeting or punishing or describing colors. Its simplest form is tending or treating the part that hurts when oneself or someone else is in pain. But an enormously complicated form of life grows out of it, including the vast family of language-games of medicine. Doctoring behavior, from the simplest to the most complex, is ultimately ungrounded. The ungrounded and rationally unshakeable nature of such behavior is what provides Wittgenstein with a positive account of our knowledge of other people's pain. The central concern of the *Philosophical Investigations* is the problem of other minds--whether we can know, for example, if someone else is in pain. Wittgenstein argues that our certainty that other people feel pain cannot be justified by an argument by analogy from our own case. We do not "know from our own case" what pain is and conclude from the pain behavior of others that they "probably" feel the same as we feel when we behave in that way. For we could not so much as understand the conclusion of such an argument (PI 293ff.). But in that case how can we be certain that others feel pain?

Wittgenstein's answer is that such certainty is a form of life. He makes this point about certainty in general in *On Certainty*, where he says:

One might say: "I know' expresses *comfortable* certainty, not the certainty that is still struggling." Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (OC 357-358)

In describing certainty as a form of life, Wittgenstein wants us to see certainty as a kind of behavior--in its most basic form, as a primitive reaction. Wittgenstein explicitly makes this point when he discusses the problem of other minds in *Zettel*, and says,

"Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive kinds of behaviour towards other human beings, and our language is merely an auxiliary to, and further extension of, this relation. Our language-game is an extension of primitive behaviour. For our language-game is behaviour. (Instinct)." (Z 545)

Which language-games does Wittgenstein have in mind here? Presumably ones that involve saying that someone is in pain or that we know that someone is in pain or that we doubt whether someone is in pain. In

what sense are such language-games "an extension" of primitive behavior? Here is one possibility. The word "pain," on Wittgenstein's view, has a first-person use ("I am in pain") and a third person use ("He is in pain") (Z 472). In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests that the first-person use of "pain" is a form of learned pain behavior.

Words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and later sentences. They teach the child new pain behavior (PI 244).

Wittgenstein says that here, the verbal expression of pain "replaces" natural pain behavior, e.g., crying (244). The third person use of "pain" ("He is in pain") can be explained in a similar way. Although Wittgenstein does not explicitly give this explanation, it can be hypothesized from other things he says on the subject. Just as "I am in pain" is a verbal extension of natural pain behavior (e.g., crying or holding the part that hurts), so "He is in pain" is a verbal extension of our natural or primitive reactions to the pain behavior of others, e.g., the primitive reaction to tend or treat the part that hurts when another person is in pain. In this way, reporting that someone else is in pain can be seen as a language-game which grows out of an instinctive response to the pain behavior of other people. We teach children, for example, to come to an adult and report when another child has been hurt rather than trying to tend or treat the child himself (or reacting in some other way e.g., going into a panic or, in certain circumstances, laughing). In this and similar ways, we rely on the primitive reactions of children in order to teach them the language-game of reporting someone else's pain.

On this account, our report that someone else is in pain when we see him behaving in particular ways in particular circumstances is not based on any *further* justification. We do not conclude from someone else's pain behavior that he is in pain because of some analogy with our own case. At bottom, our certainty is a primitive reaction to his pain behavior--a form of life. Saying that someone else is in pain is a form of learned verbal behavior which has its inarticulate roots in such a reaction. If called upon, we can point to someone else's pain behavior and surrounding circumstances as grounds for such a report. We are then in a position to say that we *know* he is in pain, for we can give grounds (cf. OC 550). But we have no justification for regarding this behavior in these circumstances as grounds for our knowledge. We give grounds for saying that we know someone is in pain by mentioning behavior and circumstances which are causally connected to our primitive reactions to the pain behavior of others. For our report that someone is in pain is a verbal extension of these reactions. To use a technical term from Wittgenstein, the behavior and circumstances which tend to awaken such primitive reactions as tending or treating the injury of another person are our *criteria* for saying that someone else is in pain. In the language-game where we make knowledge claims about someone else's pain, this is where the chain of reasons comes to an end.

Our primitive reactions to the pain behavior of other people include more than just the disposition to tend or treat them. Wittgenstein also mentions pity as one form of conviction that another person is in pain (PI 287) and "trying to comfort someone" (PO, p. 381) and, more generally, "taking an interest in the feelings of others" (RPP, vol. I, 630) as forms of life. Wittgenstein appears to be committed here to a doctrine of "instinctive altruism"--the idea that human beings have an ungrounded and rationally unshakeable concern for other people.

The doctrine of instinctive altruism is controversial. If true, it would render much of traditional ethical theory pointless. For ethical theory traditionally concerns itself with the justification of morality, including altruism. Nowhere does Wittgenstein argue for this doctrine, but other philosophers, including Bishop Butler and David Hume, and, more recently, Peter Singer, have defended it in various ways. One problem with the

idea is that in real life, altruism seems an inconstant trait of human beings. But it must be remembered here that for Wittgenstein, as for Butler and Hume, altruism is only one of our "instinctive" dispositions. There are many others, including ones which may conflict with it. And while altruism in this sense is rationally unshakeable on Wittgenstein's view, it nevertheless may be shaken in other ways, e.g., by certain life experiences, which have nothing to do with reasons. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says, My attitude toward him is an attitude toward a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul (PI, p. 178).

One example of an attitude toward a soul is our primitive reaction to tend or treat the part that hurts when someone else is in pain--a reaction which gives rise to a language-game involving the attribution of pain to others. Unlike an "opinion," such a reaction is not based on reasons or subject to rational revision. It is, in this sense, a form of life. The circumstances which tend to cause such primitive reactions provide us with the ultimate grounds for saying that we know that someone else is in pain. On this account, our knowledge of the suffering of others is not the product of an analogy with our own case but a verbal extension of an ungrounded and rationally unshakeable way of acting. This is the main use of Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life in dealing with the problem of other minds.

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## Notes

(1) Wittgenstein's works are cited using the following scheme of abbreviation:

PI *Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Macmillan (1970).

RPP *Remarks on the Foundations of Psychology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1988).

*Nachlass*, quoted by S. Stephen Hilmy in *The Later Wittgenstein: The Emergence of a New Philosophical Method*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1987).

OC *On Certainty*, New York: Harper (1969).

Z *Zettel*, Berkeley: University of California Press ((1967).

CV *Culture and Value*: Chicago: University of Chicago (1980).

PO *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Indianapolis (1993).

(2) S. Stephen Hilmy, *The Later Wittgenstein: The Emergence of a New Philosophical Method*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1987), p. 184.

(3) G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1980), p. 137.

(4) Nicholas Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press (1981), p. 27.

(5) J.F.M. Hunter, "'Forms of Life' in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1968), pp. 233-43.

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