

# Wittgenstein on forms of life: a short introduction

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**Abstract:** This paper is an introductory exploration of the notion of ‘forms of life’ in the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The notion of ‘forms of life’ is central to understanding Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Even though this is the case, there have been a variety of interpretations of this notion in the literature on Wittgenstein’s thought. In part this is due to Wittgenstein’s infrequent reference to ‘forms of life’. The term ‘form of life’ only appears five times in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the central text of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. It is a point of debate whether the notion of ‘forms of life’ commits Wittgenstein to a form of relativism. This paper explores this problem. We argue that it is entirely possible for members of different conceptual communities to engage in dialogue with each other on Wittgenstein’s view. We argue that Wittgenstein was not a *cognitive relativist*. Wittgenstein’s conviction was that truth is bound to *this complicated form of life*, or the fundamentally human perspective. His view of truth remains perspectival. Members of different conceptual communities can enter into dialogue. Other ‘forms of life’ are available to “us” and members of diverse groups can change their views.

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The notion of a ‘form of life’ is central to an understanding and appreciation of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Indeed, this concept is the ultimate ground from which any discussion of central concepts such as meaning and use, rules and knowledge take their point of departure. Yet, the term ‘form of life’ appears only five times in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s second masterpiece, and this infrequency lends weight to a non-technical reading. In fact, the notion of a ‘form of life’ may capture the general orientation of Wittgenstein’s later thought rather than represent a specifically ‘technical’ term in a narrow sense. It is a point of contention whether this notion (or orientation) of ‘forms of life’ ultimately commits Wittgenstein to a form of relativism. Relativism is not one single doctrine but rather a collection of views about the nature of thought, reality and experience and is generally problematic. Here, I will introduce the notion of ‘forms of life’ in Wittgenstein’s philosophy and I will raise, without resolving, the problem of relativism in two of its forms: cultural relativism and cognitive relativism.

The notion of ‘forms of life’ is primordial for Wittgenstein. He says:

*What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life (Wittgenstein 1953: 226e).*

By the time Wittgenstein wrote the *Philosophical Investigations* he had come to see language as made up of a multiplicity of ‘language games’ and the motif of ‘language games’ is centrally important to understanding the notion of ‘forms of life’. For Wittgenstein, words cannot be understood in isolation from the *context* in which they are used. This is so since ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (Wittgenstein 1953: 20e). The way to grasp the meaning of a word is to observe its use in the ‘language game’ in which it is used. Doing so enables the observer to see how that word is deployed by individuals in the communal activity of their linguistic community. In order to grasp the meaning of a word in any given context it is necessary to pay attention to the various non-linguistic activities and practices engaged in by that group; since it is within this context that any given language is used and any given language will be interwoven with such activities and practices. It is the use of words together with these non-linguistic activities that make up ‘language games’. Speaking a language is part of an activity and so of a form of life.

Like games, speaking is a rule-guided activity wherein behaving and acting in certain ways is tantamount to grasping the rule. If they are to be grasped at all then language games must be grasped in terms of the context wherein they are played. As Bernard Williams put the point some time ago, language, on Wittgenstein’s view, is an ‘embodied, this-worldly, concrete social activity, expressive of human needs’ (Williams 1981: 147). Language games are embedded in a form of life. A form of life is the bedrock or given. It is the irreducible basis for any inquiry into language and, as Wittgenstein says, ‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’, (Wittgenstein 1953: 8e). In Wittgenstein’s *Blue and Brown Books* the concept of language is equated with the concept of culture: (Wittgenstein 1958: 134). A culture is the ‘totality of communal activities into which language-games are embedded’ (Glock 1996: 125). In so far as language has any foundation at all this foundation is not something abstract. Its foundation is communal activity itself.

Wittgenstein described his task as that of supplying ‘remarks on the natural history of human beings’ (Wittgenstein 1953: 125e). His view is that linguistic behaviour is as much a part of human evolution as walking, eating and drinking (Wittgenstein 1953: 12e). Nevertheless, the term ‘form of life’ cannot be reduced to biology. Nor is it equivalent to the concept of ‘human

nature'. Instead, Wittgenstein placed his emphasis on humanity's historical practice (Wittgenstein 1969: 34e). The *a priori* concepts under which experience is brought and ultimately made intelligible are generated within a given historical epoch in light of the concerns and needs of actual human agents. Concepts are historical and depend upon education and training and this takes place in language games (Wittgenstein 1967: 68).

Now, I have suggested that the notion of 'forms of life' poses the question of relativism. Language games, for Wittgenstein, are a group's or a community's method of representation (Wittgenstein 1953: 25e). Given the fact that concepts are generated over time through training and education and that once these concepts are in place the way things 'look to us' will be a certain way, it follows that had we formed different concepts the way things look to us might have been quite different. The way we see things ultimately depends upon our language since our language is the means by which we manage to represent the data of experience. Individuals who make up a shared linguistic community must, by virtue of their concepts and 'representational form', generally agree in their judgements about the nature of things. This agreement depends upon individuals being part of a shared 'form of life'.

If language is to be a means of communication and if an individual can function within a language, then they must be able to understand their utterances and their representations as well as understanding the way in which the group more generally understands and represents things. The issue of relativism arises when we consider the idea of a plurality of 'forms of life' each with their own distinct and mutually exclusive 'ways of seeing' the world. It is possible to distinguish two kinds of relativism: cultural and cognitive relativism. If we isolate these as two distinct theses we can characterise them as follows: cultural relativism is the view that there are differences between different cultures or in the history of one particular culture with regards to social, moral and religious values and practices. Cognitive relativism is the view that there are different ways of 'seeing the world', that is, that there is a plurality of different sets of categories under which experience is organised and the world understood. Each set of categories is held to be internally consistent and exclusive. The upshot of cognitive relativism is that the individuals belonging to one conceptual community will be unable to grasp at all what it is like to be a member of another community. If cognitive relativism is true, then the 'truth' that a particular group talk of knowing would ultimately be 'their truth'.

Regarding, Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life' the division of relativism into the cultural and cognitive strands is problematic. The notion of a 'form of life' is intended to stress that language is imbued with cultural concerns and *vice versa*. For Wittgenstein, it is impossible to separate a community's cultural practice from their linguistic practice and ultimately their 'being so minded'. The 'form of life' that individuals share encompasses the concepts that they organise the world into, and the language they use to communicate, as well as their cultural practices and values and so if Wittgenstein is a relativist he has to be a relativist on both the cultural and cognitive counts.

It is possible to read Wittgenstein as a relativist. It is what individuals utter and assert in language that is true and false. Now, Wittgenstein asserts that when a proposition or judgement is deemed true or false this does not amount to a true or false claim about the nature of reality. Rather, it amounts to agreement in 'form of life'. This suggests that different 'forms of life' have different 'ways of seeing' the world and this might imply a multiplicity of different standards of truth and falsity. This reading is supported by some of Wittgenstein's remarks. For example, when he says: 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him' (Wittgenstein 1953: 223e) and 'We don't understand Chinese gestures any more than Chinese sentences' (Wittgenstein 1967: 39). Such remarks suggest a plurality of 'forms of life' and relativism

between them. Wittgenstein also suggests that when language games change so to do concepts and the meanings of words (Wittgenstein 1969: 10e).

The problem with a relativist position is that it entails the view that all truth must be truth-in-a-form-of-life. The result is that there is no standard to tell which ‘form of life’ has the ‘truer’ view of things. Such a position is incoherent because it invokes a non-relativistic sense of truth to characterise a relativistic state of affairs while simultaneously denying the existence of non-relativistic truth (Lear 1983: 55). So, the relativists’ position is ultimately self-refuting. It claims to be true in a way that it itself rejects. If this is Wittgenstein’s position, then his later philosophy would be incoherent. If relativism is true, then there can be no truth other than ‘truth in a theory’ and it follows from this that the propositions of physics and chemistry and so on are only true relative to our scientific ‘form of life’.

There is another related problem with relativism for Wittgenstein. If we hold that there is more than one ‘form of life’ (the premise of relativism) then how would individuals in one ‘form of life’ be able to recognise another ‘form of life’ *as* another ‘form of life’? To be able to distinguish another ‘form of life’ there must be some means to identify it and to distinguish it *as* a ‘form of life’. If the other ‘form of life’ is cognitively inaccessible to us, then we would not be able to regard it as a ‘form of life’ and we would be unable to interpret the practices that constitute it. If the lion spoke and we did not understand him, we would not be entitled to say that it was a member of another ‘form of life’. Our failure to understand would just show up our ‘form of life’s’ limits of intelligibility.

There is, however, one qualification that should be made before moving on. This is that while Wittgenstein could be a conceptual relativist he cannot be a philosophical relativist (Glock 1996: 127). When Wittgenstein uses the terms that he does he is not applying them in ways that are limited to one ‘language game’ only. Quite often Wittgenstein’s remarks are intended to point our attention to the way in which a word is used in a particular ‘language game’. His remark is intended to be true in a way that transcends any particular practice or ‘form of life’. Many of Wittgenstein’s remarks are ‘grammatical’ in this sense. If it is possible to make remarks that transcend different practices, then it must be possible to acknowledge the existence of other practices or ‘forms of life’. Such ‘forms of life’ must be cognitively accessible to us. Other world-views, ‘ways of seeing’ or ‘forms of life’ are not imaginatively unintelligible to individuals from different ‘forms of life’ for Wittgenstein. Indeed, Wittgenstein encouraged this kind of imagination. ‘Life runs on differently’ in different ‘forms of life’ and our imagination can travel amongst them.

Interesting in this regard are some of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the anthropologist J.G. Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein complains: ‘What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! And as a result: how impossible for him to understand a different way of life from the English one of his time! Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his stupidity and feebleness’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 5e). Rather than accept such an unimaginative anthropology Wittgenstein insists that ‘we’ can imagine situations and practices that are quite different from our own. He also insists that when we consider the performance of, for example, a horrific rite, ceremony or festival, and feel affected by it, we grasp the concern or mood that gave rise to it in the first place. He says: ‘what strikes us in...[the]...course of events as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, &c., any-thing but trivial and insignificant, *that* is what gave birth to them’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 3e). Outsiders can, as it were, achieve something of an insider’s perspective. More fundamental than any one particular ‘form of life’ that individuals constitute is *this complicated form of life*; and that is, the fundamentally human perspective. It is entirely possible that individuals with different concerns than ours may classify and categorise the world differently in light of their interests and needs.

What is essential is that for Wittgenstein, these different ways of ‘seeing’ the world are not cognitively inaccessible to one another. He says:

*I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago, and therefore believed this. We might instruct him: the earth has long...etc. – We should be trying to give him our picture of the world. This would happen through a kind of persuasion (Wittgenstein 1969: 34e).*

This remark is crucial when it is considered against the notion of a plurality of different ‘ways of seeing’ the world. Every view of the world is equally significant (Wittgenstein 1979: 11e) and convincing members of one ‘form of life’ of the unsuitability, inadequacy or irrationality and so on of their view of things cannot only be a matter of rational argument but must be a matter of persuasion between ‘forms of life’. The individuals who constitute the ‘form of life’ that engages in child sacrifice in order to appease a vengeful god and secure a plentiful harvest cannot be deflected from that view and practice simply by placing a rational argument to the effect that there is no causal link between their sacrifice and the success of the farming season. It may well appear to members of a scientific ‘rational’ ‘form of life’ that their practice is irrational and based on false beliefs. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein is firm in holding that convincing the members of that ‘form of life’ can only be a matter of persuasion. It is not just a matter of presenting cold facts about their false beliefs.

In fact, Wittgenstein was sceptical that phenomena, such as child sacrifice or whatever, came about as a result of false beliefs about the world. He says:

*it is nonsense if we...say that the characteristic feature of these actions is that they spring from wrong ideas about the physics of things...What makes the character of ritual action is not any view or opinion, either right or wrong... (Wittgenstein 1979: 7e).*

We cannot observe a practice and diagnose it as springing from false beliefs since we can only ever describe it and say ‘human life is like that’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 3e). Precisely how this description would be carried out is an interesting question. This emphasis on description potentially allies Wittgenstein with the projects of phenomenological philosophers (such as Heidegger) and with the pathos of some existential philosophies. Persuasion is the only means open to members of one ‘form of life’ in combating what they perceive as wrong-headed practices.

Dialogue, persuasion, self-awareness and humility are the order of the day for Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was not a cognitive relativist but his view of truth remains perspectival. Members of different conceptual communities can enter into dialogue and revise their perspective. If they do so, they may take over the views of another perspective but there is no recourse to a non-human God’s eye view on things. The question of ‘the nature of truth’ for Wittgenstein, should be posed independently of the question of cognitive relativism. His conviction was that truth is ultimately rooted in what people say and the views that they have on things, and, ultimately, to *this complicated form of life*, which is the fundamentally human perspective.

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