# From the ground to the background.
# Form of life as "the given" in Wittgenstein

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ABSTRACT. "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*". Starting from this remark by Wittgenstein, we can sketch an idea of knowledge that overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object, posing forms of life at the basis of the cognitive look and implying a starting point which is constitutively articulated. The price to pay is the apparent vagueness of such conception. Yet, vagueness is not a weak point, rather a strong point of this change of perspective, as it underlines a crucial shift of meaning: the given is not to be conceived as a ground, but as a background of knowledge. Interesting consequences can be drawn for social and cognitive sciences.

## 1. Forms of life

Although the expression "form of life", its equivalent "life-form", and its plural "forms of life", appear only rarely in Wittgenstein's writings, the importance of this concept in his philosophy cannot be denied. In Wittgenstein (2001) (hereafter *PI*), we meet that expression five times:

> Part I, § 19 (…) And to imagine a language means to imagine a life-form. (…)

> Part I, § 23 (…) Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form. (…)

> Part I, § 241 (…) It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.

> Part II, p. 148 Il (…) Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life. (…).

> Part II, p. 192 What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*.

In a different formulation of this last remark, a pragmatic aspect is more explicit (Wittgenstein 1980, I, § 630):

> Instead of the unanalysable, specific, indefinable: the fact that we act in such-and-such ways, e.g., punish certain actions, establish the state of affair thus and so, give orders, render accounts, describe colors, take an interest in others' feelings. What has to be accepted, the given - it might be said - are facts of living.

Differently from these lines, the previous quote from the *PI*, which is probably subsequent (Emmett 1990, p. 222), is embedded in a context of mathematical and logical reflections. In this sense it can be assumed that there is a slow move, in the consideration of forms of life, from anthropological towards almost transcendental remarks. Such hypothesis is confirmed if we look at other writings, prior and subsequent to the *PI* - for example Wittgenstein (1993, p. 397), Wittgenstein (1969, §§ 357, 358, 359). The concept of forms of life, in other words, in Wittgenstein's later works assumes a more basic character, progressively matching the idea of the "given", and it finally gets such a fundamental quality as to make it impossible to answer properly to a question of the kind: "Would we change our way of living, if this or that were provided for us?" (Wittgenstein 1992, II, p. 95).

The empirical or transcendental nature of form of life is indeed one of the first and most frequently discussed themes in secondary literature (Hunter 1968; Williams 1974; Garver 1994). But this is only one axis of debate. Another axis goes from singularity to pluralism: commentators wonder whether Wittgenstein deals with a singular form of life as characterizing the whole of

humanity, or with more cultures, producing *Weltbilder*, world-images, each one being an expression of a different social group. Properly, the two axes do not coincide, and rather could cross each other to produce four different theoretical instances: form of life can be interpreted as one and empirical; one and transcendental; plural and empirical; plural and transcendental (Boncompagni 2011).

## 2. The background

In most cases, Wittgenstein describes form of life as what characterizes, anthropologically, human life, distinguishing it from the life of other animals. Both natural and cultural elements are implicated. In this way Wittgenstein keeps an empirical point of view, but avoids cultural relativism on the one hand, and transcendentalism, that identifies the world itself with the form of life, on the other. We can specify the idea by looking at other remarks where Wittgenstein is concerned with the phenomena of human life.

It is clear the relevance of language in human form of life, and at the same time the impossibility to make the two concepts coincide. That is, it seems that language constitutes an essential part of form of life, but that the latter does not reduce itself to language. Indeed, even a language of which we do have a mastery, doesn't help us to understand men if we do not share their culture and traditions at all (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 190):

> We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand people. (And not because of not-knowing what they are saying to themselves). We cannot find our feet with them.

Human behaviors, phenomena such as those of hoping or believing, cannot be further analyzed in order to search for simple elements: they themselves are the empirical facts, as Wittgenstein sometimes says, that define us. Therefore, as we investigate our form of life, it is at this phenomena that we must stop, limiting our inquiry to the description of what we see. That is why the result of these investigations are "observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes" (Wittgenstein 2001, §415).

This claim for a non-analytic inquiry can be object of criticism: such a pervasive but inaccurate concept is too vague. And yet, the very method of

Wittgenstein's work, centered on family resemblances, makes of the impossibility of a precise definition its hinge. It is through this method that we can see how our behavior and our language turn out to be essentially vague and indeterminate, so that a greater precision, far from making them clearer, would change their nature (Wittgenstein 1992, I, p. 31, 38):

> If a pattern of life is the basis for the use of a word then the word must contain some amount of indefiniteness. The pattern of life, after all, is not one of exact regularity.
>
> A sharper concept would not be the same concept. That is: the sharper concept wouldn't have the value for us that the blurred one has.

Vagueness and *certainty* go together. Concepts and primary practices are certain and vague, they are certain – one could say – *because* they are vague: because they are never totally explicit, we take them for granted, we let ourselves be guided by them. Form of life is, therefore, not a ground but a background (Wittgenstein 1980, II, §§ 625, 629; Searle 1983, 1992) on the basis of which we act and understand others' actions. The background is something with which our actions and words get mixed and at the same time something against which they stand out. We always have it before our eyes, but we cannot go beyond it and we can't even put it on the foreground, as doing so means to lose it.

## 3. Social and cognitive sciences

To consider form of life as the given, in social sciences, implies to stop the analysis when we get to see, against their background, the ways human beings act, speak, take part in linguistic games. In this sense, the aim of social science is to look, compare, describe ways of life and the production of sense. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) is probably the nearest approach to this vision, with its study of the methods by which people and groups make sense of their social practices. Acknowledging a priority to linguistic usages and privileging a documentary method, it investigates the production of the ordered and meaningful character of everyday life and it focuses on common sense, with the awareness that between common sense and scientific knowledge it is impossible to draw a clear-cut division. Its object of study is then precisely the background, the set of certainties which are taken for grant-

ed in social and cognitive practices. Indeed, what ethnomethodology attempts to do is describing social practices as they were taking place for the first time, making explicit all the aspects that are usually not noticed at all. Similarities between this approach and Wittgenstein's are remarkable. Those affinities, and also the possibility for ethnomethodology to "extend" Wittgenstein in the direction of empirical research, are pointed out by Michael Lynch (1992), who particularly worked on the concept of rule-following, advancing an alternative reading with respect to Saul Kripke's and David Bloor's.

If we restrict the field from sociology to the study of cognitive behavior, investigating the background means to suggest to cognitive sciences an approach based on the connections among knowledge, practices and language. Researches aimed at studying in detail the role of body and actions in knowledge, and the role of language and culture in behavior, could find in Wittgenstein a useful theoretical allied. The concepts of form of life and background find echoes for example in *enactivism* - Varela (1991, p. 149) defines enactment as "the bringing forth of meaning from a background of understanding"; and in the *ecological approach* - Gibson (1979) attempts to show the intimate inherence of the subject to the world, which is primarily a semantic world. More generally I refer to the so-called 4Es of contemporary debate in philosophy of mind, according to which mind must be conceived as embodied, embedded, enactive and extended (Gallagher, Zahavi 2008; Nöe 2004). Such perspectives usually mention Husserl and Merleau-Ponty; Wittgenstein's view, yet, is more directly concerned with collective and cultural phenomena and their connections with the individual, overcoming the problems of the switch from the first to the third person and of the constitution of intersubjective world.

## 4. Conclusion

Acknowledging the semantic and linguistic behavior among the (in the widest sense) *biological* characteristics of man, is acknowledging the *cultural nature* of human beings. Thus, these research threads could find in the shifting from the ground to the background, which the concept of form of life as "the given" implies, a fruitful theoretical grip. A grip that may help them entering the vision of a liberalized naturalism, conceived, as De Caro and McArthur (2004, p. 17) explain, as a new conception that extends "the notion of nature beyond scientific nature to fully include the various aspects and normative dimensions

of human nature", without, by this enlargement, falling into obsolete forms of metaphysical anti-scientism.

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