Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life
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Wittgenstein's later writings generate a great deal of controversy and debate, as do the implications of his ideas for such topics as consciousness, knowledge, language and the arts.

Oswald Hanfling addresses a widespread tendency to ascribe to Wittgenstein views that go beyond those he actually held. Separate chapters deal with important topics such as the private language argument, rule-following, the problem of other minds, and the ascription of scepticism to Wittgenstein. Describing Wittgenstein as a 'humanist' thinker, he contrasts his views on language, art, humanity and philosophy itself with those of scientifically minded philosophers. He argues that 'the human form of life' calls for a kind of understanding that cannot be achieved by the methods of empirical science; that consciousness, for example, cannot properly be regarded as a property of the brain; and that the resulting 'problem of consciousness' is an illusion.

Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life is essential reading for anyone interested in Wittgenstein's approach to what it means to be human. It will be invaluable to all Wittgenstein scholars, and all who are interested in the philosophy of mind, language and aesthetics.

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Sources

Chapter 1, 'Questions and answers in Wittgenstein's philosophy', is a revised version of my article in *Wittgenstein – eine Neubewertung*, ed. R. Haller & J. Brandl (Hölder 1990).

Chapter 2, 'What does the private language argument prove?', is a substantially rewritten version of my article in *Philosophical Quarterly* 1984.

Chapter 3, 'Does language need rules?', is a substantially rewritten version of my article in *Philosophical Quarterly* 1980.

Chapter 4, 'Criteria, conventions and the problem of other minds', is a substantially rewritten version of my article in *Critical Essays on Wittgenstein*, ed. Stuart Shanker (Croom Helm 1986).

Chapter 5, 'Wittgenstein on the use of "I know"': parts of this are adapted from 'On the Meaning and Use of "I know"', *Philosophical Investigations* 1984, and from my introduction to a Catalan translation of *On Certainty* (Edicions 62 s/a, Barcelona 1984).

Chapter 6, 'Was Wittgenstein a sceptic?', is a much revised version of my article in *Philosophical Investigations* 1985.

Chapter 7, 'Wittgenstein on language, art and humanity', is a revised version of my article in *Wittgenstein, Culture and the Arts*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Routledge 2001).

Chapter 8, 'Wittgenstein and the problem of consciousness', is a revised version of 'Consciousness: "the Last Mystery"', in S. Schroeder (ed.) *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind* (Palgrave 2001).

Chapter 9, 'Could machines think?', is a substantially rewritten version of my contribution to a symposium with Christopher Cherry under the title 'Machines as Persons?', in D. Cockburn (ed.) *Human Beings* (CUP 1991).

Chapter 10, 'Thinking', is a slightly revised version of my article in *Wittgenstein – A Critical Reader*, ed. H.J. Glock (Blackwell 2001).

Chapter 11, 'Secondary sense and "what they have in common"': parts of this are taken from '"I heard a plaintive melody"', *The Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A.P. Griffiths (CUP 1991).

Abbreviations of works by Wittgenstein

BB   *The Blue and Brown Books* (Blackwell 1964).

LFM   *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. Cora Diamond (Chicago 1976).

LW   *Last Writings* (Blackwell 1992).

OC   *On Certainty* (Blackwell 1969). References are to section numbers.

PG   *Philosophical Grammar* (Blackwell 1964).

PI   *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell 1958). References are to section numbers unless otherwise indicated.

RFM   *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Blackwell 1978).

RPP   *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Blackwell 1980).

Z   *Zettel* (Blackwell 1967). References are to section numbers unless otherwise indicated.

Contents

Introduction
Wittgenstein on 'forms of life'

The expression 'form of life' occurs three times in Part I of *Philosophical Investigations*, and twice in Part II. It is used by Wittgenstein to make a number of points. In PI 23 he introduces it, together with 'language-game', to 'bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.' We are not to suppose that the nature of language can be understood in isolation from the activities in which uses of language are embedded. Language is not, as he thought in his earlier work, a system of propositions that 'picture' or 'correspond to' states of affairs 'in the world'. The uses of language are various, and they are interwoven with the various activities ('language-games', 'forms of life') in which human beings are engaged.

A parallel thought is expressed in Part II, p. 174, but this time it is in connection with emotions, such as hope and grief. Having said that hope can be experienced 'only [by] those who have mastered the use of a language', he writes: 'That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life' (PI p. 174). And again: '"Grief" describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life' (ibid.). We are not to suppose that hope and grief are mere occurrences within the mind, having no essential connection with the world in which we live and act, including the use of language. They are, on the contrary, interwoven with these and could not be supposed to exist in isolation from them. They are parts of our form of life, but not detachable from the whole.

There is also, however, a difference between the two passages, about what is meant by 'form of life'. In the first (PI 23) he goes on to draw attention to the 'multiplicity' of language-games, giving a long list of examples; and presumably he thinks of forms of life as having the same multiplicity. In the second passage, however, he appears to be thinking of 'our life' and 'this form of life' as a whole. In the first passage 'form of life' is used in the plural, but this is not so in the second.

These uses of 'form of life' are not, of course, incompatible: in the same way one might speak of 'language-games' in the plural, but also of '*the* language-game', meaning the whole of language and the activities in which it is embedded. In the first case, one might be drawing attention to the variety

of language uses; in the second, to the fact that they are all interconnected. (In this respect language-games differ from 'games' in the ordinary sense.)

The expression 'form of life' occurs again in the important and much quoted remarks of PI 240–2, where he also speaks of 'the framework of our language':

> Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not. People do not come to blows over it, for example. That is part of the framework on which the working of our language is based (for example, in giving descriptions). (PI 240)

In PI 242 he writes that 'if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements'. People do, of course, disagree in their judgements: what is described as 'X' by one person may not be X in the opinion of another. But not all descriptions can be matters of opinion if descriptive language is to function at all. At some level there must be 'agreement in judgements', and what is meant by this is not 'agreement in opinions, but in form of life' (241).

In Part II of the *Investigations* there are further remarks on the same theme:

> There can be a dispute over the correct result of a calculation (say of a rather long addition). But such disputes are rare and of short duration. They can be decided, as we say, 'with certainty'. Mathematicians do not in general quarrel over the result of a calculation. (This is an important fact.) (PI p. 225)

He also remarks on the trust that we normally place in our memory, and in the stability of the materials with which we calculate. These, again, must be presupposed if calculating is to proceed at all.

> If, for instance, one mathematician was convinced that a figure had altered unperceived, or that his or someone else's memory had been deceived, and so on, – then our concept of 'mathematical certainty' would not exist. (ibid)

The same would be true if the materials with which we calculate (paper and ink etc.), were 'subject to certain queer changes'. Yet 'the fact that they changed could in turn only be got from memory and comparison with other means of calculation. And how are these tested in their turn?' There follows another statement about forms of life: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*' (p. 226).

The statement that forms of life are 'what has to be accepted, the given' can be understood in a narrower or a wider sense, depending on who – which group of people – have to do the accepting. In PI 23 he gave a list of nineteen

kinds of language-games, to illustrate the great 'variety of the tools of language' and 'the activities, or forms of life' in which language is used. Now some of these language-games (or forms of life) are obviously not essential to human life – not part of what may be called 'the human form of life'.[1] Among his examples are 'constructing an object from a drawing', 'solving a problem in practical arithmetic' and 'translating from one language to another'. These and many other practices are 'given' as far as we are concerned, but they are not given in the case of societies existing at other times or places. This point cannot, however, be made when we turn to such examples as 'giving orders and obeying them', 'describing the appearance of an object' and 'reporting an event' (PI 23). What sense could we make of a society in which these activities were unknown? And what would be left of the idea of a human language if they were not part of it?

Perhaps it will be objected that the use of language is itself merely *one* form of human life. Could there not be a human form of life without language? If we think of 'human' in a purely biological sense, then the answer is obviously 'yes'. There could be groups of beings much like ourselves in physical and phylogenetic ways, but lacking the use of language; and they might well be classified as 'human' in that sense. But they would not be so classified if by 'human' we meant 'homo sapiens' or 'rational animal', for these characteristics are essentially bound up with the use of language.

A distinction between essential and non-essential can also be made with reference to the point about agreement in judgements. For language to function as a means of communication, there must be a certain agreement in judgements which (as quoted earlier) is not an 'agreement in opinions, but in form of life'. What is essential here is that there be *some* judgements – some applications of a given concept – that are not subject to disagreement; but this is not to say that this 'hard core' must be the same in every language. Take the case of colours. It is well known that the classification of colours varies with different languages. Ways of describing colours that seem natural and obvious to us do not seem so to people in other societies, and vice versa. What is 'given' for us is not given for them. (In the *Brown Book* Wittgenstein imagined a culture in which one word was used for red and green and another for yellow and blue (BB 134).) What, however, is not variable is the existence of *some* agreed way of using the words concerned.

The last point is made by Wittgenstein in the passage immediately following that in which he describes 'forms of life' as being 'what has to be accepted', etc.:

> Does it make sense to say that people generally agree in their judgements of colour? What would it be like for them not to? – One

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1   The phrase is mine, not Wittgenstein's.

man would say a flower was red which another called blue, and so on.
– But what right would we have to call these people's words 'red' and
'blue' *our* 'colour words'? (PI p. 226)

The point is that if there were *no* regularity in their 'judgements of colour',
then we could not recognise the sounds they utter *as* judgements of colour. A
similar point is made in PI 207 about language in general.

> Let us imagine that people in [a certain] country carried on the usual
> human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an
> articulate language. If we watch their behaviour we find it intelligible, it
> seems 'logical'. But when we try to learn their language, we find it
> impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what
> they say, the sounds they make, and their actions ...
>
> Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports and
> rest?
>
> The regularity for what we call 'language' is here lacking.[2]

Here again, what is lacking are not regularities just like those of our
language, but *some* regularities that could be recognised as such. Without
these we could not recognise the sounds they make as a language, and could
not make the transition from behaviour that merely 'seems "logical"' to
behaviour that really is logical.

The limits of conceptual variety are explored by Wittgenstein in various
places and contexts, notably in the *Remarks on the Foundations of
Mathematics*, where he introduces a variety of imaginary societies where
calculating, measuring and reasoning are done in ways that would seem
absurd and illogical to us.[3] The main aim here is to counteract the
assumption that our concepts are 'absolutely the correct ones' (cf. PI p. 230).
There are limits, however, to what is conceivable in this direction; and a
distinction must be made between *strange* ways of going on, and ways of
going on that could not be recognised as measuring or reasoning at all.

> '*This* follows inexorably from *that*.' – True, in this demonstration this
> issues from that. This is a demonstration for whoever acknowledges it as
> a demonstration. If anyone *doesn't* acknowledge it, doesn't go by it as a
> demonstration, then he has parted company with us even before anything
> is said. (RFM 60)

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2 The published translation has 'There is not enough regularity ...'. The point, however,
   is not about *degrees* of regularity; it is about the presence of *any* regularity of the kind
   that makes language possible.
3 See, e.g., RFM 38, 94, 212.

There is also a discussion in *Zettel* 331–390, where he introduces a variety of imaginary concepts that 'cut across ours' (Z 379). Here he raises the question whether, or in what sense, our concepts are 'arbitrary'; and this topic is discussed in some of the essays that form, roughly, the first half of the present book. My general aim here is to reject the views of certain commentators about 'arbitrariness' and to stress the ways in which language is neither arbitrary nor variable, being part of what I mean by 'the human form of life'.

In the second part of the book this phrase is applicable in a different way. In one of the essays appearing there I describe Wittgenstein as a 'humanist' thinker. My aim in this essay and others nearby is to bring out the ways in which our descriptions and understanding of human beings are peculiar to them, and not assimilable to the aims and theories of empirical science. It is, for example, human beings, and not their brains, that are describable as 'conscious', etc. (cf. PI 281); and scientific research into the brain or other organs could never provide the human kind of understanding.

The relevant contrast here is not, however, between language users and others; it is between beings that can be described as 'conscious' and beings where this description would not make sense. But the former include, of course, non-human animals as well as human beings. Such qualities as perception, sensation and consciousness can be ascribed, as Wittgenstein put it in PI 281, 'only [to] a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being'; and this would certainly include, to some extent at least, non-human animals. In this context, then, 'the human form of life' must be understood to include beings that 'resemble (behave like)' human beings to a sufficient extent and in suitable ways; and the contrast between the 'human' kind of understanding and that of empirical science would also apply here.

Wittgenstein, however, does not use the phrase 'form of life' in this context – and neither does he, anywhere, use 'the human form of life'. On the other hand, what should we make of the tantalising remark at PI, p. 223, that 'if a lion could talk, we could not understand him'? Perhaps this is an expression of the *difference* between the human form of life and those of non-human animals. In that case 'human form of life' would have to be understood in a narrower sense than that just considered: the point would be to draw attention to the difference between our form of life and that of animals, as opposed to what they have in common. But there is no inconsistency here.

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The essays that follow may be divided into two main groups. In the first, consisting of Essays 1–6, I express my concerns about widespread tendencies to ascribe to Wittgenstein views which, in various ways, go beyond his position – or, at least, what I take to be the spirit, if not always the letter, of his position. This theme is explained more fully in Essay 1, which is indeed meant to serve as a sort of introduction to this part of the book.

In Essay 2 I argue against what seem to me excessively bold interpretations of the famous diary passage in PI 258. The essential aim of that passage, as I read it, is to show that the 'inner ostensive definition' that the diarist is supposed to give to himself cannot achieve what is normally achieved by ostensive definitions: it cannot create a context for right and wrong uses of the supposed sign 'S'. What I deny is the conclusion of many commentators, that the example introduced in that section is altogether incoherent.

Essay 3 is about the exaggerated importance that has been given, as it seems to me, to the notion of *criteria* in Wittgenstein's philosophy. There has been much discussion about what he meant by this (alleged) 'term of art', and whether he was successful in solving, by means of it, the problem of other minds. I argue that Wittgenstein's use of 'criteria' was not a technical one, that he was not trying to solve the problem of other minds by means of it, and that his relationship to that problem must be understood in an altogether different way.

In Essay 4 I challenge the widely held view that language is a rule-governed practice, and question to what extent Wittgenstein was committed to it. He certainly held that language is normative (there are right and wrong ways of using it), but the common assumption that normativity entails a use of rules is false. Here also I discuss what I call the 'error of voluntarism': the idea that language is human creation, with 'rules' and 'criteria' that are subject to human choice.

In Essay 5 I discuss Wittgenstein's views about the use of 'I know' in statements of the kind put forward by Moore in his 'Defence of Common Sense'. According to some commentators, he *rejected* its use in such contexts. I try to show, on the contrary, that his attitude to this use of 'I know' was ambivalent. I also relate what he said in *On Certainty* about this matter to his critique, in the *Investigations* (PI 246), of the use of 'I know' in 'I know I am in pain'.

In the essays mentioned so far, I argue against views that are widely held. Essay 6 is directed against an interpretation of Wittgenstein that is attributed mainly to one (influential) reader of the *Investigations*. According to Saul Kripke, Wittgenstein introduced a new kind of scepticism, claiming that 'there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word'. There is, if I am right, an irony about Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein. The latter argued, in numerous passages and in various ways, against the temptation to suppose that meaning must *consist* in something – something that the speaker does or undergoes at the time of speaking. His point is that no such process or entity is needed for the existence of meaning. But Kripke, if I am right, reverses Wittgenstein's argument. He takes him to be arguing that since there is no such meaning-bestowing entity, there cannot be any meaning either.

The second part of the book begins with essays that are largely about Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind – his ideas about thinking and consciousness. Here I stress the importance of his statement (PI 281) that

consciousness, perception, etc. can be ascribed only to human beings and beings that resemble them in suitable ways. In Essay 7 I describe Wittgenstein as a 'humanist', contrasting his interests in language, art and humanity itself with those of scientists and scientifically minded philosophers. Essay 8 is directed specifically against recent attempts by such thinkers to treat consciousness and its various modes as fundamentally physical, and subject to scientific study of processes of the brain. With the help of ideas drawn from Wittgenstein, I argue that brains, unlike human beings, are not suitable for the ascription of consciousness, and that the much debated 'problem of consciousness' is an illusion. Equally misguided is the idea that what prevents consciousness from being 'explained' by scientific methods are the ineffable 'qualia' – the 'what it is like' – of conscious experience.

Essay 9 can be seen as an extension of the previous essay. Having endorsed Wittgenstein's view that thought, consciousness, etc. are ascribable to human beings, and others to the extent to which they resemble them, I consider the status of conceivable 'artificial persons', made of artificial materials but nevertheless resembling flesh and blood human beings to a considerable extent. I argue that, faced with such beings, we would be able, and indeed compelled, to treat them as beings with thoughts and feelings, moral rights and duties, etc.

Essay 10 is still on the philosophy of mind, but this time the emphasis is more on exegesis. After quoting Wittgenstein's remark that the concept of thinking is 'widely ramified', I pursue its ramifications with the help of his writings. I follow Wittgenstein in resisting such questions as 'What is thinking?' and 'What does it consist in?' What is needed for a proper understanding of this concept (as with others of interest to philosophers) is to consider how the word 'thinking' and its cognates are *used* in the various contexts in which they occur.

In the final essay, Essay 11, I deal further with Wittgenstein's ideas about 'secondary sense' (previously introduced in Essay 2). His use of this term is usually associated with a passage in the *Investigations*, where it is illustrated with idiosyncratic examples (describing Tuesday as 'lean' and Wednesday as 'fat', etc.). I try to show that secondary sense is far more important than these examples would suggest. It is widespread in ordinary language and its presence has not been sufficiently recognised. It is also, I claim, of special interest in (a) aesthetics and (b) the philosophy of mind.

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Part I

Interpretations of Wittgenstein