

Form(s) Of Life*

Jaap van Brakel

I

That people understand one another and themselves is due to their common participation in certain forms, patterns, modes, ways, or forms of life. Growing up is growing into a form of life: an open-ended set of contextualised ways and patterns of acting and speaking. Form(s) of life refers to the complex of natural and cultural circumstances which are presupposed in using language and in any particular understanding of the world. It is that which makes meaning in a community possible.

If we start from certainties we can give reasons. But there's an end to giving reasons: the end is what is given in form(s) of life; it is where my/your/our/their spade is turned. Since forms of life are the source and limit of meaning there is no stepping 'outside' of them. Questions (scientific or otherwise) can be raised about anything. But these questions cannot but be asked from *within* the certainties of form(s) of life. There is no meta-form of life to which one can appeal. Similarities and differences between pluralities of forms of life crop up and disappear. Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance should also be applied here. Is form of life the same as language game? Or does it mean something like 'human nature'? Should it be taken as a synonym of 'culture' (whatever that may mean)? How should it be tied into discussions about grammar, criteria, rule following or the primitive behaviour of mankind?

Perhaps the answer is that these are the wrong questions: similarities and differences crop up and disappear and syncategorematic or intrinsic relations proliferate. Perhaps two clusters might be distinguished heuristically; the language-related cluster: language(s) - language game(s) - grammar(s) - form(s) of life; and the life-related cluster: culture(s) - background(s) - practice(s) - fact(s)/pattern(s) of living - world picture(s) - form(s) of life. Both constitute recognisable clusters of family resemblances, intimately related, though not identical. Both family resemblance and 'intimate relations' include the possibility of interchangeability in some contexts, but not all. Both clusters refer to open-ended, vague, promiscuous concepts.

Quite a number of interpretations have been offered of form(s) of life (restricting the options to human form(s) of life) and specifically the question has been raised whether it is to be taken in the singular or the plural (or whether it is a matter of substance

whether Wittgenstein uses the expression in the singular or the plural). First it has been argued that there is *one* biological form of human life: one natural history. There is just one form of life for humans, viz. the human form of life, as distinct from the bovine, piscine, canine, etc. form of life. Second it has been argued that there is one transcendental form of human life. Here form of life is a transcendental limit on anything human and is universal and invariant across human cultures. Third it has been argued that form of life is roughly synonymous with either culture or language game - so there are many forms of life. Such quasi-anthropological interpretations take forms of life as variable patterns of activity, rather than as biological or transcendental conditions for being human.

And there are more interpretations, including a variant of transcendental relativism and the suggestion that we should assign more than one meaning to form(s) of life in Wittgenstein's writings; for example one meaning for 'the universalist' (first nature) and one for 'the relativist' (second nature). Further, a range of dichotomies have been used to partition different interpretations: anthropological (or ethnological) versus biological or transcendental, empirical versus conventional or formal, idealist versus relativist, and more. Such dichotomies don't lead anywhere - they only make sense (if at all) *given* very particular ways of framing the issue.

There is *both* one and many human forms of life that crop up and disappear. It would be incorrect to talk of *many* human forms of life, because all have in common their humanness. It would also be incorrect to talk about *one* human form of life: there are variations without a common core. Furthermore, there is vagueness in the boundaries of the 'one' human life (think of slaves, ancestors, foetuses, pets) and all human beings (all societies) are busy dealing with *many* different forms of life.

Language(s), thought(s), world(s), form(s) of life, logic(s), rationality/rationalities are syncategorematic terms; i.e. they are concepts that cannot each be studied independently. Moreover, each of these terms has to be seen as a mass term and a count noun at the same time. Form(s) of life is to be understood in the singular *and* plural, as local *and* universal, as empirical *and* transcendental. Taking form(s) of life this way dissolves the petrified relativism - universalism dichotomy. There's no practical reason to worry about living in totally incommensurable worlds. However, from this well supported empirical fact it doesn't follow that there *has* to be a shared core or essence of human behaviours.

The suggestion that the empirical becomes indistinguishable from the transcendental, in this sort of context, can also be found, for example, in the work of Merleau-Ponty (when criticising Husserl). Gadamer too in his critique of Husserl's *Lebenswelt* can be read in this light. But although the suggestion of dropping or blurring

sharp boundaries between the empirical and transcendental is often there, it is rarely brought to the fore. Still, hints towards the problematic nature of these boundaries are given in passing by many writers. In the literature on Wittgensteinian form(s) of life alone, doubts have been expressed, not only about the bipartition of the transcendental and the empirical, but about at least nine other such dichotomies as well (e.g. grammatical/empirical, local/universal, realistic/transcendental).

II

Though language-games should not be equated with form(s) of life, they are there as features of form(s) of life. To express the intimacy more directly: In learning one's first language one learns 'the' human language game. The close relation between the 'language'- and 'life'-related clusters can be broadened out by a consideration of intercultural communication. That intercultural communication is possible cannot be disputed, because it is a natural extension of 'normal' interhuman communication and any argument of whatever sort presupposes interhuman communication. Participation in forms of life is necessary for using language and hence necessary for translation and interpretation. If it weren't the case that forms of life were similar in certain ways, translation or interpretation wouldn't get started.

Of course, the assessment that in intercultural communication we have at least partly shared forms of life, is an assessment from within one cluster of forms of life. It doesn't follow that because there are similarities there *must* be a universal core. Similarly, to suggest that the common behaviour of mankind (or Wittgenstein's use of 'primitive' or 'natural' reactions or 'natural history') is a transcendental or biological universal invariant, is to fall back to the idea of a transcendent observer (be it of the 'foundationalist' *a priori* or 'naturalist' *a posteriori* sort). The common behaviour of mankind should be understood analogously to form(s) of life. Starting from where one is, means starting from a position which can only be opened up, to the extent that it can, by confrontation with an indeterminate number of forms of life. The issue of form(s) of life and that of the common behaviour of mankind can be seen as brought together in any encounter of two or more human beings, but in particular in so called first contacts: the situation where people with unshared histories meet (who don't speak each others language, don't have access to interpreters, etc.). Here is an example from one of Cook's journeys - New Zealand, April 7, 1773:

... we should have pass'd without seeing them [i.e. 'one man and two Women'] had not the man holloa'd to us, he stood with his club in his hand upon the point of a rock. ... the man seemed rather afraid when we approached the Rock with our Boat, he however stood firm. ...

... The captain then taking some sheets of white paper in his hand, landed on the rock unarmed, and held the paper out to the native. The man now trembled visibly, and having exhibited strong marks of fear in his countenance, took the paper: upon which captain Cook coming up to him, took hold of his hand, and embraced him, touching the man's nose with his own, which is their mode of salutation. ...

... presently after we were joined by the two Women, the Gentlemen that were with me and some of the Seamen and we spent about half an hour in chitchat which was little understood on either side in which the youngest of the two Women bore by far the greatest share. We presented them with fish and Wild fowl which we had in our boat, which the young Woman afterwards took up one by one and threw them into the Boat again giving us to understand that such things they wanted not. ...

Although there only is an account from one side and that side already knows quite a lot about the other side, perhaps this is the nearest one can get to what's going on in essence in interhuman communication. What is going on is a lot; *everything* is involved: innumerable interpretations and judgements are made of the other person(s) - long before any word is uttered or understood. Broadly speaking, the attitude towards 'the others' is as souls. It is assumed (on both sides) that for 'the others' there is some way of reciprocating and engaging (to some extent) in shared practices - of course how these practices are described (or experienced) may differ. The 'one man and two Women' probably did not refer afterwards to the event as having 'spent about half an hour in chitchat'. First contacts show that both the transcendental and empirical aspects of form(s) of life have a universal and local aspect. First contacts are a good example of how the *condition humaine* is not a kind of fact. To be a human person, it is both an empirical and a transcendental precondition that one knows the certainties of particular form(s) of life *and* that one is capable of recognising and dealing with an indefinite variety of other form(s) of life.

Because I participate in form(s) of life, I can interact with other form(s) of life. By imagining other communities or, even better, by interacting with real ones, one can learn to understand better what the 'natural' human form of life(s) is/are. The limits of the human life form are given by what is similar. But what is similar should not be understood as something that is biologically or psychologically or transcendently shared by all human beings. What is similar is what human beings would recognise as similar in first or other contacts - a similarity that is, in a way, transcendently grounded, but the content of this grounding remains tied to the local situation of actual encounters. Is there a common behaviour of mankind? Yes, but not understood as something the essence of

which will be revealed by cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. There are common behaviours of mankind in shared local worlds in which there are (attempts at) mutual attunements of form(s) of life.

To repeat, the fact that different form(s) of life are similar is no reason to presuppose that there is a core, or some essence, rationality, prototype, DNA-structure or transcendental subject, which these form(s) of life, of necessity, share. There are all kinds of things human beings share - even if we leave out what humans share with other animals. All humans have a mastery of language; they have beliefs, desires, hopes, emotions, a sense of practicality and morality, a 'deep' awareness of birth and death, and so on. But the latter is an empirical statement made from within particular form(s) of life. It leaves open the possibility to come across people who consider what 'we' call emotions, events in the world out there, or people for whom we're at a loss of how to gloss our language game of 'believing' in their language. There will always be many similarities; this is both an empirical and transcendental 'fact'. But what these similarities are and how they are to be understood depends on the form(s) of life one has been exposed to and, in particular, on the language(s) that are used to express these similarities. One can only speak about the 'universality' of, say, laughter or anger from a limited cluster of forms of life, which set limitations on how the meanings of laughter and anger as well as the meanings of the criteria of identifying cases of laughter and anger are to be understood. Consider the differences and similarities between Ifaluk *liget*, which can be glossed as 'justified anger' and Utku 'anger' - *ningaq, qiquq, urulu, or huaq*, each of which stresses different aspects of what 'we' call anger (which already has a surprising variety of uses among native speakers of English around the world). For the Utku 'anger' is *never* justified; for the Ifaluk 'anger' is *always* justified. By our lights both Ifaluk and Utku sometimes display anger (though Utku only very rarely). On that basis one might suggest that 'anger' is a universal, because there is a core which all 'prototypical' examples of anger share. However, there is no reason why the universal shouldn't be *song* or *liget* (which, by the way, both happen to be much more morally and rationally loaded notions than the common western concept of anger). Any understanding or account of what is similar is particularised, not something innate (in a Platonic, Kantian, sociobiological, or whatever sense). What is similar has to be 'claimed' in first contacts, as well as, again and again, in all human interactions. From this it follows not only that form(s) of life should be understood in a dynamic sense, but also that they should be understood *at the same time* in the singular *and* the plural, as local *and* universal, as empirical *and* transcendental.

Endnote

- * An earlier version of this text contained bibliographic references (as well as references to Wittgenstein's works). Given the limitations of space it was decided not to include any references at all. However, I list here the names of the authors that occur in that bibliography: Apel, Baker GP, Baker LR, Bearn, Bloor, Barry, Bolton, Brearley, Cavell, Conway, de Certeau, Deloch, Eijzenga, Emmett, Fischer, Garver, Gier, Habermas, Hacker, Haller, Hilmy, Hinman, Hintikka & Hintikka, Hodges & Lachs, Holenstein, Hunter, Hutto, Kripke, Kober, Lear, Lyotard, Malcolm, Margolis, Needham, Øfsti, Putnam, Ratzsch, Robinson, Sacks, Schatzki, Scheman, Schneider, Schulte, Taylor C, Taylor E, ter Hark, Thompkins, von Savigny, Williams, Winch, Wolgast.