

**ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL GENESIS OF  
THE TERM "FORM OF LIFE"**

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I

Recently there has been intense interest among philosophers and historians alike in establishing the historical setting for Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy. There is currently much preoccupation with the European origins of his thought.<sup>1</sup> Some of this interest has centered around the term "*Lebensform*," "form of life," and rightfully so, since it is thought to be one of the distinguishing marks of his later philosophy. For instance, van Peursen mentions as possible candidates for the origin of the idea the literary works of Spranger and Scholz.<sup>2</sup> More recent research using new sources has confirmed van Peursen's conjecture, notably the scholarship of Morris Engel<sup>3</sup> and the joint effort of Janik and Toulmin.<sup>4</sup> Although it is not clear from whom Wittgenstein borrowed the term "form of life," it does come from German philosophical usage. That much is established. And as I shall show below, the term was in use long before Spranger and Scholz. Wittgenstein may have first encountered the idea from an earlier source than has been substantiated. But that is only conjecture on my part.

The term "form of life" first appears in German philosophy in Arthur Schopenhauer's work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819). Although the exact phrasing by Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein is not shared, the wording is similar. In the *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter *P.I.*), Wittgenstein always used "*Lebensform*" for form of life.<sup>5</sup> He did not use any literary variations as Schopenhauer did. For instance, Schopenhauer used both "*Formen*" and "*Gestalten*" for the plural when discussing "the forms of life."<sup>6</sup> However, when Schopenhauer spoke of the form of life he used only "*Form*," as Wittgenstein did, except that Schopenhauer's literary construction of the term was "*die Form des Lebens*."

Now this is all well and good, but did they *mean* the same thing or even similar things by these words? To begin answering this question, let us look at Schopenhauer's use of the term in its context, and then proceed to Wittgenstein's, since the latter's is most familiar.

II

Schopenhauer's conception of form of life is fairly straightforward and relatively easy to present, mainly because the term plays such a distinctive

role in his metaphysics. The most frequent occurrence of the term "form of life" is in reference to time, specifically the present. Schopenhauer advises us that "above all things, we must distinctly recognize that the form of the phenomenon of will, the form of life or reality, is really only the *present*, not the future nor the past." And in the next few sentences he adds that "the present alone is the form of all life, and is its sure possession which can never be taken from it." Some other instances of the term which occur in his discussion of the assertion and denial of the will are the following: "the present, the single form of real life" (I,361; I,386); "the form of all life is the *present* . . ." (I,361; I,387); and "the form of life is an endless present" (I, 362; I,388).

Schopenhauer's reason for emphasizing the present can be seen when some of his key metaphysical ideas come into play with the term. For Schopenhauer, "the present is the form essential to the objectification of the will" (I,361; I,387). And toward the end of *The World as Will and Idea* (hereafter *W.W.I.*), he remarks

Here we see, in passing, more distinctly that in general the form of life, or the manifestation of the will with consciousness, is primarily and immediately merely the present. Past and future are added only in the case of man, and indeed merely in conception, are known *in abstracto*, and perhaps illustrated by pictures of the imagination (III,381; II,732).

This statement admits that there are the other temporal dimensions or predicates, but for man they are not as important as the present because "life is inseparable from the will to live, and the only form of life is the present" (I,473; I,499). (An idea similar to the one Schopenhauer is dealing with here is Wittgenstein's remark in the *Tractatus*: "eternal life belongs to those who live in the present" [6.4311].<sup>9</sup> But there is *more* to it than this in Schopenhauer.) And to make this idea of the present clearer, one must turn to the conception of life and the world in Schopenhauer's thought, for they are central to his meaning of the term.

The two passages that emphasize the notion of form and which utilize many of the main ideas of Schopenhauer's philosophy are also ones that show that the term probably had its origin in Kant's doctrine of the forms of intuition—space and time. They read as follows:

*Every individual*, every human being and his course of life, is but another short dream of the endless spirit of nature, of the persistent will to live; *is only another fleeting form*, which it carelessly sketches on its infinite page, space and time; allows to remain for a time so short that it vanishes into nothing in comparison with these, and then obliterates to make new room. And yet, and here lies the serious side of life, *every one*

*of these fleeting forms, these empty fancies, must be paid for by the whole will to live, in all its activity, with many and deep sufferings, and finally with a bitter death, long feared and coming at last* (I,415; italics mine).

And a bit later, he adds,

that constant strain and effort without end and without rest at all the grades of objectivity, in which and through which the world consists; the multifarious forms succeeding each other in graduation; the whole manifestation of the will; and, finally, also the universal forms of this manifestation, time and space, and also its last fundamental form, subject and object; all are abolished. No will; no idea, no world (I,530-31; I,557).

As these two passages suggest, there is a distinct metaphysical role of the notion, form of life, in Schopenhauer's thought. Nature is treated as an expression or manifestation of the will. The particular manner in which the diversity of the world is accounted for is by way of form. Form functions in a two-fold way and may be illustrated by the following explanation:

That generation and death are to be regarded as something belonging to life, and essential to this phenomenon of the will, arises also from the fact that they both exhibit themselves merely as higher powers of the expression of that in which all the rest of life consists. This is through and through nothing else than the constant change of matter in the fixed permanence of form; and this is what constitutes the transitoriness of the individual and the permanence of the species (I,356-57).

It appears from the term's context that the principal meaning for Schopenhauer is a biological one. "Form of life" has a sense of a species and its characteristic behaviors. Moreover, the emphasis upon the present shows affinity with Kant's use of "*Form*" in his conception of time as a form of intuition. Schopenhauer accepts Kant's idea that time is not an abstract idea, but an *a priori* form of perception or of the sensible manifold. For Kant, sense experience merely presents itself; and time is characteristic of our perception of the flow of consciousness. So the present is the most immediate way that sense experience is given to us.<sup>10</sup>

If one reviews the beginning of Schopenhauer's "Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy" in *W.W.I.* (II,23ff), one quickly finds that he thought time and space are expressions of a deeper condition or underlying reason for all experience, which is causality. Our experience of phenomena within time has causality as a presupposition; for instance, material objects are expres-

sions of causal forms or structures. That is to say, phenomena as we experience them are interrelated and connected. They are a coherent stream presented to our consciousness.

The form of life as the present has the experience of material objects interpreted in the above way. But the form of life is also the manifestation of the will with consciousness (III,381) which is described as a directly felt relation in which an individual becomes aware of the inner nature of a phenomenon. This subjective feeling is what Schopenhauer labels will. So these two items, the inner and outer nature of phenomena, are what the present consists of, and define what the content of "form of life" is for Schopenhauer. Within a particular form of life, one's perceptions become objectifications or manifestations of one's will, the will to live or to be, and that person's existence has an analysis similar to the one given of perception. The familiar descriptive terms of Schopenhauer's theory of will are used in supplying content to the idea of what a form of life is: the will irrationally drives us; we blindly suffer from our needs and cravings, which are never satisfied. Each will acts to preserve itself from others who oppose it. And so on. This is the tragic picture Schopenhauer gives us of life and the world, and it is not too surprising to find it behind Schopenhauer's understanding of "*die Form des Lebens*."

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the idea that the present is the form of life, with its Eastern overtones which would be shared with Schopenhauer's use, is seen in the following, moving dialogue from Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922):

He once asked him, "Have you also learned that secret from the river: that there is no such thing as time"?

A bright smile spread over Vasudeva's face. "Yes, Siddhartha," he said. "Is this what you mean? That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future"?

"That is it," said Siddhartha, "and when I learned that, I reviewed my life and it was also a river, and Siddhartha the boy, Siddhartha the mature man and Siddhartha the old man, were only separated by shadows, not through reality. Siddhartha's previous lives were also not in the past, and his death and his return to Brahma are not in the future. Nothing was, nothing will be, everything has reality and presence."<sup>11</sup>

### III

Is it possible that Schopenhauer influenced Wittgenstein's phraseology? At first sight, it might seem that there is not much correlation between

Schopenhauer's and Wittgenstein's uses of the term. After all, what could Wittgenstein's dictum, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (*P.I.*, Pt. 1, sec. 19), have to do with Schopenhauer's metaphysic-laden use? To answer this question in the negative and for that to be the end of the matter is to oversimplify and to fail to appreciate what is presented here. First of all, there is the problem of understanding just what Wittgenstein meant by the term. He never explains it, and from his occasional use in varying contexts, it is still debatable as to what conception underlies Wittgenstein's use (see fn. 5). However, if one begins to examine Wittgenstein's notion carefully, there are *some rough* similarities to Schopenhauer—enough to make the parallel appear puzzling to the historian of philosophy.

The first similarity is in Hunter's interpretation of "form of life" in Wittgenstein's *P.I.*<sup>12</sup> His reading of the *Lebensform* passages he dubs as "the organic account." Let me briefly review its basic tenets. "Form of life" refers to the biological or organic phenomena which occur in, and which are typical of, the activities of living beings. This would include the complicated ways in which animals react to their environment. So to say that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life is to say that speaking or language-using is as much a biological, natural process as walking or digesting food. Under this interpretation, what is emphasized about language *are the activities one undergoes when one speaks*. The gestures, facial expressions, bodily movements (including autonomic responses)—all those things which humans naturally carry out or perform in their environment when talking—are the items which Wittgenstein wished to emphasize when he talked about constructing elementary (primitive) language-games. As he reports in *P.I.*, "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 form of life" (Pt. I, sec. 23). Notice he says a *part* of an activity or of a form of life—not that language is identical with it.

We find this idea as early as the *Tractatus period*: "Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it" (4.002).<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein's line of reasoning here casts doubt on Patrick Sherry's argument (fn. 12) about forms of life as religion. Only when religious activities are *spoken* do we have this associative function between these two concepts. So the converse of Hunter's "organic account" is also true and not something which should be forgotten in a discussion of this sort. Speaking and language-activities condition forms of life just as much as the other way around when we are discussing human activities. Under the organic account, appropriate language-use comes as an immediate response of a person in a situation where one *learns* to understand what to say or what is said simply by the words themselves and not by guessing, or interpreting, or applying rules. There is a good example in the *Zettel*<sup>14</sup> of what Hunter is getting at:

The concept of pain is characterized by its particular function in our life./Pain has *this* position in our life; has *these* connexions; (that is to say: we only call "pain" what has *this* position, *these* connexions)./Only surrounded by certain normal manifestation of life, is there such a thing as an expression of pain. Only surrounded by an even more far-reaching particular manifestation of life, [is there] such a thing as the expression [*Ausdruck*] of sorrow or affection. And so on (532-34).

This train of thought and its emphasis upon the actual expression of whatever is referred to, i.e., the activities normally accompanying it (e.g., pain) *and* upon whatever can be or could be said about it, is at the center of Wittgenstein's understanding of *meaning*. This conjunction has not always been appreciated. (See the *Philosophical Grammar* discussion included in fn. 5 for a similar idea to this one from the *Zettel*.)

There is an aphorism which Wittgenstein once expressed to Malcolm that is more compatible with what I have said and with Hunter's account than with other interpretations of *Lebensform*. It is "(An expression has meaning only in the stream of life.)" The word "stream" gives us a better clue to the idea of activity than "form" does. Also, the word "stream" suggests continuity, yet change and fluidity. This remark is reminiscent of van Peursen's point about Wittgenstein and Heraclitus, "who similarly tried by way of aphorism to unearth the confusion of the multifarious uses of language from the far from obvious, often concealed expressiveness of the *logos*: meaning, word, speech" (13). And the phrase "stream of life" is suggestive of the presentness of one's life—of living through one's life where experience and its items are seen as causally interconnected, which Schopenhauer stressed in opposition to Kant; it is also reminiscent of Hesse's memorable dialogue.<sup>16</sup> In the *Zettel*, Wittgenstein uses the metaphor "run on" with life; this is probably the closest to what he meant by "stream of life":

I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts (387).

For here life would run on differently.—What interests us would not interest *them*. Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which *essentially* different concepts are imaginable (388).

There is also a parallel between Hunter's organic account of "*Lebensform*" and Schopenhauer's meaning of "*die Form des Lebens*." Both use it in the sense of species' and individuals' expression or activity. (See *W.W.I.*, e.g., I,415, 345-7, and III,381 cited earlier.) Hunter supplements his interpretation with the following comment:

Saying that this use of language ["hope"] is a form of life is saying that it is not derivative, that it is not done on the basis of evidence, that saying the words is itself part of the stock of human responses and is as natural and primordial as an affectionate gesture . . . it is the complicated organic adaptation which enables us to use a word such as "hope" which is the form of life (241).

Hunter's point can be illustrated again from the *Zettel*. In his discussion of "pain," pain-behavior, and of attempts to establish connections between them (540), Wittgenstein says that it is helpful to remember the *primitive reactions* one has when oneself or someone else is in pain. He adds,

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

This prototype is at the core of Wittgenstein's use of *Lebensform*. And another *Zettel* remark in the same vein, but much bolder than the others is

Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive, kinds of behavior 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 behaviors. (For our *language-game* is behavior.) (Instinct) (545).

There may be more anthropological overtones to Wittgenstein's use than Schopenhauer's, but there is still some resemblance between the two in that both were interested in using the organic activities of individuals to characterize man's plight or daily existence. Both men agree that the form of life is not one which consists of rational choices—ones that are consciously deliberated, or "the result of thought" as Wittgenstein put it—but rather it consists of activities which we might call the "pre-rational." The role of reason in both of these philosophers is subordinate to other human activities; therein lies their resemblance. The difference mainly lies in their descriptions of "pre-rational behavior." Schopenhauer saw all such behavior as an expression of the will to live which is the constant source of suffering; all volition arises from want (I,468). Such striving is characteristic of the form of life. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, saw instinct, gestures, etc., as the mark of *Lebensform*; but on the matter of what instinct, gestures, etc. *are*, he is silent. Schopenhauer uses his metaphysics of the will to inform us of what they are. And of course, Wittgenstein deliberately avoids such theorizing. However, the similarity is closer than this instance of their uses

