

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The question of what Ludwig Wittgenstein meant by “form of life” or “forms of life” (*Lebensform*, *Lebensformen*) has attracted a great deal of attention, although it is an expression that Wittgenstein himself employed only on a relatively small number of occasions. Since it seems to be at the core of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, one might wonder why he did not focus more explicitly on its meaning and significance. This Element aims to offer a clarification of this notion that also explains Wittgenstein’s reluctance to be more explicit and straightforward about it.

The Element is structured into four parts: an introduction, two main sections, and a conclusion. In the introduction, I investigate the meaning(s) that *Lebensform* had at Wittgenstein’s time. This investigation will provide at least a partial answer to the question posited. Indeed, the term was rather common at Wittgenstein’s time, so much so that he probably did not think its meaning needed to be explicitly addressed. It was used both in the natural sciences and in philosophy, and it was used both to point to natural factors and features of certain species, among them the human species, and to highlight broadly cultural, social, and aesthetic elements that characterize and differentiate the various ways in which human beings organize and live their lives with each other. The concept of *Lebensform* was therefore not an “invention” of Wittgenstein but rather an idea that was already present in his cultural milieu and that he put to use for his specific purposes.

To illustrate such purposes, after the introduction, Section 2 will focus on the occasions on which Wittgenstein mentioned forms of life in his writings and lectures. Since the term appears only five times in the *Philosophical Investigations* (including both parts 1 and 2)¹ and a few times in other writings and lectures, the task of examining these occurrences in detail and tracing them back to their original formulations in Wittgenstein’s manuscripts is not impossible. The analysis of the contexts in which *Lebensform* or *Lebensformen* appear

¹ Throughout this work, whenever I refer to the *Investigations* in general (without using abbreviations), I will be referring to the whole work as it was traditionally known, hence both part 1 and part 2. I will, however, use the abbreviations *PI* and *PPF*, following the use introduced by the fourth edition of the book (2009), when referring only to part 1 or only to part 2, respectively, and when quoting from or referring to specific remarks. In references to *PPF*, I will also add the section and page reference to the “old” *PII* (from the third edition of the *Investigations*) in square brackets. For references to *Culture and Value*, I will use the 1998 edition, but add the reference to the 1980 edition in square brackets. For the abbreviations of Wittgenstein’s works, see the bibliography. When referring to Wittgenstein’s manuscripts and typescripts in the *Nachlass*, I use the standard classification (von Wright 1993) and quote from the Bergen Electronic Edition (BEE). Translations from the *Nachlass*, unless otherwise specified, are mine (often from Boncompagni 2015, where I benefited from the advice of Joachim Schulte).

will indeed help us understand the reasons motivating Wittgenstein's choice of this expression, what he connected it with, and what he was interested in highlighting. The variations that some passages went through between their original formulation and later versions also constitute a lens through which to examine the development of Wittgenstein's approach to certain issues. One point that will be addressed is the earliest occurrence of the term in his work, dating back to 1936: he first introduced *Lebensform* as a replacement for the word "culture." This change might suggest that there was something in "culture" that did not capture what he wanted to emphasize when he talked about forms of life. I will argue that unlike "forms of life," "culture" risks not capturing the practical, everyday, and ordinary aspects of the *things we do* when we use words. Another point that will emerge is Wittgenstein's views about the English translation of *Lebensform*, which, at least at some point, he thought should be "way of living." This translation, perhaps surprisingly, eliminates any talk of a "form" and instead emphasizes the activities, practices, and ways of doing in which our language games are embedded, which he elsewhere referred to as "the whole hurly burly" of life.

After this examination of Wittgenstein's remarks, in Section 3, the vast literature on Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life will be addressed. It might be surprising that so much has been written on a notion that he seldom employed, but I believe that the emphasis on it by many commentators is not misplaced. It will be fascinating to see with what purposes commentators stress the relevance of forms of life in Wittgenstein; in fact, interpretations diverge and point in different, sometimes opposing directions. To systematize the debate and add some clarity to it, I will identify some of the most discussed issues and some of the most relevant readings that have been offered. Some commentators, for instance, claim that Wittgenstein stresses the existence of basically one human form of life, while others emphasize his remarks about the different ways in which human beings, in their specific cultures and social settings, develop their own ways of living. Relatedly, some connect the human form of life to language in general, and some seem interested in considering the practices in which singular language games are embedded. Some interpreters offer a transcendental reading in which forms of life are to some extent the conditions of possibility for meaning and language. Others are inclined toward a naturalistic account that privileges biological and evolutionary aspects. The section includes early interpretations, such as those proposed by J. F. M. Hunter, Max Black, and Nicholas Gier; the influential work of Stanley Cavell, who distinguished between a vertical (biological) and a horizontal (cultural) dimension of the concept; and the transcendental readings proposed by, among others, Bernard Williams and Jonathan Lear. It also reviews more recent debates

concerning such matters as whether Wittgenstein's interest in the plurality of forms of life entails a form of relativism, whether he should be considered a conservative thinker, and whether his reference to human practices makes him an empiricist and/or a naturalist.

In the fourth and concluding section, after recapping the most relevant insights gained from the former examinations and trying to map the survey of interpretations onto Wittgenstein's remarks, I develop my own take on this notion. To anticipate, I argue that the concept of forms of life functions as a methodological reminder for Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was not providing an empirical explanation of what a form of life is. Instead, he was engaged in a grammatical investigation, highlighting the connections between speaking a language and being the particular animals that we are, belonging to communities that are held together by habit, education, norms, culture, and science. This explains Wittgenstein's seeming reluctance to say more about forms of life: his interest lay not in explaining forms of life in themselves but in making use of this conceptual tool in his wider inquiries into the workings of our language. Far from diminishing the significance of this notion, a methodological reading will highlight its centrality in Wittgenstein's overall project.

1.2 "Lebensformen" before Wittgenstein

Two sources are particularly helpful for grasping the way in which the term *Lebensform* was used before Wittgenstein and at his time and hence the meaning or meanings with which he was likely familiar. One source is Helmreich and Roosth's (2010) "keyword" account of the term "life-form", in which they examine how this term has been employed in natural philosophy and biology over the last two hundred years, beginning with its appearance in German as *Lebensform*. The second source is the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Ritter, Gründer and Gabriel 2007). These two sources consider partly differing fields of research, with the former occasionally mentioning philosophy but certainly not focusing on it and the latter instead oriented toward philosophy. Combining them is therefore particularly useful.

Helmreich and Roosth note that according to the *Deutsche Wörterbuch*, the term *Lebensformen* first appeared in 1838 in the *Jenaer Literatur-Zeitung* with the meaning of "the physical properties of heavenly bodies and the life forms possible upon them" (2010: 31). In approximately the same period, a slightly different meaning is detectable in a work by Karl Friedrich Burdach on physiology in which the emphasis is not on the external environment but on the inner life forces of an organism: life-forms are described here as "self-organizing according to an inner principle" (Helmreich and Roosth 2010: 31; Burdach 1838). Both ideas, at that

time, served to ground the possibility of constructing new classificatory schemes, in contrast with the prevalent view exemplified by Linnaeus' static taxonomy. This brings to mind Goethe's work on the morphology of plants, a work that Wittgenstein knew very well and that was in turn inspired by Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (more on Goethe and Kant soon). The same inspiration was at the origins of Johannes Müller's work. Müller, a physiologist and anatomist, teacher of Hermann von Helmholtz, Ernst Haeckel, and Louis Agassiz, between 1834 and 1840 published a piece titled (in Helmholtz & Roosth's translation) "Concluding remarks on the variations of development in animal and human life forms on Earth" (Müller 1840).

Another set of thinkers who use the term *Lebensform*, including the philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt and his younger brother, the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, focused on the relationship between the organism and its environment and the role of habits and custom (Helmreich and Roosth 2010: 33). Recognizing their contribution requires backdating the first occurrences of the term with respect to the *Deutsche Wörterbuch*. Wilhelm von Humboldt in fact talks of *Lebensform* as early as 1824, treating it as a synonym of custom or culture. His brother Alexander generalizes this notion to the organic world, including plants. From Helmholtz and Roosth's article, we also learn that Alexander von Humboldt influenced Charles Darwin and that Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had already used the term "form of life" (in English) at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century.

The legacy of the two von Humboldts extends to Ernst Haeckel's very popular works, including his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (1866) and *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868), which had multiple editions and contributed significantly to spreading Darwin's work in the German-speaking world. Haeckel is especially remembered for his idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, that is, the life of the organism recapitulates the evolution of the species.

The English expressions "life-form" and "form of life," sometimes with reference to life on other worlds, became common in the mid- and late nineteenth century in both the United Kingdom and the United States (Helmreich and Roosth 2010: 36–37).

From other more philosophy-oriented sources, including the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Ritter et al. 2007), we learn that Friedrich Schleiermacher uses the word *Lebensform* as early as his lectures on psychology in 1830 while considering the relationship between the individual and society (Schleiermacher 1862).² Wilhelm Wundt, considered the founder of modern

² The lectures were given between 1818 and 1834. According to Hacker (2015: 2), Schleiermacher used the term *Lebensform* as a synonym of *Lebenstypus*, with the meaning "personal character formation in relation to society."

experimental psychology, investigates *Lebensformen* in connection with customs and morality in his *Ethik*, first published in 1886. He differentiates between specific forms of life, that is, customs in which individual needs (food, dwelling, clothing, work) are met, forms of “intercourse” (the labor contract, play, good manners, salutation), social forms of life (family, tribal unions, the state, the legal system), and humanistic forms of life (friendship, hospitality, charity), which are attained through agreement (*Übereinstimmung*) in the spiritual qualities of human beings (Wundt 1908; see in particular vol. 1, chapter 3).³

In the twentieth century, the *Historisches Wörterbuch* mentions Eduard Spranger, whose book *Lebensformen* (first published in 1914 and then revised in 1921) was widely read at Wittgenstein’s time (Spranger 1921). Spranger was a student of Wilhelm Dilthey, and his work can be considered a development of Dilthey’s conception of life. Spranger classified six basic ideal-typical forms of individuality, or characters (his book was indeed translated into English as *Types of Men*). These different, alternative, even rival types of minds (for instance, the military, the contemplative, and the artistic mind) reflect alternative *Lebensformen*, modes or styles or ways of life, each characterized by its own basic ethical systems or structures of values: theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social, political, and religious forms of life. The lineage from Spranger to Wittgenstein is generally acknowledged in the Wittgensteinian literature. One of the first commentaries on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Hallett (1977: 88–89), partly following Toulmin (1969: 71), directly connects Wittgenstein’s notion to the influence of Spranger’s book. Baker and Hacker (1980: 136), instead, claim that there is no reason to associate Wittgenstein’s use of this term with Spranger’s work.⁴

Spranger also worked on developmental psychology and on adolescent life, other fields in which the notion of forms of life seems to have been in use. For instance, Herman Nohl, whose research developed in strict contact with both Dilthey and Spranger, investigates the way in which education is influenced and shaped by cultural backgrounds and worldviews and mentions *Lebensformen* in his *Charakter und Schicksal* (1938).⁵

³ Among the thinkers of the nineteenth century, we should add Arthur Schopenhauer, who uses the expression *Form des Lebens* on a few occasions in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819). He is not among the authors listed in the *Historisches Wörterbuch*, presumably, because he does not employ the word *Lebensformen* (I will say something more about *Lebensform* and *Form des Leben* in Section 2).

⁴ Here and elsewhere, I am referring to the first edition of volume I of Baker and Hacker’s commentary; some parts that are of interest for the notion of forms of life were in fact not included in the 2005 revised edition.

⁵ Interestingly, Nohl was a relative of Wittgenstein, having married his cousin, the pianist Bertha Oser. Bertha was the daughter of Wittgenstein’s aunt Josephine (“Aunt Fine” in family letters; see McGuinness 2019: 150, 154–56). See Wittgenstein’s family tree in Avins’ (2014: 225) study.

Another author worth mentioning is Alfred Wechsler, who wrote under the pseudonym of W. Fred and published a monograph titled *Lebensformen: Anmerkungen über die Technik des gesellschaftlichen Lebens* (*Forms of Life: Remarks on the Techniques of Social Life*; Fred 1905). This work is analyzed in depth by Margit Gaffal (2011).⁶ Topics included among “the techniques of social life” are good manners, personalities, appearance and reality, fashion, marriage and love, conversation, habits of eating, sports, reading, and traveling. One aspect underlined by Fred/Wechsler is the emergence of new forms of life, for instance, that of the “cosmopolitans,” who contributed to spreading modern ways of living to more traditional small towns. As Gaffal (2011) notes, Fred/Wechsler warns against adopting a new form of life without reflection just because it is new. A form of life, he claims, has the “right” to exist and to be followed only “if it coincides with the deep laws of humanity” (quoted in Gaffal 2011: 61). A form of life therefore also connects to a deeper level and must be grounded, ultimately, in human nature. This aspect will also emerge in the Wittgensteinian notion. Another aspect that will resurface is the emphasis on the implicitness of forms of life: a form of life is basically a set of implicit, tacit know-hows that are manifested in the naturalness of people’s behavior in various, often complex social contexts. Fred/Wechsler praises the English over the German form of life precisely because it remains more tacit.⁷ The relationship between the individual and the social rules embedded in forms of life is also an aspect considered by Fred/Wechsel, according to whom individuals cannot “make” their own forms of life but must to a certain extent adapt to the existent form of life in which they live.⁸

The series of monographs published at the beginning of the twentieth century with “forms of life” in their title does not end here. Another representative of the collection is *Lebensform und Lebensfunktionen der Rede* by the linguist Hermann Ammann (1928), a study of human speech that brings into focus the “lively” nature of language and its relationship with forms of life, analyzing, for instance, primitive forms of syntax such as exclamations in connection to elementary speech acts, such as cursing, congratulating, or blessing (cf. Padilla Gálvez and Gaffal 2011: 13). In 1919, Dutch linguist and historian of culture Johan Huizinga published *Waning of Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms*

⁶ See also Hacker 2015: 2–3; Haller 2014: 133–34.

⁷ In his review of this book, Hugo von Hofmannsthal underlined how forms of life “say without words what no one would agree if said with words and concepts” (cited in Abreu e Silva Netu 2011: 97).

⁸ Compare Wittgenstein: “The solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic disappear. / The fact that life is problematic means that your life does not fit life’s shape (*Form des Leben*). So you must change your life, & once it fits the shape, what is problematic will disappear” (*CV*: 31 [27]).

of *Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the 14th and 15th Centuries* (translated into both German and English in 1924), in which he talks of forms of life in terms of the spirit of an epoch that is manifested in practices, customs, and habits (Huizinga 1924; cf. Abreu e Silva Netu 2011: 90).

Finally, other thinkers who deserve at least a mention are the architect and designer Adolf Loos (with whom Wittgenstein was familiar), for his insistence on the fact that the design of an object must connect to the “forms of culture” and manners of life in which it is used (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 230); Karl and Charlotte Bühler (friends of Wittgenstein’s sister Margaret), who offer important contributions to developmental psychology and linguistics (Toulmin 1969: 71); Alfred Adler, physician and psychotherapist, who analyzes children’s development based on the “form of life” that the child acquires during infancy (Padilla Gálvez and Gaffal 2011: 10); the philosopher and theologian Heinrich Scholz, for his work on religious forms of life (Ritter et al. 2007); and Paul Ernst, for his distinction between “organic” and “inorganic” (bourgeois) forms of life and his criticism of the latter (Nyíri 1981).

Statistics show that the use of the term “*Lebensform*” peaked between 1930 and 1940 – precisely when Wittgenstein started to use it – and remained high thereafter (Floyd 2018: 61).

1.3 Goethe and Spengler: Methodological Concerns

In the Wittgensteinian literature, two authors receive particular consideration for their influence on the development of the Wittgensteinian version of the notion of forms of life: Goethe and Spengler. In my view, they are especially important to the methodological role that this notion assumes in Wittgenstein’s work.

The Goethean and, by way of Goethe, broadly Kantian influence is emphasized, among others, by Abreu e Silva Netu (2011: 78–83), who highlights the intertwinement of a subjective and a cosmological dimension in Kant’s perspective on the notion of form (especially in the Third Critique) and connects it to Goethe’s method of comparative morphology (Goethe 1946 [1790]). The indebtedness of Wittgenstein’s own method of surveyable representation (or synoptic representation) and the use of “objects of comparison” (*PI* §§122, 130) to Goethe’s morphology is acknowledged by many (see, for instance, Schulte 1984, 2017; Andronico 1999; Breithaupt et al. 2003). Wittgenstein is indeed explicit about the similarities between his aims and methods and Goethe’s views. In commenting on the latter’s conception of the “original plant,” in which the point is not so much to explain a plant’s temporal development à la Darwin as to offer “a plan” in which it is possible to group the organs of plants on the basis of

their similarities “as if around some natural center,” Wittgenstein and Waismann explain, “This is precisely what we are doing here. We are collating one form of language with its environment, or transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole space in which the structure of our language has its being” (Waismann 1965: 81).⁹ Even if Wittgenstein and Waismann are not talking about forms of life at that time, Wittgenstein’s slightly later notion of forms of life and the way in which he uses it resonates significantly with these words.

However, the thinker who is most often mentioned as being at the origins of the Wittgensteinian notion is Oswald Spengler, with whose *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*), published in 1918 (first volume) and 1922 (second volume), Wittgenstein was very familiar. In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler deals with cultures and civilizations as organisms with their lifecycle. He argues that a civilization is the destiny or final stage of a culture once it stops growing internally and creatively and starts expanding externally and rigidly. Spengler uses the expression *Lebensform* several times in connection with both the human form of life in general and specific historical forms of life (socialism, for example). The method of Spengler’s inquiry owes much to Goethe, although he applies it to history rather than to natural organisms. Rejecting an idea of history based on the study of causes and effects, Spengler wants to understand cultures and their developments by looking closely at their physiognomies. He examines the analogies in forms between different epochs in the same way in which one can examine the analogies between the organs in different living beings, focusing on their functions and on the relations of the parts to the whole. To some extent echoing Haeckel’s idea of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, but without its evolutionistic commitment, Spengler claims that the grandiose history of civilizations is *morphologically* in relationship with the microscopic history of an animal or a flower.

The relevance of Spengler to the development of the Wittgensteinian notion is emphasized, among others, by Baker and Hacker’s (1980: 136–37) influential commentary on *PI*, in which these passages from *The Decline of the West* are brought up as an example:

[T]he words *History* and *Nature* are here employed . . . in a quite different and hitherto unusual sense. These words comprise *possible* modes of understanding, of comprehending the totality of knowledge . . . as a homogeneous, spiritualized, well ordered *world-picture* The possibilities that we have

⁹ I am attributing this to Wittgenstein as well as Waismann, although the quotation is from the latter’s *Principles of Linguistic Philosophy* (Waismann 1965: 81); indeed, I think that these lines capture Wittgenstein’s own views at the time he was collaborating with Waismann in the early 1930s. See also *VW*: 311.

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of possessing an “outer world” that reflects and attests our proper existence are infinitely numerous and exceedingly heterogeneous One condition of this higher world-consciousness is the possession of *language*, meaning thereby not mere human utterance but a culture-language.¹⁰

While taking inspiration from Goethe and Spengler, Wittgenstein, however, does not refrain from criticizing them. His point is that they were not able to keep the method and object of inquiry separated. He claims that there is a risk in using “prototypes” or objects of comparison without an explicit awareness that these are only prototypes and objects of comparison: the risk of *wanting* to find the prototype in the phenomenon. There is a “prejudice”¹¹ in Spengler, Wittgenstein claims; in particular (*CV*: 30 [26–27]; *PI* §131), he should have realized the importance of keeping the method and object of inquiry separate. Even more, he should have realized that he was inventing a method rather than discovering the laws that govern the history of cultures and civilizations (*CV*: 31 [26–27]; Hacker 2015: 3).¹² We will see how this methodological awareness plays out in Wittgenstein’s notion of forms of life in the concluding section. Before that, however, we will look more closely at Wittgenstein’s own remarks on forms of life and the most relevant interpretations in the literature.

To conclude on the uses of *Lebensform* before Wittgenstein and at Wittgenstein’s time, as the short survey just presented shows, Wittgenstein cannot be said to have “invented” the notion of forms of life: “[T]his was just one of those cultural commonplaces that did not need explaining” (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 230). Additionally, it is noteworthy that in the uses of *Lebensform* that were common at his time, it is possible to identify both a biological dimension, in which the object of investigation is a living organism and its place in a physical environment, and a cultural and definitely human dimension, in which the connection between the individual and the collective instead assumes prominence (we will see in the next sections that both aspects also emerge in Wittgenstein’s writings). Finally, the two authors who seem to have been particularly relevant for the development of Wittgenstein’s approach, Goethe and Spengler, both pointed toward a methodological employment of the notions of form and forms of life, even if, in Wittgenstein’s view, neither was able to keep faith to this intuition.

¹⁰ Spengler’s expression translated here as “culture-language” is *Kultursprache*; see Spengler 1919: 80.

¹¹ *Ungerechtigkeit*, also injustice, distortion, unfairness.

¹² On Wittgenstein’s criticism of Spengler, see also Andronico 1999 and Schulte 2018. On the relevance of Spengler for Wittgenstein more generally, see also von Wright 1981 and Cavell 1988.

2 Forms of Life in Wittgenstein's Work

2.1 Overview

This section examines the occurrences of the terms *Lebensform* and *Lebensformen* in Wittgenstein's published writings, his lectures, and his manuscripts. Since Wittgenstein did not use these terms many times, it is feasible to consider all the occurrences of this expression in his work (some of which are in fact reformulations of the same remark).¹³ By examining not only the best-known remarks from the *Investigations* but also their earlier formulations, as well as other remarks from other sources, it will be possible to obtain an overview of the different shades of meaning that this notion suggests.

This section is therefore largely exegetical and relies on a number of quotations from Wittgenstein's work. I will limit references to the secondary literature in order to approach Wittgenstein's words without being guided by preconceived interpretations or frameworks (as far as possible). The analysis of the most relevant readings that have been defended in the literature will be the focus of Section 3.

I will proceed by reviewing clusters of remarks that seem to inhabit the same semantic area and were written in approximately the same period. Because the remarks that appear in the *Investigations* are better known, for each cluster, I will start from those remarks, trace them back to their original formulation when possible, and extend the analysis to similar notes from other writings. The three semantic areas that we will examine relate broadly to the following themes:

- (1) Language games and the activities of life (starting from *PI* §§19 and 23, remarks from 1936–7)
- (2) Agreement and following a rule (starting from *PI* §241, remarks from 1938 and the first half of the 1940s)
- (3) Forms of life as the “given” (starting from *PPF* §§1 and 345 [i 148, xi 192], remarks from after the Second World War).

Wittgenstein uses both *Lebensform* and *Lebensformen* in his writings, speaking both in the singular and the plural. Although some commentators have focused on this distinction (see Section 3), I do not think it is particularly significant, and I will therefore not use it as a criterion for distinguishing groups of remarks. Wittgenstein also occasionally uses *Form des Lebens*, whose difference from *Lebensform* is not immediately apparent in English (“form of our life” or “form of one's life” could possibly be good translations).

¹³ At least, these are all the occurrences I am aware of.