Wittgenstein on ethics: Working through Lebensformen

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Abstract
In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein conveyed the idea that ethics cannot be located in an object or self-standing subject matter of propositional discourse, true or false. At the same time, he took his work to have an eminently ethical purpose, and his attitude was not that of the emotivist. The trajectory of this conception of the normativity of philosophy as it developed in his subsequent thought is traced. It is explained that and how the notion of a ‘form of life’ (*Lebensform*) emerged only in his later thought, in 1937, earmarking a significant step forward in his philosophical method. We argue that the concept of *Lebensform* represents a way of domesticating logic itself, the very idea of a claim or reason, supplementing the idea of a ‘language game’, which it deepens. *Lebensform* is contrasted with the phenomenologists’ *Lebenswelt* through a reading of the notions of ‘I’, ‘world’ and ‘self’ as they were treated in the *Tractatus*, *The Blue and Brown Books* and *Philosophical Investigations*. Finally, the notion of *Lebensform* is shown to have replaced the notion of culture (*Kultur*) in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein’s spring 1937 ‘domestication’ of the nature of logic is shown to have been fully consonant with the idea that he was influenced by his reading Alan Turing’s 1936/1937 paper, ‘On computable numbers, with an application to the Entscheidungsproblem’.

Keywords
ethics, forms of life, Lebenswelt, normativity, Turing, Wittgenstein

I Wittgenstein on ethics
In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein conveyed the idea that ethics cannot be located in an object or self-standing subject matter of propositional discourse,
true or false. At the same time, he took his work to have an eminently ethical purpose, and his attitude was not at all that of the emotivist. In the *Tractatus* logic and ethics are activities, pursued reflectively with oneself in the light of truth and feeling, rather than theories or structures of thought representing value or facts or emotions in a psychological sense. His conception is wider than something religious: it comprises within it philosophical exploration that does not disrespect the teachings of religious traditions, while not simply subscribing to their truth. The idea that logic, ethics and philosophy do not represent the world as it is, but explore possible ways of living in the here and now – this remains a constant in his philosophical work.

Of course Wittgenstein’s ideas developed over time, in response to his own life, as well as his responses to the works of others to him. In his 1929 ‘Lecture on Ethics’,2 for example, he made a public statement disassociating himself from the conception of ethics as the propositional study of non-natural properties such as absolute good (as in Moore); from the emotivism of Russell; and from the scientism of the Vienna positivists. His idea was that absolute value, as opposed to instrumental or theoretical value, comes out precisely in our running up against the limits of sense in discussing and characterizing absolute good or absolute value. We must recognize those limits in ourselves, through reflection, deed, action and thought, not simply invoke them in a theory. In his ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough’*,3 from the mid-1930s, his attitude took an anthropological turn, as he used Frazer’s scientism about ‘primitive peoples’ as a foil to explore the very concept of a ‘prejudice’ in our own minds, and so the limits of our own perspectives. Finally, through his mature interlocutory style – expressed first in *Philosophical Investigations* (PI)4 – he allows his reader to experience, work through and converse about ethical aspects of life and thought with him or herself, in concert with others, as a part of human life itself.

This working through involves the consideration of certain very general facts about human beings – including ‘natural’ facts. But it also involves confrontations with cultural norms and one’s own sense of integrity, developing an ear and eye for the local task of formulating value judgements, assessing actions and characterizing expressions and perceptions from a first-person point of view. This has no essence that can be captured by describing an overarching set of relevant facts, properties, expressions or systems of norms or values. Ethics as expressed in Wittgenstein is not an empirical inquiry, nor is it reducible to methods of other areas of knowledge-seeking such as science or logic. Nor is it a branch of philosophy with a special subject matter. It is instead an issue, a task, in life. And so it is embedded in our forms of life, in ways that we act in our lives, by interacting with others, falling out of ourselves by taking refuge in thoughtlessness or in thoughts of others, reacting to our own actions and words, forming and facing a personality and locating ourselves in our environment in flourishing or non-flourishing ways. Ethics runs through, and is implicated by, every branch of thought and life, not merely philosophy.

Understanding Wittgenstein’s conception of ethics requires a careful evaluation of the notion of ‘form of life’, which for him is not an anthropological fact or given culture to be described, but rather a norm of elucidation and of characterization. It earmarks a new philosophical and critical method, a method which we can now see as an important innovation in the history of philosophy in the 20th century.
In section II, we consider the critical significance of this notion of ‘form of life’: Why it is a norm of method, rather than something simply to be described as ‘given’ – as one might mistakenly glean from Wittgenstein’s rough remark about forms of life being the ‘given’ that must be ‘accepted’ (PI PPF xi §345). Rather than passivity, Wittgenstein sees ethics and meaning at home in activity and receptive openness, an appreciation of the variety of forms of responsiveness, of forms of criticism and action (this might well include silence). This does not commit him to a form of particularism, or to quietism, but instead to the view that generalization in ethics is only possible within the perspective of a flow of life, through appreciation of the modalities (possibilities and necessities) pertaining to our courses of action, evinced in characterizations. These themselves realize but one among many contingent realizations or expressions of life.

In section III, I argue that Wittgenstein’s notion of form of life does not imply conventionalism. In section IV, I show how the notion of form of life is connected to Wittgenstein’s insistence on domesticating the supposed ‘sublimity’ of logic and ethics: the embedding of norms, including the use of words, in life. This, I argue, is a matter brought to the fore by Alan Turing, in his analysis of the notion of a ‘formal system’ of logic – a somewhat surprising claim, but one that tells us a great deal about Turing and Wittgenstein. I conclude with some general remarks on the significance for ethics of Wittgenstein’s critical contribution to philosophy.

II Lebensform as elucidation

The mature thought of Wittgenstein may be seen as a critical contribution to the development of mid-20th-century philosophy, its modernist form an expression of the deep need for relocating dislocated selves and voices in the midst of political, ethical, technological and social revolutions. In an age of catastrophic change, turmoil and diversification, it anticipates the need to constantly rethink the location and relocation of a self and its philosophy in everyday life. The Preface to Philosophical Investigations was dated 1945, alluding to ‘the darkness of this time’: not only the destruction of European life as Wittgenstein had known it but also the opening of the death camps and the dropping of atomic weapons on civilians.

As an engineer and mathematician, Wittgenstein knew that massive forms of computational power had been marshalled to achieve these things. In its own way, his mature philosophy provides us with something remarkably prescient and relevant: a way of confronting the meaning of what it is to be human in the midst of a computational and technological revolution that is rapidly reshaping our manners of conducting and expressing social and personal relationships and ties as well as our relationship to the earth and our biologies. Wittgenstein intended to respond to this process, to the whirl of dislocation in our thinking about life in an age of pervasive forms of biologicization, automation and psychologization. With his notion of Lebensform, he meant to offer a critical counter-response, one that maintains its philosophical relevance in our time, since it reaches deep into historical and theoretical processes that are still ongoing.

The notion of Lebensform first appears in his writing in the years 1936–1938, when he started drafting a manuscript which eventually resulted in the Philosophical Investigations. Although the notion plays a pivotal role in the Investigations, the expression
appears only five times in that work. In this section, I would like to suggest that this discrepancy is significant: It depends on the fact that Lebensform is not an object of investigation, but rather a norm of elucidation, that is, it earmarks his conception of philosophical method, of what is to do justice to human life, in and out of philosophy.

One can appreciate that Lebensform plays a pivotal role in the Investigations if one recalls Wittgenstein’s remark that ‘to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life’ (PI I, §19). In The Blue and Brown Books, to imagine a language is to imagine a ‘culture’, as if this is the locus by means of which meaning is given. In the Investigations, by contrast, Wittgenstein does not go on to describe forms of life but to mark out a manner of elucidation of normativity, suggesting that we elicit responses that mark the variety of possible responses, or forms of speaking in language about language. The understanding of language and of ethics is a task, an investigation of possibilities of significance, it is neither primarily an empirical investigation nor the quest for a theory of meaning.

And thus the idea of rules invited by Wittgenstein’s notion of a ‘language game’ is seen in a more diffuse and complex way in his mature philosophy: not as a reduction of meaning to linguistic rules or criteria or culture as given, but instead an invitation to try to describe how language works, and reflect on this activity philosophically. Indeed, his topic is not language, but possibilities of structuring human life – one’s own and others’ lives – with speech. He is thus not concerned with what is given, but with the very idea of givenness per se. And so his remarks about the ties between a language and a form of life are not meant to take up forms of life as objects of description. Rather, when we speak and discuss meaning and raise philosophical questions in life, this is an activity given through the delicate and complex problem of the embedding of speech in life, the fitting together and the applying of words in lived situations, imagined or otherwise.

One could object that, later in the Investigations, Wittgenstein claims that ‘what is to be accepted, the given, is – one might say – forms of life’ Lebensform (PI PPF xi §345). Aren’t Lebensformen here treated as objects of philosophical description? – No. These later, less polished parts of the Investigations have to be interpreted cautiously and thoughtfully, not straightforwardly. It is clear that Wittgenstein does not mean to offer a description of the ‘given’ and to claim that Lebensformen should be taken to be this. Instead, he is reflecting on the conundrums of givenness per se, a fundamental problem in any philosophy that partakes of analysis, of the attempt to describe concepts, objects, properties, values and perceptions in words, breaking down their interplay to see this more clearly.

Wittgenstein is pondering the role that any given can play in philosophical thinking. This explains why, earlier in the Investigations, what is given is only an enumeration, a list of undifferentiated, yet nearly universal features of human life with words: walking, eating, drinking, playing (PI PPF §25) and also commanding and obeying, describing objects by sight and by measurement, telling a story, guessing a riddle, telling a joke, requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (PI §23). This is a suggested list, not an analysis: it sets up arenas, forms of human and animal life to explore.

A confirmation of this interpretation may be obtained if we contrast the notion of Lebensform with an apparently similar concept, that of Lebenswelt (‘life world’) or Umwelt. Lebenswelt is much used by phenomenologists, including during the same years when Wittgenstein commenced writing about Lebensform. Although the idea of a Lebenswelt is sometimes used to explicate Wittgenstein’s mature thought, the concept
was never used by him. This absence is significant, if we reflect on the distinction between the two notions, Lebenswelt versus Lebensform.

Lebenswelt refers to an actual, significant environment in which a living organism (a human being, a non-human animal or even a kind of plant) moves, perceives and unfolds its life. A Lebenswelt can become an object of description, a tangible significance-disclosing territory that may be clarified, explicated and portrayed. This sets Lebenswelt apart from Wittgenstein’s notion of Lebensformen. Lebensformen may elucidate and be elucidated, but only through reflection, variation, truncation and multivalent embedding of arguments, grammatical procedures with words and language games in imagined snapshots of possible or actual forms of life. They are forms, that is, possibilities of structuring in life (to adapt TLP, 2.003). As we have said, Wittgenstein uses Lebensform very seldom, and we can see why: A Lebensform is not an object to be described but a norm of philosophical elucidation.

In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein is developing a new philosophical method which does not involve taking for granted fixed syntactical or grammatical rules, or even any particular language games, but instead brings in the ‘I’ from the start, allowing different voices to exchange perspectives, their disjointed and argumentative grapplings conveying the idea that to achieve a particular self, one with integrity, is a task. This is conveyed in the composition of the Investigations itself. In his earlier Blue and Brown Books, Wittgenstein does not treat what he calls ‘personal experience’ at the start: the ‘I’ does not occur until well into the discussion in The Blue Book (pp. 40 ff.). And although he refers at the beginning of The Brown Book to Augustine’s conception of language, he does not quote it. By contrast in Philosophical Investigations, by opening with the passage from Augustine’s Confessions the ‘I’ is embedded directly into philosophical method from the start. Wittgenstein gets us to reflect on cases and what they reflect, in turn, about us. He wishes to uncover the limits of our grammar, cases in which given grammar can hardly be relied upon. In this mature phase of his thinking, Wittgenstein is very much a philosopher of incompleteness and undecideability, driven by the very idea of what it is to have a particular voice in philosophy or in life: what it is to search intelligently (or not) in a variety of circumstances, and what contingent facts we depend upon in our discussions of what is ‘reasonable’ (as opposed to ‘rational’ in the sense of being right-by-reason, or calculation of self-interest).

The Investigations warns us that when we are not sure how to project our words into life, we should be careful not to mistakenly substantialize the conditions which are required if our signs are to take on life. The typical idea is to bring in notions such as ‘consciousness’, ‘human nature’, ‘culture’, ‘norms’, ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’. Rather, the Investigations urges us to search the variety of possible uses of words through the employment of language games: we should consider different uses of grammatical structures, employing these notions in order to investigate, shape, query and criticize them.

The upshot is that Wittgenstein’s deployment of language games is not meant to give a description of the meaning that there always already is – like the phenomenologist’s analysis of the Umwelt – but instead to reflect critically on our lives, in particular on the use of words that our living involves, on our reasoning and on our assertions about the world: the possibility and the apparent necessities of sense, reference, meaning and
Wittgenstein’s phenomenological approach to logic does not attempt at getting behind logic, but instead at a critical domestication of it.

In this way, Wittgenstein is not really contradicting his earlier thought, but instead inverting it. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he takes up a new way of presenting his ideas: he contrasts his present thought with the earlier *Tractatus* conception. In this way, he re-embeds his previous ideas about truth, sense and meaning in a new philosophical frame, conveying the idea that it is the plasticity and variety of forms of life, the very ‘friction’ that seems less than ideal that is precisely what our ideals of exactitude, reason and truth in thought require to have purchase (cf. PI §107).

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that world and life are ‘one’ (TLP, 5.621) and this expression might seem to approach the notion of *Lebenswelt*. Such an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remark would, however, be misleading. For he introduces this apparent equation after reflecting on realism and solipsism, and after concluding that those two notions collapse into, or eclipse one another. This occlusion follows from considerations that are tacitly grammatical or logical. If solipsism were true, it could only be expressed by prefacing all one’s assertions and judgements by ‘I think’. (That one should be able, formally and synthetically, to do this was held, of course, by Kant.) Yet by means of this formal, grammatical expression of solipsism, the ‘I’ cannot secure any sense of individuality. For it would be utterly unclear what perspective on the world was being expressed, much less how that perspective might be compared with and differentiated from other perspectives. Here, ‘I think that…’ is equivalent to ‘it is the case that…’

The expressed position thus collapses to an equivalence with pure realism or – which would be the same – to pure idealism. In either case, ‘*my* world’ – that is, the solipsistic world – would be lost (cf. TLP, 5.62 ff.).

According to this line of reasoning, realism leads inevitably to idealism (or scepticism or solipsism), and vice versa. Realism is the inevitable result, in other words, of the fading away of the ‘I’ as an object in the world – an essential feature of the idealist outlook. Idealism and realism may then be seen as two sides of the same coin. Consequently, neither the idealistic ‘I’ nor the realist world are concepts suitable for the elucidation of the nature of thought, of the possibility of representation, and of the essence of the logical space, these being the most basic Tractarian locales of form. According to the *Tractatus*, the transcendental form of thinking manifests itself instead in sentences which, although meeting ordinary standards of everyday grammar, turn out to be devoid of sense, that is, are tautological [sinnlos], or nonsensical [unsinnig]. Such transcendental form cannot be displayed by focusing on what is the case: we can only grasp it by thinking about possibilities, by thinking through in logic, how sense, and how the applicability of logic and mathematics to the world, manifests itself (cf. TLP, 6.13).

This line of reasoning survived the changes that occurred between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, even if it ended up being radically reframed. The demand for formal unity in thought of a gap-free kind, Wittgenstein states in the Preface to the *Investigations*, was surrendered. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein has given up the Tractarian demand for *the* general form of the proposition. But the schematic outlines of his earlier thoughts about ‘personal experience’, realism and solipsism, remain. In the *Investigations*, the dialectic shows up more satisfactorily, inside his philosophical method right from the start, in the emphasis he places on the difficulties of expressing, valuing and...
stating how things appear to those ‘I’s’ who engage in evaluations, that is, in a reflective life of and with words, aiming to put them to work in the world. The old dialectic between realism and idealism is now embedded in a new method, a method which is built on first person expression imbricated from the beginning in the vying of voices with one another (cf. PI §§24, 402).

The careful attention paid to words that are put to work and go astray in our engagement with one another and with the world allows these philosophical movements of thought to draw out and express the distinction between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ – but not as if it is a hard metaphysical distinction between something imperceptible and hidden, and something exterior and bare. Instead, what is ‘inner’ exhibits itself in speech, just as in music the inner emotional core of a piece may be drawn out in performance. The ‘I’ is no longer extruded as a single point of view, forced outside the world, but it finds its place in its antagonisms and points of contact with the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ and the ‘we’, in the various modes of searching and finding and failing to find ourselves in our forms of life. In this way, philosophy and ethics is ubiquitous, at stake in nearly all attempts to communicate and understand each other. As Cavell first pointed out, this is the core feature of Wittgenstein’s and Austin’s methods of appealing to what we ordinarily would be inclined to say in such and such a circumstance.

This development in Wittgenstein’s thinking about the relation between ‘I’ and world brings us to the core of his notion of Lebensform. The language which allows us to define the limits between the I and the world may be regarded as a calculus, that is, as a mechanizable procedure with rules governing the possibilities of expression. That notion of ‘calculus’ or ‘calculation’, a human being working step-by-step according to a rule in a disciplined and ‘unintelligent’ manner, is one aspect of the human form of life. But it must nevertheless, according to the later Wittgenstein, ultimately be conceived as embedded in a Lebensform, a part of human activities of searching, of attempts at distinguishing an ‘I’ from a ‘you’, a ‘me’ from a ‘we’, a this from a a that and so on. Informal representation is the life blood of formal representation, however complex and difficult its vagaries and contingencies and fragilities may be.

It has been suggested in a series of papers published elsewhere that Lebensform fulfils a logical task for Wittgenstein. By means of a kind of analytical regression to what is most basic, his analysis of analysis ends here: It finds what is simple (i.e., the elementary that the Tractatus was after) in what is acknowledged as simple or obvious in our ordinary responses – something always contestable, something evolving, difficult to accept and move on from. The simple must be domesticated in the later Wittgenstein, turned from something ‘sublime’ to something ‘that is an important form of presentation, but with homespun [hausgebackener] application’ (MS 152, p. 96). What is perceived as natural by us is to be worked through. Philosophy thereby becomes a task in life.

III Lebensformen versus Kultur

We can gain a deeper understanding of Wittgenstein’s notion of Lebensform if we contrast it with his handling of the notion of culture (Kultur). As far as we know, Wittgenstein used the word Lebensform for the first time in his writing in 1936. It appears during the months in fall 1936 when he tried to revise The Brown Book, which
had been dictated to Francis Skinner and Alice Ambrose in 1934–1935, in hopes of transforming the dictation into a manuscript.\textsuperscript{13} The work was unsatisfying for Wittgenstein, and hence the attempted revision failed, signified by his drawing a line through his Manuscript 115 at MS 115, page 118 and writing ‘this whole attempted revision is worthless.’

One of the problems that Wittgenstein faced here was his problematic and unconvincing use of the concept of culture (\textit{Kultur}) to elucidate the notion of language. \textit{The Brown Book} is a step-by-step presentation of language games, arranged in linear form, suggestion a quasi-evolutionary, additive, anthropological perspective on meaning. In \textit{The Brown Book} to imagine a language is to imagine a culture, and this is how Wittgenstein conceived of his efforts to elucidate meaning through an investigation of the uses of language. This suggested that he wanted to claim that we can only make sense of a use of language against the background of a culture, with its rules and social habits.

But Wittgenstein soon realized that cultures are not ready-made objects liable to be defined by or given to us unproblematically. Culture already presupposes the complex forms of life that make specific structurings of meaning possible. We can imagine a use of language, indeed a language game, only in the context of a ‘\textit{Lebensform/Form des Lebens}’ (MS 115, pp. 237–9). At this point, Wittgenstein drops the concept of culture (\textit{Kultur}) altogether – it never appears in the manuscript of \textit{Philosophical Investigations} again. He substitutes for it the notion of \textit{Lebensform}. The idea that to imagine a language or language game is to imagine a form of life is the conception that will survive in the mature philosophy.\textsuperscript{14}

An important line of continuity in Wittgenstein’s thought is thus his aim to analyse the whole idea of philosophical analysis itself, a reflective task achieved by exploring the limits of our world and the contingencies of our thinking against the backdrop of contingencies and alternative points of view. This kind of philosophy is not meant to offer further theoretical explanations, but rather, it seeks to stop and explore what is taken to be simple for and by us. It can only be conducted through analogy, metaphors and elucidation – just as Frege had held about his primitive logical notions (such as ‘concept’ and ‘object’\textsuperscript{15}). In 1936 Wittgenstein abandoned the hope that a notion of ‘culture’ can elucidate his reflections on meaning, language and logic. He recognizes instead that cultures have to be subject to his critical method and analysed in terms of something more fundamental and simpler for us, an everyday relation to words in our immediate environment.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, in the \textit{Investigations} logic is seen as the spelling out of necessities and possibilities, just as it was in the \textit{Tractatus}, but its purchase depends on feasible human ways of going on ‘in the same way’ from where we are now. This places the emphasis on the triangulation between our language, our mutual interactions and our activities within the world: words and their evolving structures embedded within human forms of life – subject to biological as well as cultural necessities – are part of reality. Possible ways of going on are sharable and yet always liable to criticism.

An upshot of this line of interpretation, which builds on ideas of Cavell, is that Wittgenstein does not use the notion of forms of life to suggest that language is merely a social, conventional and artificial construction, as is often believed. According to Cavell,\textsuperscript{17} in the \textit{Investigations}, ‘forms of life’ evince both a horizontal axis, the ethological and the conventional, and also a vertical, evolutionary and biological axis. ‘Forms
of life’ imply ‘natural reactions’ (PI §185), the uses of ‘fictitious natural history’ (PI PPF §365; cf. PI §524, discussed in Floyd¹⁸) and ‘the common behavior of mankind’ (PI §§204–6, 272), as well as reflections on what joins us to and separates us from non-human forms of life. The notion of form of life allows us to focus on the spectrum of possible realizations that our life as talking animals can take (on animals and our animal nature, cf. PI §§203, 372, 493, 647, 650, PPF I §1). Lebensformen are elucidated by way of comparisons (Vergleichsobjekte; cf. PI §§130) and philosophical investigations: They are not items or ultimate facts to be described, but are drawn out through the reflective philosophical activity of reshaping and reconfiguring our sense of possibility, of our dealings with one another, with language and with the world. The important point here is that reconfigurations of our uses of words are not reconfigurations of what is merely social or conventional but reconfigurations of life. And such transfigurations can occur through philosophical reflection on imagined necessities and possibilities.

Wittgenstein explores the significance of this point in what was originally published as the second part of the Investigations. That part is now called ‘Philosophy of Psychology: A Fragment’ (PPF), but the title can be misleading. Following Frege, Wittgenstein is still trying to respect the distinction between logic and psychology even as he explores psychological experiences of sense and meaning. In section xi, PPF §§111–5, Wittgenstein introduces a notion of ‘aspect seeing’:

111. Two uses of the word ‘see’.
   The one: ‘What do you see there?’ – ‘I see this’ (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: ‘I see a likeness in these two faces’ – let the man to whom I tell this be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.
   What is important is the categorial difference between the two ‘objects’ of sight.

112. The one man might make an accurate drawing of the two faces, and the other notice in the drawing the likeness which the former did not see.

113. I observe a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’.

114. Its causes are of interest to psychologists.

115. We are interested in the concept and its place among the concepts of experience.

Wittgenstein suggests that in ‘noticing an aspect’, we do not merely represent a property of an object, but we spot a comparative ‘likeness’ which is there to be seen, a feature, and not one merely stipulated: we bring an experience or response into view, making sense of things, thereby ‘seeing’ and realizing a possibility. In seeing a ‘likeness between two faces’, we respond by shaping and determining a relation of ‘sameness’ between different cases through an experience, but one which is both active and passive. For example, it might be pointed out that a stranger’s face strongly resembles that of one’s mother. One could come to be struck by this and be surprised by it, coming to share the way of experiencing the two faces in something like the way we may come to share in an aesthetic response to a particular work of art. We do not directly apply a concept (e.g. the concept sad or mother or happy) to various objects in such cases, simply sorting.¹⁹
What matters here is the fact that we gather two particular faces and link them with a remoulding of the concept same and see how our words and concepts reach into a new context.

A comparison with ratios may help. 5/15 and 4/12 are the same ratio, even if 5 and 4 are not the same, and neither are 15 and 12. The procedures for using methods of division according to these different ratios are very different. In order to see the two ratios as the same we need a mode of resemblance: in a mathematical case, this takes the form of rules of calculation which set criteria determining when two ratios are ‘the same’ and when they ‘differ’. The substratum of our experience here is the mastery of a technique of reckoning (cf. PI PPF xi, §222).

Similarly, we can only claim that two faces are alike if we have a way of comparing them which allows us the activity of clarifying what kind of ‘sameness’ is at issue. Unlike in a mathematical case, however, the way of comparing cannot depend upon techniques of calculation to play the role of scaffolding. The analogy with mathematics could lead us astray here, as sometimes happens. For the recognition of sameness grounds reasoning about possibilities and modalities. One could claim that two faces that look very different to me are nevertheless similar in one or another way, and that could lead us to many discussions and arguments concerning the respects in which they are similar and different. Weighing and balancing techniques can matter when it comes to responses to a claim or situation or person. Sameness, like human behaviour, comes in many different degrees.

It is part of the point of logic and ethics – of philosophy as Wittgenstein conceives it – to spell out our modes of comparison and reflect on how we discuss the spelling out itself. Here, we should mention the ethics of care and the work that literature can help us do. Both stress the practical importance of careful and thoughtful attention to particulars, meticulous assembling of ways we use words to respond to, differentiate and group together people and things. This is not a kind of restrictive ‘particularism’, since it involves generalizations and the recognition that within experience itself are already many dimensions of generality and conceptualization. Instead it is the recognition that value is to be found and measured in our ways of inhabiting and responding to Lebensformen.

In portraying similarities and differences, we bring to bear our responsiveness to our own judgements – even when, following Wittgenstein, we make a kind of ‘anthropological move’ to explore how things are to one whom we deem ‘other’. This process cannot be neutral. Our responses depend on our values, our interests, our experiences. Wittgenstein ultimately needed the notion of Lebensformen to embed his idea of proceeding with language games in life. We need to attend to the variety of possible ways of structuring living if we want to avoid a philosophy in which ‘the problems of life remain completely untouched’ (TLP, 6.52).

**IV Domesticating the sublimity of logic**

As we noted, Wittgenstein’s philosophical method always implied a search for what is taken to be simple in philosophical analysis, in the step to characterize the philosophical significance of an experience, concept or thing. It is in this spirit that in 1937 he revisited
the question of the nature of logic and attempted to domesticate it, bringing it down to earth. As he saw things, in the *Tractatus* simple objects and names had been taken in a ‘sublime’ way, as ultimate indefinables. Now his concern is to show that instead this idea of a simple object or name is ‘an important form of representation but [one] with home-spun application’ (MS 152, p. 96).\(^{21}\) *Lebensform* is relevant to this juncture in his development. As we have seen in section I, this is a notion which belongs to philosophical method and modes of elucidation. It constitutes an aptly fundamental way of thinking about ways of conceiving and regarding logic, language, life, value, meaning and experience as activities that are pursued together, in everyday life.

For the later Wittgenstein, the simple is not absolute, as the *Tractatus* had it, nor merely conventional. Nor is it relative to a *Satzsystem*, as he held in his so-called middle period (c. 1929–1933). The simple does not reveal itself in language games, traditions or cultures, as *The Blue and Brown Books* already make clear in rejecting the idea of an ‘indefinable’. According to the mature Wittgenstein, the ‘simple’ inhabits ‘ordinary life’: is always immanent in analyses and in following rules, although it is always contestable, transportable into new situations, capable of being reframed. What we take to be simple shows itself in our valuations of premises, suggestions ‘to go on’ in particular ways, refusal to begin at particular points and so on. All simples are inserted in life-structurings; they are fluid, meaningful parts of our traffic in meaningful response to and in life. This is not nihilism. For we can surely swim, if we deliberately shape our movements properly and orchestrate within our environs.

Hence in Wittgenstein’s view, *Lebensform* includes the *Umwelt* but does not reduce to it. His notion frames the *Umwelt* in a larger activity of questioning and criticizing, one which investigates a multiplicity of seeming modalities (possibilities and necessities) in an array of language-involving structurings of life. This links *Lebensform* to logic: as the *Tractatus* had already stated, ‘form is the possibility of structure’ (2.033), ‘the structure of a fact consists of the structures of states of affairs’ (2.034) and ‘the totality of existing states of affairs is the world’ (2.04). But ‘the world and life are one’ (5.621). Hence, the consideration of the modalities of life forms clarifies the logical scaffolding that shows itself in our life with language.

This represents a tremendous contribution to philosophy by Wittgenstein. It marks a departure from the traditional view that the modalities of life and meaning are to be taken to be inherent in organic wholes (biological organisms, kinds, societies). It steps forward toward a new, evolutionary, modular, fragmented, varied, constructed, manifold, procedural and dynamic conception of concepts that are in play in partial procedures. On this view, modalities depend on our engagement in life, in logic, in language, in experience and even in philosophy, as we compare and contrast and refine the ways in which we use words and techniques of describing and reflecting on events in life. The traditional concept of form acquires a new significance, which highlights the role of regularities and norms in life (*Regelmäßigkeiten*). Cultures and societies are not objects ready for analysis or passively given data. Instead, they are forms of life which can only be characterized through engagement, as they are lived through, queried, pursued and shaped by words, which in turn are shaped by them.

A consequence of this conception of philosophical procedure is that divergences and tensions among our judgements and evaluations should not be taken as rationally
intractable or as giving us reason to morally criticize or judge our opponents straight-
away (cf. PI §§2, 7, 194, 554). Instead, divergences and tensions can be brought out, spelled out, recognized, set and reflected upon in our lives. As Diamond has written, exploring Murdoch’s conception of ethics, we are all ‘perpetually moral’, but this can be reflected upon in philosophy, which may allow us to see other ‘forms’, or possible structurings, of and in life.22 In this way, what is simple and obvious to us is brought out so that it can be experienced and, if need be, readjusted or recast in our lives. Focusing on Lebensformen is a way of investigating and characterizing, if sometimes criticizing or upholding, what seems most obvious or right or terrible to us.

Thus, Lebensformen are not cultures or systems of norms. They are not moral systems that may be described and offered as justifications or criteria for evaluation. They are rather possibilities of human life forms (or animal or ecological life forms, if we are discussing these): modes of living carrying with them, in our case, schemes of thinking, desiring and acting. To see a possibility of living is not to see a whole life, but to see something that may be analogically applied to cases which are relevantly similar to one other, forms that may be put at work to shed light on families of difficulties. Logic and philosophy do not represent what is the case, or hold up the building of our judgements. Instead, they give us scaffolding: something modular and piecewise connected, needing to be tailored to the context at hand; raised up, put down and raised up again somewhere else; transported and brought in as needed to deal with particular problems for which they may be used. Scaffolding forms of life is essential for humans to be able to build structures (cultures, values) that will stand and form places to inhabit (cf. PI §240).

Since Lebensformen are not the Umwelt and they are not cultures or systems of norms, they are not exactly objects of description but fields of philosophical exploration. In Wittgenstein’s later philosophy ideals of simplicity, unlike in the Tractatus, are not constituted by elementary objects but inhabit what Cavell calls ‘the ordinary’, a field of exploration of dailiness which we inhabit dynamically as we conduct our lives with others with words, claims and judgements.23 Here, is it important to note that in the Investigations, an ‘anthropological moment’ survives. For Lebensformen are found in very natural and wholly general human activities: we tell stories, we eat, we drink, we play (PI §25), we interact linguistically (PI §242), we hope and grieve (PI PPF §1). Wittgenstein seeks the sublime in the ordinary ‘rags and dust’ of our lives with words (PI §52).

The domestication of logic through Lebensformen is linked to another theme which emerged around the same time in Wittgenstein’s thinking: that of Regelmässigkeit. In the summer of 1937 Wittgenstein was working on drafts of the Investigations and discussed them in Cambridge with Moore, Turing and Alister Watson.24 His exchanges with Turing, who had (partly under the influence of The Blue Book) developed the idea of analysing the idea of a formal system in terms of that of a human calculator (the idea of the Turing machine25) a year earlier 1936. Their discussions with Watson triggered significant responses in Wittgenstein’s writing about the possibility of a machine that can symbolize its own actions (cf. PI §§193 ff.). A ‘Turing machine’ is a mathematical, abstract object, the blueprint of the modern concept of the stored program computer (one that can modify its own commands). It characterizes the ancient notion of an algorithm. But in Turing’s way of conceiving it, a Turing Machine is also a ‘language game’: a list
of instructions that can be grasped and prompt actual human behaviour in reality. In order to bear on reality, then, the abstract object must be seen by us as a series of instructions or commands that have a normative force, giving us criteria setting standards of correct and incorrect behaviour. Wittgenstein ultimately argues that we can see the algorithm as such if and only if it has the right kind of significance in our lives, can be embedded in Lebensformen. This is entailed by Turing’s move of making the notion of a partial function, and not a total function, the basic and not the derived notion.

Depending on how an algorithm is embedded in life, it can bear different understandings and modes of significance. As an abstract object, an algorithm is neutral and impersonal, but when we give life to it, this is no longer so. This conception informed Turing’s analysis from the beginning, and this is why Wittgenstein responded to Turing’s work at length. We can also see the traces of Wittgenstein’s ideas about language games in Turing’s proof that there can be no general decision procedure in logic (his negative resolution of the famous Entscheidungsproblem). As has been shown elsewhere, this proof struck Wittgenstein deeply. It proceeds in a special way, showing the idea that the limits of logic lie in what we can make sense of as meaningful requests or commands, rather than in any properties or features of a gap-free mathematical or formal theory. Within the framework of logic, Turing showed that an order can only be followed in a context. Wittgenstein spells out in his later philosophy the idea that Regelmäßigkeiten only makes sense in the context of a Lebensform.

V Concluding remarks

For Wittgenstein, ethics shows itself in our embeddings of words and actions in life, in the ‘grammars’ of our lives with words. Living involves selecting, looking at possibilities and necessities and projecting received uses of words and grammars into new contexts. This in turn relies on our ability to criticize received uses in light of contingencies of life, discovering new possibilities and experimenting with new ways of failing, suffering, negotiating, succeeding and so on. A form of life is a field of valence, ethnological and biological, into which our words and actions are embedded. Here, we must re-evaluate necessities and contingencies over and over again. Our choices are carried out through ‘passionate utterance’ (cf. Cavell), engaged always in evolving processes of positioning, renegotiating, responding, reflecting – with more or less attention to thoughtfulness and emotional response.

This is not a form of conventionalism, since the binding force of a demand or command is a plea for a necessity or need in life, given always against a backdrop of forms and structurings of life, possibilities and necessities. It is not merely the decision of a group or a consensus. It is not metaphysical particularism, since the responses of agents must involve dimensions of generalization that are involved in the critical deployment of concepts with which modalities of situations are considered, imagined, judged and shared. The later Wittgenstein situates ethics in nature, in a sense; but here "nature" is not a given structure of the world described by physical science, but is taken to involve a process of unfolding human forms of life that includes our constant claims to judge: the words and our social temperaments and responses that are part of reality. The thoroughly
epideictic qualities of our uses of words involve us in having always to consider contingencies and necessities of human life: Lebensformen.

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**Notes**


25. Floyd, “Chains of Life”; Floyd, “Turing on ‘Common Sense’.”