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Forms of Life and Comprehension

Analysis and Application of Concepts from the *Philosophical Investigations*

by

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B.A. Mathematics and Philosophy

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Forms of Life and Comprehension**Analysis and Application of Concepts from the *Philosophical Investigations***

by

Vincent Graziano**B.A Mathematics and Philosophy, Lehigh University, 2018****M.A. Philosophy, University of New Mexico, 2021****ABSTRACT**

In this paper I have examined the notion of ‘forms of life’ against the concept of ‘comprehension’. Particular attention was given to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. I first defend my view that comprehension is made possible by forms of life; or, that forms of life condition our comprehension. A comprehension-event is one which will always occur in a language-game, and is structured by grammar. After I defend my position, I apply this view to three canonical philosophical issues: conceptual universals or how we see one when there are many, the mind-body gap or the difficulty of unifying our ideas about the world with the world itself, and possible world semantics. My view is that if we understand forms of life in the manner which I elucidate, then we have a conceptual groundwork to stand on in order to address these three canonical problems.

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Introduction

The aim of this essay will be to interpret the concept ‘form of life’ in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. By analyzing this concept in unison with the notion of ‘comprehension’ I hope to shed light on their meaning. ‘Form of life’ is never rigidly defined in the *PI*, which is perhaps appropriate because Wittgenstein says, “What has to be accepted, *the given*, is – one might say – forms of life.”¹ This does not, however, clarify what exactly these forms of life are; it only stipulates that, whatever they are, they are apodictic. We cannot dispute them since they are “the given”. My interpretation of forms of life is that it is the structure of what is comprehensible. It is by virtue of forms of life that anything is comprehensible. Structure, here, is to be understood as grammatical structure. Although the goal will be to interpret ‘form of life’, I will also use my interpretation to work through three philo-historical issues: universals, the mind-body problem, and possible world semantics. The benefit of addressing these issues is twofold. First, it will help clarify my interpretation, and show how it is applicable. Second, it will suggest a coherent path forward in thinking about the three areas of interest.

There are two parts to this paper. The first part has two sections, and the second part has three sections. The first part is devoted to interpretation and analysis of the concept of ‘forms of life’. The second part will be the application of that interpretation to three canonical issues. In the first section, my focus will be to defend the interpretation of ‘form of life’ as the name for the structures which make our comprehension possible. In order to do this, I will make clear what I mean by comprehension. Specifically, I delineate comprehension as the basic mode of perceiving meaning. Comprehension is bound by

¹ Wittgenstein, *PPF* §345, page 238, my emphasis.

language, and takes place only in language-games. Grammar is the structure of those language-games. On the whole, comprehension is a kind of linguistic intelligibility. In the second section I describe semantic relevance. This section is about what determines the precise meaning of a word. By what standard do we allocate the relevant meaning of a word as opposed to an irrelevant one? My suggestion is that life, understood in the widest sense, is the standard. I work through some of Wittgenstein's private language considerations in order to come to this conclusion. The third section of this paper is about universals and forms of life. This addresses the question of what it means to have a form for a concept, or an idea. The basic formulation I come to is that a universal is an agreement, and that they are not established *by*, but constitutive *of* the different ways we interpret them. The fourth section concerns the mind-body problem and the manner in which we can resist the gap between mind and body by citing the constitutive nature of forms of life for our language and the very concepts we need in order to hypothesize the mind-body gap. The last section is about possible world semantics, and the way forms of life interact with that theory. I discuss the interaction of common languages with possible worlds, and how the stipulation of a possible world depends upon a common language spanning those worlds.

Forms of Life and Comprehensibility

Introduction to Comprehensibility and Semantic Relevance

The first mention of 'form of life' occurs in §19 of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.
— Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering
Yes and No — and countless other things. — And to imagine a language
means to imagine a form of life.²

² Wittgenstein, *PI*, §19, page 11.

This quote comes after Wittgenstein has made us go through the exercise of imagining a possible language in §2. We are asked to consider a “primitive language” such that a builder and his assistant can call out “block”, “pillar”, “slab”, and “beam”.³ What is the significance of this quote within this context? What is it to imagine a language? My view is that when Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a language, he is asking us to imagine a world in which that language is semantically relevant; where the language is used in human lives such as the life of the builders. In the example from the quote, we are asked to consider a language of “orders and reports”. But who are those reports for, and under what circumstances do they apply? Hence, we imagine them as ‘orders and reports *in battle*’. This is a different context than, say, ‘orders given by a tyrant’ or ‘reports submitted for review of a book’. Imagining a language is imagining a form of life because that language is only sensible when it is situated or contextualized as a language-game where the context dictates the way grammar applies to real life. In the case of the primitive language from §2 we imagine a language *for builders* which uses the words Wittgenstein stipulates. What if we take the same primitive language but shift the context? Suppose it is the language used by a master painter and his apprentice painting still lifes. Would that language be *the same* language as the language used by the builder and the assistant? I don’t think so, because when the painter calls out “Block.” he means that the apprentice should paint a block, whereas the builder is asking the assistant to do something entirely different; specifically, he is asking the assistant to pass him a physical block. A language in use and the mere list of signs must be distinguished, then. The words ‘block’, ‘pillar’, etc. are a mere list of signs when taken out of context. A language in the genuine sense is a collection of signs situated in a context by a (grammatical) structure. So although language is essential to forms of life, it is just as important to understand the

³ Wittgenstein, *PI* §2, page 6.

activity which that language is designed to give meaning to. Although it is not a hard and fast rule, the distinction between a language and a language-*game* perhaps clarifies this point as a language-game entails the use of that language.

If we focus on the activity of everyday life, what we will find is that from a Wittgensteinian perspective, those activities taken together are modes of comprehension, and that forms of life is the name for the structure of those activities. Here Cavell is very insightful.

That on the whole we do [project meaning] is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke is, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life”.⁴

What Cavell is showing us here is the “whirl of organism” that he believes ‘forms of life’ name. In order to understand the semantic relevance of forms of life it is this “whirl” that must be investigated. Cavell suggests that we take into account the full range of life and all of its nuances. The phenomena he lists, I stipulate, employ the notion of ‘comprehensibility’. By this I mean that these phenomena all invoke the need to perceive meaning in our activity or experience. I cannot share a sense of humor, forgive someone, or even make an assertion without the notion of ‘comprehension’ coming into play. How so, though? Take, for example, sharing a sense of humor. One must be able to comprehend that a joke is being told, or that it is an appropriate context in which to tell one. When forgiving someone, one comprehends that some act of harm has occurred to you, and then the person to whom you give the apology must accept that what you are saying is, in fact, an apology. These are just two

⁴ Cavell, “Availability” 52.

examples, but I believe that it holds in general that all activity requires comprehension. The reason is that insofar as we engage with the world, it is *intelligible* to us.

Analysis of Comprehension

In this section I parse the meaning of ‘the structure of what is comprehensible’. First and foremost, I will make clear what I mean by ‘comprehension’ as the means of grasping semantic content (of grasping what is intelligible). Second, I develop how different words occur in relation to each other or in a grammatical structure, which is only to say words occur in a context, within language-games.

The manner in which I am using ‘comprehension’ should be distinguished from ‘having a clear understanding’. The latter is used if a person has mastered a concept. For example, if a person is showing another how to ride a bike, then they can achieve a clear understanding by demonstrating their ability to ride that bike. Similarly, in mathematics, a person can have a clear understanding of long-division and can demonstrate this. A person’s comprehension is more basic than their understanding of a concept. In this sense, ‘comprehension’ is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for ‘understanding’. A person comprehends when they perceive something meaningful; and by ‘meaningful’ I intend something with semantic content, having a relationship between itself and the world. To comprehend the instruction of riding a bike presupposes that those instructions have some kind of semantic content, that it is intelligible. If something meaningful is required for it to be comprehended, then that meaningful object is, by definition, what is comprehensible. So what exactly are those objects? In language, they are words, and in general, signs. A word exhibits semantic content not just as a vehicle, but as the semantic content *itself*. This is the same position taken by Cavell. Cavell’s position here is quite clear, because for him knowing

x is knowing what x is called. The example which gives rise to this formulation is that of teaching a child what a pumpkin is.

Do we tell him what a pumpkin is or what the word “pumpkin” means? I was surprised to find that my first response to this question was, “You can say either”. And that led me to appreciate, and to want to investigate, how much a matter knowing what something *is* is a matter of knowing what something is *called*.⁵

Why does Cavell say this? The reason is that the two alternatives he presents are common enough, but his position is unique. His view is that those who claim (he cites Hume) that when we change the name of something, its essence remains the same, we are observing a “limited” or “special” case.⁶ What is true in general is that to know what something is to know what it is called. This is just to say that words *are* the semantic content in language. Put negatively, there is not, in general, external phenomenon to words which dictates how to attune those words to the “real world”. At its root, the observation that Cavell is making is that there is a kind of linguistic paradox at hand whenever we stipulate that some philosophical distinction exists between what is and what is named. The paradox is a consequence of asking “What do you mean by ‘what is’?” Consider the following argument. Suppose that there is some phenomenon x which we use to gauge whether our words are accurate. If we have a word for such a phenomenon then we are back in the position that what something is is what it is called. Since we have a word for it, we presumably have a coherent story to tell about that word. If there is no word for that phenomenon, then there is nothing that we can say at all about it in any coherent manner. What would we mean by that phenomenon, then? I don’t believe we could mean anything at all. In short, we cannot draw a line between our words and the world in any meaningful way. We might argue that we can

⁵ Cavell, *Claim* 170.

⁶ *Ibid.*

bracket a meaning for this external phenomenon, and simply leave it as ‘external phenomenon’, or just as a sign (say, a handkerchief to remind us that there is something external phenomenon to language) but I don’t believe this is satisfactory when seen in the light of some of Wittgenstein’s remarks about naming.

One thinks that learning language consists in giving names to objects. For example, to human beings, to shapes, to colours, to pains, to moods, to numbers, etc. To repeat – naming is something like attaching a name tag to a thing. One can call this a preparation for the use of a word. But *what* is it a preparation *for*?⁷

I take it that the purpose of the question “What is it a preparation for?” is to suggest that giving something a name has a purpose. Something else must be said about what is named. Perhaps most pressingly, one must ask, “What do you mean by that name?” One might say that we mean nothing by it, but then why give it a name to begin with? If a person is wearing a name tag, we don’t read the name tag and then walk away (maybe if you recognize that the person bearing the name tag is someone distasteful to you). The name tag serves the purpose of introducing the person to us. What about the case of a name tag with nothing written on it? What does that mean? This speaks to the notion of a sign in general (say, a handkerchief), because such a name tag would indicate something without using a word. What bears that name tag, though? We might say “Something, although I do not know the name”. What do we *mean* by ‘something’, though? Can we describe it or tell a story about what it is to be something? If not, then what purpose does the nameless name tag serve, or, in general, what does it mean to have a sign for something which is not describable? I think it is fair to conclude from a Wittgensteinian point of view, that there isn’t much justification for such signs as they have no use, no purpose. This is to say that *all* meaning comes back to

⁷ *PI* §26, page 16.

language, to words. It is through language that comprehension occurs, where meaning comes to light.

I want to be careful to do justice to the notion of keeping our words “in order” in the sense that Wittgenstein talks about. We should avoid thinking that certain concepts (such as this ‘external phenomenon’ to words I have argued against or ‘comprehension’) have a special theoretical position, which has no bearing in practice.

We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, inference, truth, experience, and so forth. This order is a *super-order* between – so to speak – *super-concepts*. Whereas, in fact, if the words “language”, “experience”, “world” have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table”, “lamp”, “door”.⁸

Wittgenstein’s rejection of the illusion that certain concepts have special order compared to everyday language is a recurring theme in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is tempting to conceive of certain words—for example, ‘the Absolute’, ‘the Transcendent’, ‘the Idea’—as having more power (sort of like a trump-card) than others. If we take Wittgenstein’s project seriously, though, we should always be careful not to give in to this illusion. Why? My sense is that when we do erect superordinate concepts, we begin thinking ideologically. By this I mean that we begin to extract our words from their use. We forget that naming is giving something a name tag, and that these “superordinate” words are subject to clarification. In a sense, that means that making a word your point of departure, and then saying that it does not require further clarification (perhaps by saying that it is an axiomatic truth) is a failure to do justice to the very way that language functions. The notion of comprehensibility I am aiming to draw out must be a “humble” one. An intelligible sign (a word) is comprehended *as* the meaning of the word. For example, when we say “The coffee is in the pot”, ‘coffee’ is

⁸ *PI* §97, page 49.

comprehended as a readily recognizable term precisely because it is a word *in a language* and therefore subject to criticism. If we supposed otherwise, namely if we supposed that ‘coffee’ really means something completely mind-independent (something like a collection of mereological simples), then we lose the humility of the everyday use of the word.

All of this is to agree with Cavell’s claim that knowledge of x is knowing what x is called. Isn’t knowledge different from comprehension, though? This is a fair point, but I believe Cavell’s observations map directly onto my analysis of ‘comprehension’ as well. We can frame my analysis as an analogy to Cavell’s. When a person comprehends, do they comprehend what the object *is*, or what it is called? Put this way, we can then ask, what would it mean to comprehend what an object *is* apart from what we call it? Suppose one were to comprehend a pumpkin, apart from language entirely. All that would be left for us to comprehend is our perception of pure matter. But what does ‘pure matter’ mean, and how do we perceive it? Again, just as in the case of knowing, we find ourselves trapped by language. When we attempt to draw a line between what something is and what it is called, we run into a linguistic paradox. We stipulate that some non-linguistic phenomenon exists, only to find ourselves using language to talk about it. You couldn’t say that the pumpkin is round, orange, small, etc. All you would be able to do is stare. To call the pumpkin an object would invoke language. Even saying it has properties would fail to escape language. (Not to mention that we can always ask “What are the properties?”.)

Consider the case of being taught to ride a bike, one comprehends that there is something here for you to learn, although you might not entirely understand it yet. Alternatively, imagine a world in which a person being taught how to ride a bike did not comprehend what their teacher was saying. The possibility that a person (usually children)

will fail to comprehend is precisely why forms of life must be conceptualized. Generally, it is taken for granted that when something is said or stipulated, we will be able to understand, but what causes us to pay attention at all; why do we expect there to be meaning in what we experience? Why is something *comprehensible* in our experience? Wittgenstein's insight is that this expectation is founded upon the grammatical structure of our experience. This is why "language-games" are formulated as they are in the *Philosophical Investigations*. In response to the question "But how many kinds of sentence are there?", Wittgenstein responds that there are "countless kinds".⁹ The reason is that language-games are constantly changing, coming into being, and being forgotten. These language-games are constituted in activity.

The word "language-game" is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.¹⁰

In other words, our language, in part, constitutes forms of life and our very experience. The grammatical structure of that language, then, will carry through to the meaning of our activity to the extent that the language constitutes that activity. Consider the example of builders using language along the lines of "Bring me a slab". The grammar of that sentence constrains the meaning of the words so that it is clear that a slab is needed; one should be looking for a slab, not a block or a pillar. What does 'grammar' entail, though? This is difficult to conceptualize from a Wittgensteinian point of view. The reason is that we lack the ability to stand outside of our grammar, and see it as a coherent whole.

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. – A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*.¹¹

⁹ *PI* §23, page 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, page 15.

¹¹ *PI* §122, page 54.

To survey is to look over a phenomenon such as a plot of land. When we survey land, we measure its physical dimensions, account for the topography, locate naturally occurring landmarks, etc. All of these measurements give us a coherent picture of the land.

Wittgenstein is claiming that there is no sufficient measurement system for grammar. Why, though? Surely we account for various technical elements of the grammar in any language when we are learning it. The issue Wittgenstein sees is that to survey grammar is to use grammar. There is no survey which can be done without grammar. While we can assess certain technical aspects of grammar (all that is needed to find a textbook for the grammar of your language) we can never obtain a position where grammar can be sufficiently surveyed. Hence, our survey of it will always be deficient. Since grammar is already being employed in the act of surveying, it is difficult to conceptualize what it would mean to have a sufficient survey of grammar.

When discussing grammar we should be careful not to presuppose that grammar *explains* its objects (subjects, predicates, dependent clauses, sentences, etc.). Wittgenstein's view is that grammar does not explain, but *describe*.

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes, and in no way explains, the use of signs.¹²

What is the meaning of this distinction? To explain a sign is to give an account of why it is the way that it is. For example, if I were to explain my actions after failing to act appropriately, I would attempt to justify those actions. Alternatively, think about explaining a stop sign. If we say, "A stop sign is a red road sign which indicates that you need to stop your vehicle before proceeding". That is a description of the sign, though; it describes its use. A description pays no heed to why something is the way that it is; it brackets the justification

¹² *PI* §496, page 146.

for something and focuses on its apparent characteristics. If I were to describe my actions after failing to act appropriately, I would simply list my actions, and possibly their effects. So in a Wittgensteinian context, ‘grammar’ should only be used in the descriptive sense, not the explanatory sense. What does this look like? Consider the sentence, “The book is on the desk”. When we say that ‘on the desk’ is a predicate, ‘predicate’ is a description, not an explanation of ‘on the desk’. The distinction is that calling something a predicate describes its place within grammatical structure, but it does *not* explain why ‘on the desk’ is that way. This is consistent with the view that our conception of our grammar is always deficient, for to know why something is the way it is would be able to give a list of sufficient conditions for its being that way. In this sense, grammar is arbitrary.

The rules of grammar may be called “arbitrary”, if that is so to mean that the *purpose* of grammar is nothing but that of language.

If someone says, “If our language had not this grammar, it could not express these facts” – it should be asked what “*could*” means here.¹³

This is a delicate point. The sense in which Wittgenstein is using arbitrary, is that since grammar serves the same purpose as language, grammar can vary as long as it serves that purpose. Alternatively, he says, suppose that our grammar was otherwise, then we are asked to consider what ‘could’ means. Well, when *we* say that ‘grammar could not be otherwise to express these facts’, then we mean that it is *not possible* for grammar to have different rules than it currently has if we want to express the facts at hand. The space of possibility in this context, however, is conditioned by those facts. What are those facts? Those facts are expressed with a different grammar by supposition. What could *we* say about that grammar given that we are using our own grammar? This is the point that I believe Wittgenstein is trying to make. If we suppose that we use a different grammar, then ‘could’, ‘express’, and

¹³ *PI* §497, page 146.

‘these facts’ would exist within a different structure. The language-game would not be the same. The grammar that we make use of serves the purposes of our language. It is partly constituted by the activity, the forms of life, which we engage with.

Understood in this way, the rules of grammar set forth modes of inquiry into the meaning of words. Take the sentence, “The cat is on the mat”. Grammar tell us that ‘the cat’ is a subject, and that ‘on the mat’ is a predicate. The instruction to *comprehend* that a cat is in fact on the mat emerges from that grammar. For the Wittgensteinian picture, language determines what is meaningful, comprehensible, or intelligible, and therefore the grammar of a language is what locates the comprehensible content for us. It is in grammar that the possibility of understanding (what I called “mastering a concept”) is found. The complexity of even our everyday language is apparent from this point of view as the various grammatical connections of words helps locate a word within the structure of that grammar. What this means is that each grammatical connection sheds light on other words, and that in this complex arrangement, comprehensibility emerges. In the simple example of the builders, single words designate the facts of that world (their project), but even in that small world, a name goes a long way in conveying meaning. One of the reasons is because of the particular circumstances in that world which dictate where precisely the block should be placed, or how urgently the pillar must be brought. A general picture of grammar describes the structure of forms of life, and the manner in which we come to comprehend the facts of the matter, but it does not describe how a specific word or phrase comes to have meaning. In the example I gave earlier, the builders use the word ‘block’ in one way, while the painters use ‘block’ in another. In that example, we have the same language (words), but the language-game is entirely different. What accounts for this difference and the ability to communicate within

one of the language-games? Formally, speaking it must be an agreement that this is the way those words are used. For Wittgenstein, though, this cannot be an agreement in the sense of a verbal or written contract. Rather, it is agreement in forms of life.

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” — What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in forms of life.¹⁴

To say that we agree in our language is to say that the language-games we use determine what has meaning for us. The fact that we comprehend at all is a function of this agreement. The kind of agreement is one which spans possible sentences, not particular ones. There is no agreement that a particular answer must be given to any given question. The agreement lies in the set of possible questions, answers, assertions, modes of feeling, and more. But, again, what about particular uses of sentences? Why should one sentence be said instead of another in a given situation? Put differently, is it enough to say that forms of life, understood solely as the structure of comprehensibility, describe the meaning of words sufficiently? I don't believe so, and this brings my analysis to another important concept, 'semantic relevance'. What *about* forms of life determines what is semantically relevant? What standard decides this, and for whom? I will argue that 'life' itself is that standard, taken in the widest sense of the word.

Semantic Relevance and Private Language

This section aims to clarify what I intend by 'semantic relevance'. By 'semantic' I mean the meaningful relationship of a word to the world, and by 'relevant' I mean 'relevant in the context of life'. The manner in which I approach this topic is to move through some of the private language considerations.

¹⁴ *PI* §241, page 94.

When I say something is semantically relevant, my intention is to draw attention to the possibility of failing to comprehend the meaning of something. To deem something semantically irrelevant is to say that it has a meaning, and yet is not relevant to the state of affairs as you see them. For example, in the builders and painters example we can instruct the painters to use the language-game as intended for builders, but it has no relevance to their project. Or, suppose that a waitstaff at a restaurant has a short-hand to refer to each person by their order. They might say things like “The roast beef needs water” or “The fish dropped his fork and needs a new one”. Within that world, that context, these words are semantically relevant, but outside of that context they are nonsense. What determines relevance, though? I will argue that ‘life’ in the broadest terms does. What does ‘life’ mean? Life is the widest understanding of the activity we undertake. Activity and language together constitute our lives individually; we experience and use language to navigate those experiences. There is a scope issue when it comes to ‘life’, however. One might ask, “Who’s life?”. There is a sense in which we can designate each individual person as he who determines what is relevant to himself. An individual can make things relevant based upon their projects. Specifically, we can see that among the activities which Cavell calls the “whirl of organism” is private activity.

A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. So one could imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue, who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. – An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people’s actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions.)¹⁵

In order to act in this way, one must be able to decide what to do (to give oneself an order, to blame oneself). In doing so, we locate meaning in our words to match the purpose of the

¹⁵ *PI* §243, page 95.

activity. We can imagine someone saying to oneself, “It’s all your fault.” when laying blame on oneself. Although that sentence can be used to refer to someone else (if they were worthy of blame and you lashed out at them), it is nevertheless true that I can and will make use of language in private situations, and *not* use the words in the incorrect way. Wittgenstein quickly notes that although this is true, what happens if we radicalize this private experience? What if a person were to speak to themselves in a language *only* they understand; a genuinely private language?

But is it also conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences – his feelings, moods, and so on – for his own use? — Well, can’t we do so in our ordinary language? — But that is not what I mean. The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.¹⁶

Let me be concrete about this to demonstrate Wittgenstein’s point. Suppose we have an individual using a private language, one which “another person cannot understand”. Would we be able to translate that language into our own? Whatever word, *x*, he is using, would always be open to the question, “What do you mean by *x*?”, and we are promptly back to using our own language, rather than this supposedly private language. Wittgenstein enlists the example of pain here because it is something which is particularly private in a sense. Can we comprehend another person’s pain? We might answer “No” in order to agree with the position that a private language is possible; this means that the way the other person is using the word ‘pain’ is entirely their own. Surely, we do hear people say, “You wouldn’t understand what it feels like” or something to this effect when in severe pain. On the whole, though, that doesn’t seem quite right because of course we *do* recognize when others are in pain. Think about asking a friend if they have had a similar pain to one you are having, or

¹⁶ Ibid.

when you go to the doctor when they ask you to describe the pain. I don't believe we would want to commit to the view that on the whole, the doctor does not in fact know what pain you are in. This intuition motivates the notion of a language which is shared. Wittgenstein gives a compelling case for the failure of private language by noting how its possibility is always dependent upon a shared "common language".

What reason have we for calling "S" the sign for a *sensation*? For "sensation" is a word of our common language, which is not a language intelligible only to me. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands. – And it would not help either to say that it need not be a *sensation*; that when he writes "S" he has *Something* – and that is all that can be said. But "has" and "something" also belong to our common language. – So in the end, when one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like to emit an inarticulate sound. – But such a sound is an expression only in a particular language-game, which now has to be described.¹⁷

This is a long quote, but it is worth working through in its entirety to reinforce the point, which I take to be one of the strongest demonstrations of the failure of private language. Whenever we define a private word or sign, 'S', we always depend upon a common language in order to do so. Therefore, that private sign is something which can be described in the common language. Even if we say that private sign is for something amounting to gibberish (an inarticulate sound), then we can ask "What do you mean by 'gibberish'?" or by the stipulated inarticulate sound. This is precisely the same form of the linguistic paradox we noted before where we found that reference to something outside of language always turns back into a discussion with language. This paradox focuses on the scope of the language, or who the language belongs to. By stipulating a private word, we open ourselves up to be interrogated in a common language. The issue is that we cannot *coherently* stipulate that private word without using a common language.

¹⁷ *PI* §261, page 99.

Although private experience is well-grounded in the everyday sense (giving oneself an order), Wittgenstein's view is that on the whole private language is problematic. Language is a public phenomenon, one entwined with culture. With respect to the question of semantic relevance, we can see that it is not an individual's life which determines what is relevant precisely because language, and therefore meaning, is public or common. Wittgenstein's remarks about private language suggest that, in fact, it is life as a whole which dictates what is relevant in the use of certain words. By this I mean that all of the activity of being alive instructs the human being what is relevant in which situations: culture, private experience, sense of humor, parental guidance. We are tempted to radicalize this view and say either that "Only culture conditions what is meaningful to us." or "We read what meaning we wish onto the world", but for Wittgenstein the picture is much more nuanced. What is relevant to us is determined by a manifold of inputs, which on the whole just *is* what 'life' means in the context of forms of life. Our various experiences, cultural traditions all come together as life. It is something in which we participate so long as we are alive. I say participate because it is not something which we define ourselves, subjectively, but rather it is something which we *take part in* as living beings. Returning to the example of the builders, we see that the words 'block', 'slab', etc. have meaning *for them* in their lives. We cannot say that the intelligibility of those words is their own, though, per the private language argument.

Forms of life are the structure of what is comprehensible. I have outlined how that structure must be grammatical structure because language is the locus of comprehension, the place where meaning is intelligible. I outlined a linguistic paradox generated by stipulating a meaningful phenomenon external to language. I also discussed the notion of semantic

relevance and how life as a whole must be the standard by which we judge what is semantically relevant due to the private language argument.

Addressing Canonical Philosophical Problems with ‘Forms of Life’

This part of my paper is focused on applying a notion of forms of life to three canonical issues in philosophy. The first is universals, which I understand in the light of the *agreement* of forms of life. The second is the mind-body problem, which I believe fails as a result of a criticism of philosophical skepticism. The last application will be to possible world semantics, which I believe forms of life problematizes greatly as a consequence of the span of common language into those worlds.

Language and Universals as Agreement

Although forms of life and language are not identical, forms of life are constituted in part by languages. It is in our language that forms of life are apparent. By analyzing language, we come to see how certain words are semantically relevant and therefore what is comprehensible to us. If forms of life are to be understood as the name of the structure of what is comprehensible, then this has important implications for canonical metaphysical questions. Specifically, I’d like to view the problem of the one over the many or the problem of universals from a Wittgensteinian perspective using the interpretation I have given of forms of life.

What is a universal? A universal is stipulated as an idea or form which gives unity to the various instantiations of a concept. For example, there are various cups, but there must (tentatively) be something which binds together all of these various cases of cups; this is normally referred to as cup-ness or the essence of the cup. We can similarly refer to this problem as the type/token problem where every particular token is *of* a general type. Before

attempting to address this question using my interpretation of forms of life, it should be noted that Wittgenstein is skeptical about this kind of inquiry.

When philosophers use a word – “knowledge, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition/sentence”, “name” – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? –

What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.¹⁸

Wittgenstein is saying that there tends to be a schism or gap between our theoretical concepts, and the uses of the words we are all too familiar with (hence why we are “at home” with those words). This sentiment echoes an earlier passage where Wittgenstein is discussing philosophical problems and the notion of naming.

For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.¹⁹

Language is “on holiday” when it is on vacation, or when it is not doing its work for us.

When we do metaphysics, we have a tendency to use terse formulations, but Wittgenstein is reminding us to use the full vocabulary of our language so that we can be as clear as possible about the issues at hand. By noting the “everyday use” of a word, we do justice to the full nuance of that word.

This brings me to the matter at hand, namely, universals. If universals are to remain at home we must find a way to approach the problem with attention given to the everyday usability of the word ‘universal’. An everyday example would be when we use the word to show that there is universal *agreement*; e.g. “The movie was universally loved.” or “There was universal disgust for the offensive language.”. This sentiment expresses that there is a consensus or a collective agreement about something. This should immediately remind us of

¹⁸ *PI* §116, page 53.

¹⁹ *PI* §38, page 23.

what Wittgenstein says about forms of life and agreement. Specifically, he says that agreement in forms of life is what is meant by the fact that humans agree in their very language (its structure, its grammar), not just opinions. These examples (the loved movie and the offensive language), though, are agreement of opinions, so how does it relate to the original point made by Wittgenstein? Agreement about a concept, idea, or universal does depend upon language. Whichever word we are seeking to interrogate to find the universal meaning of exists in a language. For example, 'justice' is a word in our language, and therefore subject to forms of life, grammar, etc. If we simply look at what specific people agree about justice, though, surely we are missing the point of universals; we would be listing off opinions rather than establishing a universal form. My contention is that the issue is to construe this problem as if we are establishing the universal; what we should do instead is to try to think of this problem the other way around. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, *a universal is constitutive of the very fact that we have varying conceptions of justice*. By this I mean that our grammar, our shared forms of life, makes possible that there is a meaning for the word 'justice'. And so generally speaking, it is not universals that we need to *establish*, but particular accounts that we need to justify dialectically and dynamically. Given the notions of forms of life and comprehension, we can say that whenever we stipulate a definition of justice, such as, 'Might makes right' or 'Taking care of one's friends and harming one's enemies', we can only make this stipulation because we already have an agreement (in forms of life) about 'justice' and its grammar.

Mind & Body

The mind-body problem is brought forward by philosophical skepticism about the ability to map strictly subjective, mind dependent content onto the world. The form of a solution to the

problem is to provide a bridge between mind and body. The manner in which forms of life can address the mind-body problem is by devaluing the skepticism which gives rise to the problem to begin with. If forms of life are understood in the light of comprehensibility, then we need not doubt the unity of mind and body. Although I don't believe it is true that *all* skepticism is undone with a proper conception of forms of life, skepticism about mind and body is. The argument is that if we grant forms of life give definition to the structure of what is comprehensible to us, then mind and body themselves are comprehended *within* that structure. If that is true, then 'mind' and 'body' have no meaning outside of that structure. This is only to say, though, that these words are taken out of their everyday language when they reify two superordinate conceptual realms. This reification extracts mind and body from their normal context, wherein they are semantically relevant. This causes them to lose their meaning.

Cavell gives voice to the possibility of closing the mind-body gap in "Natural and Conventional". His view is that it was Wittgenstein's intention to show the unity of mind and body by conceptualizing 'grammar' and 'criteria'.

The coincidence of soul and body, and of mind (language) and world *überhaupt*, are the issues to which Wittgenstein's notion of grammar and criteria are meant to speak.²⁰

There are a couple of things to say about this claim. For my purposes, there is no need to ascribe intent to Wittgenstein's project; whether he intended to close the mind-body gap is immaterial. Second, Cavell focuses on the notion of 'criteria' and goes to great lengths to explain how Wittgenstein uses this word. For my purposes, it is the interpretation of forms of life as the structure of what is comprehensible that will do the work of closing this gap.

²⁰ Cavell, *Claim* 108-9.

Although Cavell does not put the resolution of the issue in these terms, he does make a slightly different claim later in the same paragraph without explicitly enlisting criteria.

In Wittgenstein's view the gap between mind and the world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human "convention". This implies that the *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a "stranger to", "alienated" from) those shared forms of life, to give up the responsibility of their maintenance.²¹

For Cavell, forms of life close the mind-body gap (really, they maintain its *already being* closed). As long as forms of life are maintained, and we don't alienate ourselves from them, that gap is closed. There are three questions I have about this. First, what does it mean to maintain a form of life? Second, how do we "escape" or "alienate" ourselves from them. Third, for whom does this entail the mind-body gap is open for?

When we use the word 'maintain' we generally mean something along the lines of 'taking care of' or 'ensuring the continued function of'. For example you can perform maintenance on a car, or maintain a relationship. How does this apply to forms of life? In what sense are forms of life maintained? I don't believe it is the case that anybody ever says explicitly "I need to take care of my form of life today". It is almost comical to even suggest that the average person concerns himself with forms of life at all. The most charitable way to hear 'maintain', I believe, is to say that it is maintenance of the implicit kind. Forms of life are maintained precisely in our lack of concerning ourselves with them. This is only to say that when we are going about our everyday business, forms of life can work freely. The reason I believe this is that if forms of life are the structure of what is comprehensible, then it is precisely when we are going about our business, working, telling jokes, enjoying dinner, fixing a tire, that forms of life are endlessly fecund. By getting out of their way (by not

²¹ Ibid, 109.

disrupting them), they do their work. Even this formulation of maintenance as implicit, though, is not quite right because our comprehension is not something which we are always attending to. One gets up in the morning, makes coffee, and reads the news. Forms of life are at work, but not because we are letting them whether explicitly or implicitly, but because they *must* if we are to comprehend anything at all; i.e. if we are to come to the understanding that the coffee needs more sugar or has too much cream. And so in sum, we maintain a form of life neither by actively adhering to what a form of life is (say by following a fixed set of rules) or by actively allowing them to function as they. Rather, we simply act, and forms of life do their work.

“How am I able to follow a rule?” – If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in *this* way in complying with the rule.

Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do”.²²

I quote Wittgenstein’s famous section here not to bring up the various complications of rule-following, but only to make that point that if Cavell meant that maintaining forms of life is some kind of explicit, overt act along the lines of following a rule, then this misses the point of forms of life. Explicit, overt acts are made possible by a world in which we can comprehend, i.e. a world framed by forms of life. The basic, everyday activity we engage in is always already founded in forms of life, and *these* activities certainly fall into the category of something described as “This is simply what I do”. I think Cavell knows this, especially given his account of the “whirl of organism” which is forms of life, but I also believe his choice of the word ‘maintain’ here was not well-founded.

²² *PI* §217, page 91.

The second point to address is what it means to “escape” or be “alienated” from forms of life. This is a difficult problem because one must escape from the very fabric of thought, comprehension. What would that entail, and how might it relate to the mind-body gap? My contention is that this alienation from forms of life is something that happens in philosophy. This means, in turn, that the mind-body gap is a problem for philosophers; which is the third point I wanted to draw out of the quote from Cavell. How do I substantiate this contention, though? If we grant that forms of life are indeed the structure of what is comprehensible, then to be alienated from them is to alienate ourselves from comprehension. This occurs when the very use of our words are put into *doubt*. Skepticism, or methodological doubt, is a philosophy which explicitly engages in this kind of doubt. It criticizes generally accepted ideas, and shows that they fail to hold together in a coherent way. For example, we can be skeptical about the existence of others. How, the skeptic asks, do we know that there are other people? (What criteria can be satisfied to demonstrate their existence?) What do we *mean* by ‘other’? Skepticism shakes the foundations of our everyday activity. It finds weakness in what we take for granted, and exposes it to us. We are alienated from forms of life when we are skeptical about our basic modes of apprehension, about our very ability to comprehend. Skepticism about our very ability to perceive the world breaks down forms of life precisely because, as was brought out earlier, comprehension entails something comprehensible. In linguistic terms, something *is* what it is *called*. When we (philosophers) break down this basic relationship, when we split the mind from the body, our comprehension becomes paralyzed. Our language ceases to be able to work for us.

We alienate ourselves from the maintenance of forms of life when we break down our basic modes of comprehension. Philosophical skepticism achieves this when it is targeted at

the very means of using our language. The mind-body problem fits this schema. It targets the very foundation of forms of life by making our language unusable. What does this mean, though? I don't believe this very fact *refutes* the mind-body problem, but it shows that the possibility of opening the mind-body gap is founded in a rejection of our very language. *This* is the problem the Wittgensteinian picture is addressing. The danger of philosophical skepticism is the danger of losing touch with our very forms of life. Cavell makes a similar claim about Wittgenstein's project as a whole.

It is as though Wittgenstein felt human beings in jeopardy of losing touch with their inner lives altogether, with the very idea that each person is a center of one, that each *has* a life.²³

This "jeopardy" is perhaps most apparent when thinking about the danger of philosophical skepticism. When we doubt our very experiences, philosophical skepticism tends towards a belief that there simply is no "there" there in our forms of life; that everything is an illusion. Wittgenstein points us in a different direction. His doubt is whether the language we use can really be escaped at all, and the balancing act we must maintain is that between our everyday experience and the philosophical criticism of those experiences. Just because philosophy puts our everyday lives in doubt, *does not* then imply that those experiences are an illusion. Rather, it shows the constitutive role our everyday lives play in making sense of anything at all. To be sure, this problem is more complicated (as is apparent in the private language argument), but on the whole I believe we can say that skepticism about the mind-body problem falls into the category of a kind of radical philosophical skepticism which results in the rejection of basic human intuition: that we can lift the mug on the table in front of us and drink the coffee in it, or feel emotionally drawn to another person. We must reject the mind-body problem not because it is a failed story, but because the very possibility of making

²³ Cavell, *Claim* 91.

sense of it, of comprehending what the words mean is founded in our everyday experience. Surely, ‘mind’ and ‘body’ fall into the category of those words which Wittgenstein must have a meaning “as humble” as ‘table’.²⁴ If we are to ensure that ‘mind’ and ‘body’ remain humble, we must not close ourselves off from our forms of life, from our everyday activity, but instead mobilize it as a means to further understanding what it means to be a ‘mind’ or ‘body’.

Possible World Semantics

Wittgenstein’s remarks about private language sketch a possible method for approaching possible world semantics. Recall the argument that any stipulated word, ‘S’, will always depend upon a common-language description, even if we stipulate that ‘S’ is for an “inarticulate sound”.²⁵ Possible world semantics is a theoretical approach to the concepts of ‘necessity’ and ‘possibility’. In the basic formulation, x is possible if there is some world in which x is true. Alternatively, x is impossible if there is no world in which x is true. Finally, x is necessary if x is true in all possible worlds.

Wittgenstein’s observations about private language make the possible worlds picture problematic. The reason is that if we say something is possible, then it has a description within our language. So then what does ‘possible world’ mean? If the word ‘possible’ exists in our language (or more specifically, within the language-game of possible world semantics), then when we talk about possible worlds, those worlds are similarly bound by our language. In other words, a common language *spans* these possible worlds. To say something spans possible worlds is to say that it obtains in all of those possible worlds. We can run the private language argument again to demonstrate the way that common languages do span

²⁴ *PI* §97, page 49.

²⁵ *PI* §261, page 99.

possible worlds. Suppose that there is some world ‘W’, in which a private language exists and therefore has some private word ‘S’. (In this context, ‘private language’ means one which is unique to a possible world.) What bears the name ‘S’ in W, though? Again, we are back in a position where our common language is needed to explain a private language; at this point the recurring theme of the inescapability of language should hopefully be clear. Moreover, what does comprehension look like in that world, and forms of life? What this demonstrates, if it is valid and sound, is that all possible worlds share a common language, although it does not show that all worlds *only* have one common language. It is possible that each world has multiple languages.

If it is true that language spans these worlds, this may suggest that although we can posit possible worlds, they will always be bound by language. A Wittgensteinian position here can be mapped out which is analogous to the position of Actualism. Actualism states that “everything that has being in any sense, is actual”.²⁶ In other words, there are no *merely* possible objects. We can reformulate this position in a way (which should be familiar after reading Cavell) by saying that “everything that has being in any sense, is in a grammatical structure”. What this means for possible world semantics is that all possible worlds have a grammar. This formulation makes possible worlds far less “distant” than otherwise. The reason is that when we posit a possibility, say that I should eat eggs for breakfast instead of oatmeal, we have a means of navigating that possible world because it is conditioned by a grammar we are all too familiar with. In that sense, those possible worlds are comprehensible to us. This makes sense because to posit a possible world is always from a position from a form of life, from the lived experiences and activity that we are engaged with. One point of contact this formulation could have with the literature on the subject is with Kripke’s

²⁶ Menzel.

formulation of “rigid designators”.²⁷ A rigid designator is a name which spans possible worlds. When we posit a counterfactual (when we suppose that something is otherwise than we believe it is), it is grounded by a name whose meaning we can clarify. The famous example is to imagine a world in which Nixon had not won his election. ‘Nixon’ rigidly designates the person Richard Nixon, and so when we consider a possible world in which Nixon had not won the election, we are still talking about the Richard Nixon we are all too familiar with. Of course this raises issues, not the least of which is the worry that if Nixon is who we conceive of, isn’t that just the person who *did* win the election? Bracketing this concern (which is no doubt complicated), the notion of rigid designation is clearly close to my formulation of possible worlds as containing a grammar. Rigid designation opens a world to be comprehensible to us. In a sense, we export our form of life when rigidly designating a name and hypothesize a possible world in which that rigid designator has meaning. Although I don’t think we need to conceive of possible worlds using rigid designation, the point of contact with the view that possible worlds are bound by grammar is clearly related and consistent.

What about possible worlds that are not comprehensible to us? This is a generally interesting possibility because it raises the issue of the communicability of differing forms of life. Indeed, one might argue that if we are committed to possible worlds, forms of life can be seen as a hindrance to that project, since it limits the space of possibility; only comprehensible worlds are admitted, while incomprehensible worlds are not. The limitation is to whatever form of life conditions our language. How might we untangle this difficulty, and what are the ramifications for forms of life and communication between differing forms of life? In order to chart a way forward, I contend that we should recall the case of private

²⁷ Kripke, “Naming and Necessity”.

language, and focus on the notion of translation. This was mentioned in brief already, but at this point we can reverse our perspective on the quote to see how forms of life can branch outwards into *new* possibilities.

A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. So one could imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue, who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. – An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people’s actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions.)²⁸

Originally, we discussed this quote within the context of private language. We can attest to the possibility of private experiences, but ultimately the private words are always described from the position of a common language. What about the explorer, though? How can he translate these private experiences into the common language? If we can map this process, then we may be able to show how a form of life can expand into new possibilities. What does ‘new’ mean, though? In the case of a translator, we are mapping one known language onto another known language. There is nothing new in either of those languages, except possibly the rules for translation. What we need are rules for establishing something entirely novel; that is, something which was previously incomprehensible, and yet is now comprehensible. One of the important clues is that in the example Wittgenstein gives, the explorer “watches”. One observes the activity of the individual we are seeking to translate. If it is comprehensible, we can write down or remember what that activity is, if it is new, then we are forced to consider how our language can expand. Recall that for Wittgenstein naming is akin to giving something a name tag. Naming a new activity would function as preparation for the use of that name when describing the way the person is acting. What is ‘new activity’, though? Aren’t we back in a position where our language binds us to itself where we must

²⁸ *PI* §243, page 95.

describe this so-called new activity with the language that we already have? This is correct, and it suggests the delicate nature of naming something new. To give a name to a new phenomenon is not merely arbitrary in the sense that we can call it whatever we like, apart from the language that we already have. Rather, we stretch our own language and seek to understand the new word in a way that expands what is comprehensible; we grow our form of life. The best example of this is teaching a student mathematics. When a student learns calculus for the first time, the new concepts are reduced to old concepts. What is already learned (algebra, geometry, trigonometry) is mobilized in the face of something entirely new, say a derivative or an integral. The new word 'derivative' comes to be comprehended just as a special case of an algebraic equation with specific terms arranged in a way that is already comprehensible to the student. New problems are solved by using old techniques. What is incomprehensible, what is beyond a form of life, comes to be comprehensible by a similar process. A new discovery is named, and it is understood in the terms of the common language.

If this is right, then possible world semantics and forms of life can be maintained without reducing what is possible merely to what is possible within a given form of life. Imagine, for example, if we said that what is possible is just what is possible for a form of young adult life. Surely, that would be a mistake. We can allow for possible worlds which are incomprehensible, with the caveat that to describe that world, we need a name for something within that world, as well as the grammar to comprehend how that name makes sense. For example, if we stipulate that Nixon had not won his election, then we can explore that world by navigating the consequences of that change. In doing so, new possibilities can be discussed which previously were not understood within our grammar. We then generate new

grammar by using our current one (like the calculus problem) to establish a possible world which was previously incomprehensible.

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