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**WHITHER THEORY?
OÙ VA LA THÉORIE ?**



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Wittgenstein on Language: Theory as Meaning-Production

Wittgenstein's philosophy has attracted a lot of attention in the field of literary theory in the last few decades. This interest seems all the more appropriate since an increasing number of studies have established, usually from very different perspectives, that his thought embodies the two fundamental impulses we have come to expect from a working, productive theoretical corpus: first, a non essentialist exploration of the way in which language works, and second, a concomitant –although in his case almost obliquely developed– theory of culture. Commentators, however, often disagree on the content, scope and nature of those facets. And the ongoing debate about the reception of his work seems far from being settled. These circumstances allow us to revisit his philosophy with a probing attitude. As I intend to show, unraveling some not frequently examined ramifications of his thought could help us supply at least a provisional answer to the question: whither theory?

For this purpose, allow me to review, in a very synthetic way, some of the main tenets of Wittgenstein's theory of language, especially as it is developed in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and the texts of the so-called "later period."¹ I hasten to point out that in this

¹ For a more detailed exposition of Wittgenstein's claims as well as a particular reading of their implications (only intimated here), see chapter 1,

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exposition I am going to distance myself both from the canonical “analytical” reception of his work –which has stressed all along its allegedly prescriptive bent–, and from a more recent and growingly spreading reception –which seems to stress “everydayness,” the descriptions of ordinary life and behaviors, as its main trait. I believe it is fundamental that we keep in mind that in presenting his arguments, and even his highly clever *exempla*, Wittgenstein was attempting to carry out several tasks at the same time: first, to establish a more precise understanding of the way language works through the exploration of the rich variety of language applications we encounter everyday but also through the analysis of some “invented” (*erdichtet*) applications; second, to reveal the often overlooked relationships between language-use and the way it “is conformed” by and reciprocally “conforms” our life; lastly, to criticize the misled and misleading uses of language in philosophy. It was only owing to an emphasis on the latter, the “therapeutical” task –as Wittgenstein himself would put it–, that the prescriptive and reductive reading of his philosophy was made possible. Wittgenstein, however, openly decries this approach:

Wir wollen in unserm Wissen vom Gebrauch der Sprache eine Ordnung herstellen: eine Ordnung zu einem bestimmten Zweck; eine von vielen möglichen Ordnungen; nicht die Ordnung. Wir werden zu diesem Zweck immer wieder Unterscheidungen hervorheben, die unsre gewöhnlichen Sprachformen leicht übersehen lassen. Dadurch kann es den Anschein gewinnen, als sähen wir es als unsre Aufgabe an, die Sprache zu reformieren (PU § 132).²

[We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order for a particular end; one of the many possible orders; not the order. To this end we will time and again emphasize differences that our usual forms of language easily make us overlook. For this reason, it could look as if we saw it as our task to reform language.]

“Wittgenstein and The Other (of) Language” of my book *Wittgenstein, Kraus, and Valéry. A Paradigm for Poetic Rhyme and Reason*.

- ² For quotations from the *Philosophical Investigations* (*Werkausgabe*, 1: 225-580) I shall use the abbreviation PU along with the paragraph number throughout the text. All other quotations are presented in the customary format. All translations in this text are mine.

On the other hand, an emphasis on his exploration and explanations of everyday uses of language has provided the ground for the reception of Wittgenstein's philosophy as a reflection on "ordinary" ways of life. This slant is there, to be sure; but we must admit that it coexists with more infrequent and only sketchy but no less important explorations of "extra-ordinary" uses of language. It is in this spirit that he confesses in *Philosophical Grammar*: "Die Sprache interessiert mich als Erscheinung und nicht als Mittel zu einem bestimmten Zweck" (I am interested in language not as a means toward a definite purpose but as a phenomenon).³ In this sense, it is legitimate to claim that Wittgenstein's work stages the need to understand, as well as the imperative to explore, a wide range of pictures of language, each pertaining to particular and divergent ends.

Let me now introduce and discuss briefly two key notions of Wittgenstein's theory. The first one is the notion of *Sprachspiel*, language-game. According to him, a language-game is a way of using and combining words so as to form meaningful statements in particular contexts. The way we use and combine those words corresponds to certain rules that are not necessarily clear or even conscious to us, but which we have nonetheless learned or, so to speak, "absorbed" with those contexts. This means that in different contexts we can and do resort to words differently, and that we naturally adapt our uses to the actual context in which the words are uttered or received. Although Wittgenstein employed this notion, in the preliminary stages of his investigations, as a kind of simplified model for the study of language, he later extended it and began to conceive of it as the fundamental tool to study language. This fact had a far reaching consequence: according to this description, Language (capital L) was nothing but –and nothing more than– the reunion, the collection of all possible though largely heterogeneous language-games:

*Statt etwas anzugeben, was allem, was wir Sprache nennen,
gemeinsam ist, sage ich, es ist diesen Erscheinungen [den Sprachspielen]
garnicht Eines gemeinsam, weswegen wir für alle das gleiche Wort*

³ Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe*, 4: 190.

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verwenden, –sondern sie sind mit einander in vielen verschiedenen Weisen verwandt. Und dieser Verwandtschaft, oder dieser Verwandtschaften wegen nennen wir sie alle “Sprachen” (PU §65).

[Instead of stating something common to everything that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena [language-games] have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all of them –but rather that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘languages’.]

Clearly, Wittgenstein’s philosophy deals a severe blow to the essentialist conception of language: there is no such thing as “language” in the sense of an “entity,” which is precisely the way it has traditionally been thought of in Western philosophy.

To this anti-essentialist move, Wittgenstein adds a more complex one in reminding us that a language-game is not just a simple set of words but “das Ganze: der Sprache und der Tätigkeiten, mit denen sie verwoben ist” (the whole of language and the activities with which it is interwoven; PU §7). This shows that Wittgenstein is less interested in the peculiarly “playful” facet of games as the model for the analysis of language than in their consisting of a set of more or less coherent rules *meaningful* in a particular context *and* as a specific activity. Perhaps more importantly, by correlating the way language works with distinctive forms of social behavior, this move furnishes the necessary articulation between his philosophy of language and a theory of culture.

This brings us to the second notion I wish to comment on here, the notion of *Lebensform*, form-of-life. Wittgenstein did not elaborate it in detail and as a result it is much less clear in regard to both its definition and its implications. It appears for the first time in §19 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, when, after illustrating different types of language-games, Wittgenstein concludes: “und eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen” (and to conceive of a language means to imagine a form-of-life). This rather loose association between a language-game and its form-of-life will be later characterized as a sort of inextricable link: “das Wort ‘Sprachspiel’ soll hier hervorheben, daß das Sprechen der Sprache ein Teil ist einer Tätigkeit, oder einer

Lebensform” (the word ‘language-*game*’ should emphasize here that the *speaking* of language is a part of an activity or of a form-of-life; PU § 23). It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this correlation. We could perhaps start to gauge its scope and its implications from the following remark: “befehlen, fragen, erzählen, plauschen gehören zu unserer Naturgeschichte so wie gehen, essen, trinken, spielen” (commanding, asking questions, telling stories, chatting belong to our natural history as much as walking, eating, drinking, playing; PU §25). This is, indeed, a very strong statement in regard to the relation between language-use and culture. According to Wittgenstein, language, far from being just an instrument for exchange and communication, incarnates a constitutive factor of our “natural history” (a notion that, as a result of this claim, turns out to be severely undermined in its essentialist sense). Therefore, the way we use it reveals as much of our social, historical and cultural being, as other activities traditionally studied by anthropologists. And lest we think that we are dealing here with some kind of well known evidence, let us remember that Wittgenstein attained some of his sharpest conclusions when he applied this insight to the language-games of his own culture, more often than not to expose unconscious or unacknowledged forms of thought and/or existence. But there is still another suggestive implication in the notion of form-of-life: surreptitiously, it brings to the fore a different, non-mimetic link between language and reality. In associating the notion of form-of-life to that of language-game Wittgenstein is, in fact, moving away from the conception of reality as the referent of language and toward an emphasis on what we live and experience with, in and through it. This set of experiences conform to a complex and heterogeneous space: a space that grounds our verbal practices and is conversely modified by them; but also a space shaped according to physiological, cultural and historical contexts. In this sense we could say that the notion of form-of-life brings together our experiential reality and the use of language as intrinsically interdependent facets of our existence.

With these elements, I would like to start to explore the implications of such a description of language for the matter at hand. First, it should be obvious that one of the central notions of western

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conceptions of language, the notion of “meaning,” is radically undermined with this model, along with the related notion of “intentionality.” Some of Wittgenstein’s prescriptive readers have welcomed this conclusion as the end to all metaphysical conceptions and applications of language. According to them, if the notion of “meaning” loses its mysterious halo, we must finally accept that meaning is just the use we make of utterances in our verbal everyday activities. (And so it is, as every person who has learnt to speak a foreign language knows all too well.) From which they conclude that useless utterances, such as those found in literature, but also in some branches of philosophy, especially in metaphysics, are meaningless. This is, however, only partially what Wittgenstein claims. There is another side to this interpretation –a side that an attentive reading of his texts can recover. If we think of language as a set of multifarious activities, as he suggests time and again, there is no reason why we should confine the range of those activities to the realm of the “useful;” all the more so since he seems to privilege a very peculiar kind of activity in his description of language: he resorts to games as the model for his analyses. And games, as we know, are highly transgressive activities in regard to “usefulness.” We can affirm, then, without relinquishing the framework of his thought, that meaning is, “for a large class of cases,” the *effect* of contextualized verbal activities that we regularly share with a communicative impulse –activities that exhibit of course a wide variety of forms–; but that, in other cases, meaning may well be something we *extend*, *distort*, and even *make up* with an inventive penchant. I call this extended form of verbal activity “meaning production.” The coinage has perhaps disturbing overtones –if not openly scandalous ones–; but only if we are implicitly (or explicitly) reluctant to let go of the traditional image of “meaning” and assume the consequences of Wittgenstein’s investigations. Let us dwell a little on this point.

Even if it is true that we usually “learn” a language-game along with its signifying potentialities, it is no less so that those potentialities are neither essential nor inalterable. Maybe the fact that most communicative language-games share a strong context of social meanings (and mores), makes us often lose sight of another fact: that

those same language-games would constitute an arduous learning experience for someone that does not partake of the same cultural background. Besides, we must acknowledge that there are other types of language-games (technical and scientific languages are Wittgenstein's specific examples) that must be painfully learnt along with their new "meaning modalities." If we abandon the image of meaning as being something already there, before the verbal exchange takes place, we will be ready to acknowledge that in most circumstances –and I am paraphrasing for my purposes one of Wittgenstein's sentences in *Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie*– the language-game does not have its origin in "meaning", but "meaning" is a part of the language-game.⁴ Insults, which regularly lack in any sort of factuality, are a telling example of this predicament: either I enter (or am able to enter) the language-game and feel insulted, or I don't (or cannot) and its meaninglessness becomes evident on account of my unresponsiveness. From this perspective, we can even conceive of language-games that, not being constrained by any definite set of factual experiences, bring forth unconventional, abstruse, unstable or even deviant forms of meaning; forms that nevertheless have a shaping impact on our cultural life. In these cases, we can affirm that –in varying degrees according to each language-game– meaning is something to be "construed," even "invented" rather than something to be "revealed."⁵

In a move that could be related to some well known Deleuzean contentions, Wittgenstein was already pointing out to language theoreticians that there is not one but several languages: language-games, and that meaning functions in each of them as a sort of specific

⁴ Wittgenstein's sentence refers to "reflection" [*Überlegung*], which seems to be no less daring. The passage goes: "Das Sprachspiel hat seinen Ursprung nicht in der *Überlegung*. Die *Überlegung* ist ein Teil des Sprachspiels" (the language-game does not have its origin in *reflection*. Reflection is a part of the language-game). Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe*, 7: 326-7.

⁵ This time I am borrowing a sentence from Nietzsche's *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, who boldly enough applies it to "truth." The sentence reads: "Wahrheit ist somit nicht etwas, das da wäre und was aufzufinden, zu entdecken wäre –sondern etwas, *das zu schaffen ist...*" (Truth is not consequently something that would be there and would have to be traced, discovered, –but something *that is to be created...*). Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 12: 385.

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in-built feature. The counterpart to this move, in the context of Wittgenstein's thought, would be to argue that each of those language-games must have accordingly a distinctively interwoven form-of-life. Many commentators of Wittgenstein's works, however, are neither ready nor willing to acknowledge the possibility of this interpretive turn. From what seems to me a literal and hence reductive reading of his statements on the matter, they conclude that the multiplicity of language-games configures one and only one form-of-life, which some of them identify with culture as a whole. Obviously, I cannot go into the details of the debate in the space of this text. Suffice it to say at this point that we can find enough grounds in Wittgenstein's texts to argue –analogically– that there is not one but several forms-of-life, each of them enmeshed with a particular language-game.

This line of argumentation, however, leaves us with two problems. First, we must inquire about what those different forms-of-life mean. My response is that they make up the heterogeneous multiplicity that we usually call "life" (unaware that with such a name we postulate a unity that Wittgenstein's program has taught us to call into question). Second, we must wonder about what would be the form-of-life associated to a language-game in which meaning is extended, distorted and even made up. This last problem seems all the more pressing since in these language-games there is no equivalent to the existential and experiential basis for the modalities of language-use that commonly conform to a form-of-life. To this challenging predicament I reply that those language-games provide us with a "verbal-form-of-life." I introduce this coinage –not to be found in Wittgenstein's works– to highlight that, outside of any communicational context, some *extra-vagant* forms of language-use (I separate the word "extra-vagant" to emphasize the etymological sense of the term: "wander off") create, conform, produce extra-ordinary forms of experience, even of existence. This is not, of course, unheard of in everyday language: jokes and puns are obvious examples to the contrary. But in the case of the *extra-vagant* uses I am considering at this point, this condition is raised to a completely new level. We cannot but think of literature, of course. But strange as this may sound, we could be referring as well to activities as "serious" as theory or even philosophy. Does Wittgenstein

not conclude that “commanding, asking questions, telling stories, chatting belong to our natural history as much as walking, eating, drinking, playing”? We are then in a position to make the stronger claim that meaning-production, as the salient characteristic of some particular language-games, is also part of our natural history – and a crucial one at that.

In his essay “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin suggests that it is from history and not from nature, let alone from organic corporeality, that the concept of life must be understood and determined.⁶ If, as I believe, that is the case, then we must acquiesce to the existence of a solid and deep link between what we call life and the whole of our cultural determinations: structures of feeling, ideologies, emotional reactions, moral conceptions, but also entertaining practices, art-forms, literary genres, etc. This would lead us to the conclusion that at least some of our forms-of-life are, to a very important degree, verbal-forms-of-life associated with processes of “meaning-production” (a “meaning-production,” I add parenthetically and dialectically, that is at the same time constrained by historical, geographical, and cultural elements). Furthermore, we realize that the very verbal inventiveness at the core of these language-games constitutes a form of experiential reality in its own right; a reality that has supplemented and extended both our life and the way we conceive of it. Would this not be already a form of theorization? Or, to put it in terms of Wallace Stevens’ poem “Men Made Out of Words,” we must come to the conclusion that “Life consists/ of propositions about life.”⁷

We could even give to this argument a stronger, Nietzschean spin. If the world is not a state, but a cumulative, dynamic, changing arrangement of interpretations, how can we actually tell apart “facts” from verbal creations/constructions? But we do not need to go that far in order to establish the experiential and existential charge of these singular language-games. The weaker version we have explored so far, i.e. that at least in some instances we “invent” life –true life– out of

⁶ Cfr. Benjamin, *Illuminationen*, 52

⁷ Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 310.

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extra-vagant uses of language, will suffice for the purpose of arguing for a meaning-producing theory.

Deleuze and Guattari introduced a few decades ago, in the realm of theory, the notion of *minor uses of language*. They were characterized as highly idiosyncratic language-uses capable of destabilizing the system of received meanings in a particular context or culture; hence, their theoretical importance. In a more recent text, Giorgio Agamben has pointed out the theoretical implications of the reinstatement of *argots* as a way to destabilize the axis language-people-State and its concomitant set of unshakable meanings. Are these projects not in line with what Nietzsche called the *Kritik der großen Worte* (critique of big words)? In addition to their critical foundation and even beyond it, they all constitute definite programs to elicit new forms of thought through both the acknowledgment and the exploration of the life conforming capabilities of meaning-production. And this is precisely the theorizing impulse I have tried to unravel from Wittgenstein's investigations.

I propose that, in the realm of the so-called human sciences, the notion of theory indicates a set of reflective, verbal –mainly scriptural–, and increasingly interdisciplinary practices, both historically and geographically determined, that attempt to organize and/or supplement meanings produced by cultural manifestations. This somewhat condensed “definition” of theory needs, however, further development in the light of what I have argued up to this point. First, such a set of practices is –or should be– a constantly changing one. This is an important point, since it allows us to avoid any illusion of disciplinary definition and closure, as well as any charge of essentialism. Second, those practices are inextricably and unavoidably bound to the language-games inherent in a culture, but at the same time constitute themselves in, and evolve as, new language-games. Third, they set the mode in which cultural manifestations are to be received: these practices postulate a sort of second degree existence for cultural manifestations in ascribing a signifying thrust in whatever it is that they produce –this is the theoretical move *par excellence*. Finally and as a consequence of all of the previous remarks, the meanings that these practices allegedly organize and/or supplement are oftentimes meanings that they create and make possible as active forms of

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meaning-production. We arrive then at the conclusion that theory itself is a cultural practice, whose very productions create meaning in themselves. This circularity should not, however, deter us from theorizing. On the contrary, it should compel us to the realization that, in a fundamental way, every cultural practice is already a form of theory.

Once the connection between meaning-production, the verbal-form-of-life and theory has been established, we are able to discuss some of its implications. Theory moves –with alternating emphasis–critically, dialectically, and inventively in the space of the exchanges it builds with cultural manifestations. This dialogue is in its own right a form of thought; a form of thought that must be assumed and dynamized, if we want it to go anywhere. This means that what is at stake in theory is not just language, literature, or art, but a philosophical and even a political form-of-life in which culture in its multiplicity of forms is reexamined, thought over, but also reinvented, recreated. To conceive of theory as a form of meaning-production is thus to accept it as a responsible, answerable form-of-life for the ever changing task of reshaping our forms of comprehension, our thought – our life, in the extended sense of the word we introduced before.

In the brief text that opens his book *Mezzi senza fine*, Giorgio Agamben accepts the challenge of thinking along these lines. Even though he does not mention Wittgenstein in the essay, he unmistakably entitles it “forma-di-vita” (form-of-life); a form-of-life that he, in a clearly Benjaminian turn, wants to distinguish from what he calls “la nuda vita” (naked life). I quote his conclusion:

*Il pensiero è forma-di-vita, vita insegregabile dalla sua forma, e dovunque si mostra l'intimità de questa vita inseparabile, nella materialità dei processi corporei e dei modi di vita abituali non meno que nella teoria, là e soltanto là è pensiero.*⁸

[Thought is form-of-life, life indissociable from its form, and wherever the intimacy of this inseparable life appears, in the materiality of

⁸ Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine*, 19.

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bodily processes and of customary modes of life, as well as in theory, there and there only thought is to be found.]

In this sentence we find, densely intertwined, all the elements of the constellation we have explored in this text: form-of-life, thought, theory, bodily processes, customary modes of life. The political overtones are evident; but they are one with the imperative to develop a form-of-life that conforms our existence, the “real” one, the one that reaches beyond the limitations of “naked life” into the space of meaning-production. Could we think of a more cogent defense of theory and of a more stimulating indication as to where it should go?

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