

Being and Power

A Phenomenological Ontology of Forms of Life

Daniel Rueda Garrido

Series in Philosophy



VERNON PRESS

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Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023950113

ISBN: 978-1-64889-817-4

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Introduction: Beings and Forms of Life

In this book, I seek to elaborate on the intuition that the understanding of what power is lies in its ontological foundation, i.e., that insofar as we are and to the degree that we are, we have power. But we are always in a particular way according to our actions and guiding principles. That is to say, we are—and are continually in—our form of life. The latter, insofar as a particular *way of being* implies a certain power to be who one wants to be, so that *a form of life is always the imposition of a particular way of being and acting—shared with a community—*. In this specific sense that I give to the term ‘imposing’ as that of affirming one’s being through activity, the form of life that imposes itself always does so politically, that is, by affirming itself through the organisation of activity and of one’s own life as a whole, taking here politics in the Aristotelian sense as that which gives *form* to life. A form of life is thus always the imposition of a particular way of acting on/by the subjects to *organize* their lives. And imposition indirectly refers to the will, which is why it is essential to understand this imposition as a free and voluntary act. In order to do so, I will discuss the relationship between being and will within the tradition from which I draw my inspiration. The task I set myself is to examine the concept of the form of life, already discussed in my previous works, in the light of its political dimension. In doing so, I seek to show that not only are power and life fused as the Spinozist-Nietzschean tradition already claimed, but that to live is always to do so by imposing a particular, non-natural or essential way of being and to expect it from or to posit it on the other individuals with whom we come into contact. The first thing I intend to do is to clarify the concept of being by looking beyond its traditional identification or vehicular relationship with language. The importance of such a task lies in showing the being that we are. A being that is but a form of life, as I claim and I hope would be clearer throughout the upcoming sections. In this last sense, this work presupposes my previous works and seeks to deepen their meaning and expand their scope. However, it is not necessary to be familiar with those works, because in this introduction I try to show their essential aspects in order to understand their connection with the theme of power and politics.

Although Fichte already used the term ‘form of life’ —*Lebensform*— to refer to particular realizations of the primordial life,¹ the term is nowadays mainly

¹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, ‘The Characteristics of the Present Age’, in *Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 2 vols. (London: Trübner & Co, 1889), II, p. 64. In the original, it reads: ‘Die verschiedenen Gestalten in welche das Bild der Einen ewigen Urtätigkeit

associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein. For the author of the *Tractatus*, 'the world is everything that is the case'.² In this sense, that something is the case is a true proposition. Language seems to be the net with which we catch the world in order to know it. Because language and the world share the same logical form. That form is a shared essence. For, 'the essence of language is a picture of the essence of the world'.³ Moreover, for Wittgenstein world and life are one.⁴ Thus, what has been said so far about the world can also be applied to life. Thus, the essence of life, like the essence of the world, is expressed through language. And because essence and form are the same for Wittgenstein, life, as a form, is not a fact or an object, but 'a totality of possibilities'⁵ or everything that is possible according to a form. All life is thus a form of life. Kishik's work shows that even before the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein conceived of the concept of the form of life.⁶ The question is, to what extent does the Cambridge philosopher consider the form of life or the form of the world without language, and to what extent does the form of life/the world show itself in language or does language impose its form?

On the few occasions in which Wittgenstein mentions the term form of life, a crossroads opens up, leading either to a linguistic approach centred on the uses of everyday language or to the approach to human activity. In the first case, the form of life as the ultimate foundation can only be expressed indirectly through the analysis of language games, which, in a sense, show the essence of that form of life. This is the case in which the form of life is inseparable from its linguistic expression to the point of being undifferentiated, as was the case in the *Tractatus* with language and the world. The form of life is, in this case, assimilable to language. In the second case, which is the one that interests me most, the notion of form of life is not subsumed in language, but language is subsumed in the former. Thus, language would be considered as an activity, which is

innerhalb unseres Bewußtseins sich bricht' [The various forms into which the image of the One eternal primordial activity is refracted within our consciousness] In *Die Grundzüge des gegenwertigen Zeitalters* (Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1908), Vierte Vorlesung, pp. 70-71.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1961), §3.01.

³ From Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, quoted in David Kishik, *Wittgenstein's Form of Life* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 85. Also, Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §2.0141.

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §5.621.

⁵ As Kishik writes interpreting Wittgenstein's notion of life: 'As a form, life will be perceived as a totality of possibilities'. In Kishik, *Wittgenstein's Form of Life*, p. 12.

⁶ Kishik, *Wittgenstein's Form of Life*, pp. 25-26.

supported in a concise and isolated sentence: 'the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life'.⁷

If we take language as an activity, its meaning can no longer be established as a representation of reality or the world, as it was in the *Tractatus*. For Wittgenstein, understanding a linguistic expression seems to be the understanding of that expression in a totality that he calls a language game. This language game refers approximately —although there is no a single definition— to its relationship to other expressions and to the context in which such expressions usually appear. In other words, it requires a pragmatic knowledge of how it is used in a form of life. If we connect these elements, we can infer that the meaning of a linguistic expression is found in the form of life. In my opinion, this is the key to the bifurcation between a linguistic and an ontological interpretation of Wittgenstein's thought.

For, as I said, if the linguistic expression is understood from the form of life as a whole, the latter becomes a linguistic totality. That is, the form of life is identified with the language we use in the various language games. For 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life'.⁸ Thus, to know the form of life is to know how we use language, to know the different language games that are given as a possibility. The form of life would be the totality of possible language games, and only of language games. This keeps us in a purely linguistic field, where life is assimilated to language. And where the language games express the essence of the former. In this way, we remain within the same limits of the *Tractatus*, by which only through language can we show or express —but not describe directly— the form of the world or the form of life, both sharing a certain logic or essence with language.⁹ This is the path by which the understanding of language as activity becomes the understanding of activity as language. And the form of life thus becomes equal to that which is expressed linguistically.

On the other hand, separating ourselves from this previous path, if we emphasize the second element of the expression 'language as activity', what we obtain is one activity among others of a form of life that is not linguistic but precisely the set or totality of all the actions —and not only the language games— that are possible in it. To understand a linguistic activity or speech act —an expression forged by Austin¹⁰ and Searle— is to understand it as an activity made possible by its form of life. The being that was assimilated to the world is now assimilated to the form of life as a totality. To understand an

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), § 23.

⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §19.

⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 2.18.

¹⁰ John Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

activity—even if it is a speech act—is to understand it as part of a form of life, as an actual possibility of it. It is in it that the activity obtains its own meaning. And for the same reason, to understand our activities—which implies performing them—is to understand our form of life. That form of life is the being that we are. This second path, therefore, leads us to the recognition of the form of life as a way of being and acting. In this way, by redirecting Wittgenstein's findings towards ontology, the assimilation of our being to our language is avoided. And thus, in our own actions—including our speech acts—we can grasp who we are.

On this basis, and following the phenomenological tradition from Fichte onwards, only that which appears before our consciousness, for example our actions, can reach the status of being for us. And therefore, only that which reaches the status of being is meaningful. But, in some way, only that which we are can appear before us. That is, that which emerges from our own consciousness of what is to be human. Our self-consciousness is the consciousness of our possible actions. Consequently, that being with meaning that appears before us is our actions in the world (and that of our community). Thus, the world constituted by our possible behaviour is always pre-given in our consciousness as our horizon. In the words of Husserl: 'The world is pre-given to us [...] not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world'.¹¹ This ontology deals with particular beings insofar as these are forms of life, that is, a totality of meaningful actions. The abstract concept of the Being of metaphysics is reduced to the being of my form of life, which is a particular being because it is different from other forms of life. Each form of life is constituted by the subject's consciousness, as anthropical image, and the ensemble of his possible actions in the world. The latter are but constituents of the form of life, which is nothing beyond them.

As has already been made apparent, I have called 'anthropical image' to that constitutive image which structures our consciousness, and can be defined as the totality at the same time imaginary and real that we actualise with our actions in the world. Thus, the form of life is necessarily imaginary—anthropical image—and real—ensemble of actions—at the same time.¹² It must be added that the anthropical image's actualisation implies a totalising process by which the subject and the community are progressively integrated into that totality to the degree that its activity and the world in which it develops are more in line

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 142.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary. A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 186.

with this image of human being. Or in other words, the more I recognise myself in my actions, the more I act in the world according to the principle I identify with and vice versa; a principle that not only constitutes my consciousness but also my actions and that of my community. The latter can be defined as those subjects with whom I share my anthropological image, that is, my consciousness insofar as it is constituted by my willing that image as an inherent goal, for as Fichte lucidly says: 'the will is the proper primary root of man himself, to form the human being';¹³ a will that is, after all, implied in Sartre's well-known dictum: 'In fashioning myself, I fashion man'.¹⁴

Albeit briefly, it is worth discussing here that precisely because of this constitutive character of the form of life, no subject can 'have'—I would rather say 'be', perhaps forcing the language—more than one form of life at the same time, but successively, after a conversion from one to another. Thus, it is not appropriate to equate the form of life with a culture or a society; if anything, it might be closer to the philosophical sense Aristotle gives it when he speaks of 'types of life', namely the life of pleasure, the life of honour, the contemplative life and the life of making money.¹⁵ The Stagirite reduces the types of life to four of them, but I would concede that there are many more forms of life, which can be defined by the guiding principle, such as maximising economically, seeking pleasure, seeking knowledge and wisdom, living austerely, surviving, seeking alienation, maximising the glory of a god, seeking self-improvement, maximising collective benefits, etc.¹⁶

Now, if the essential identity of the subject is given by the image of the human being which constitutes his consciousness as the principle of his possible actions, how can he have multiple identities? This is something that does not seem paradoxical to authors such as Amartya Sen, for whom identities do not seem to be constitutive but rather external and temporary labels that one puts on and takes off; and thus, the communities formed by them would be infinite, such as those individuals who play tennis, those who believe in aliens, those who like dogs, and so on: 'The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan [...] Each

¹³ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 23.

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1946), p. 30.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Complete Works*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1095 b10-1096 a10, pp. 3723-724.

¹⁶ For the outline of several forms of life as I understand them, see my previous work.

of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity'.¹⁷ Sen takes those mentioned collectivities to be actual identities, for he continues: 'None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category. Given our inescapably plural identities, we have to decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context'.¹⁸

Now, most of the 'identities' mentioned are external labels, such as the race one belongs to or the place where someone lives; others, such as opinions on an issue or liking and disliking, do not seem sufficient to be considered identities, and in any case, my opinions and emotions depend on an identity which is the image I have of myself as a human being and which I share in an essential way with other subjects. Otherwise, the very experience of being part of a community with which one identifies oneself, or the experience of becoming progressively more integrated into it, disappears; and that implies the disappearing of a sense of belonging and self-identity as an absence of reflective consciousness about the form of life that they are effectively actualising through their behaviours. If we take as identity the different aspects of our subjectivity, what we do is to multiply unnecessarily what defines us, and we end thinking we are different because we like Netflix series, eating out and tourist travelling... when this is rather common to all subjects who share the same form of life, as 'variations of the same'.¹⁹ The multiplication of identities can lead to taking triviality as the essence. Thus, I claim that we incarnate a single form of life successively, and that changing from one to another is a transformation or conversion preceded by a crisis as a personal —profound— experience,²⁰ something for which those who defend plural identities cannot account.

Having read until here, one might still wonder whether this ontology is really necessary to understand what power consists of, why this ontology or why power is rooted in being, and why power could not be conceived merely as an interpersonal relationship or a constraint of the individual at the institutional level? All these questions make sense. To answer the former, I begin by

¹⁷ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York and London: Norton and Company, 2007), pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁸ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, pp. xiii. Italics are mine.

¹⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p. 32. My claim is also supported by this author's book titled *The Expulsion of the Other* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018). The following sentence comprises one of its main ideas: 'The world is peopled by clones, yet each paradoxically wants to be different from the others' (p. 11).

²⁰ Daniel Rueda Garrido, 'Forms of Life and The Phenomenological Ontology of Conversion', *Sophia. International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions*, 62 (2023), 33-47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-021-00838-4>.

addressing the latter. At the interpersonal level as at the institutional level, what we call power is exercised through an authority that is taken as given, fixed and unquestionable. The parent over the child, the teacher over the pupil, the boss over the employee, some subjects over others, the State over all its citizens, and so on. At this level, understanding can only be that of facts, which are enclosed in themselves, facts that are presented in isolation but with the guarantees of their existence as something definitively given. The ontology of forms of life is the attempt to go beyond the given, including historical and/or legislative reasons—which are no less presented as given and indisputable. Power, as interpersonal and institutional relations, relates to subjects in an equally given form of life, as its facticity; to find an understanding of power and its distribution in a form of life, one must do so from an ontology that shows the given in its ultimate grounding; power established not as something accidental that contingently curdles in its present state, but as an active structure that necessarily sustains the political and social organisation based on a particular form of life.

This ontology is necessary, in a word, to investigate power relations from the source that nourishes them: the being that subjects have endowed themselves with by adopting their form of life. In it, power is already interpersonal and hierarchical, its self-imposition is the imposition of a community and an internal hierarchy, but above all, it is the imposition of a shared identity as a particular way of being and acting, which is opposed to that of those who do not share it, the Others. Power as an external relationship with these others also has its roots in that being that we give ourselves through the form of life with which we identify. Nicolai Hartmann wrote regarding the need to make explicit the ontology in which our view is founded: 'No philosophy can stand without a fundamental view of being. This holds true regardless of standpoint, tendency, or the general picture of the world which it adopts. The reason why not every philosophy begins with a discussion of being lies in the ease with which in this field ideas are accepted and laid down undiscussed'.²¹

And yet, accepting my premises, I could still be questioned as follows: what can we learn from this ontology, and what can we do with it? Is it a kind of relativism? Are there any ethical consequences derived from the conception of being as a form of life? Beginning with the first question, what I consider of greatest significance in the conception of the form of life as an ontological unit—in-itself-for-itself—is that in it the traditional dualities of philosophy, namely, self-other, body-mind, inside-outside, being-power, are condensed in a unitary way. This unifying synthesis does not, however, as I hope to show, fuse

²¹ Nicolai Hartmann, *New ways of Ontology* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 4.

individual differences, differences that belong to an ontological level dependent on the universal-particular—the form of life shared by a community.

To comment briefly on how these syntheses are obtained and how they operate, I will say, first of all, that in the shared form of life, the self has an intersubjective understanding of itself as a subject that shares his way of living, so that for him to live like this, the others must also live in the same way, the exception being what we can call the absolute-Others, those who follow another form of life, and therefore are not members of the same community. The form of life, moreover, as a unity constituted by the totality of the possible actions or habits of the subject is intrinsically a union of mind-body, namely the actions that the subject grasps as necessary possibilities for himself—and his community—the action as such is an affirmation of the subject himself as a psychophysical unity. In this ontology, as we have already seen, the inner and the outer are correlative, and if the form of life is the totality of possible actions, the pre-reflective consciousness of these possibilities is what I have called the anthropical image, the image one has of oneself—and of the community—as a human being; the possibilities of acting in the world are determined by that image, which is what constitutes the subject's original self-consciousness; if the form of life is the outside or facticity, the anthropical image is the inside, but the two are but a unity, so that the one demands the other and the other the one.

Finally, by reducing the being-as-language of the metaphysics to the being-as-form-of-life—the latter in terms of principled actions in the world—I am at the same time bringing the idea of power down from the plane of discourses and symbolic labels to the plane on which the lives of different communities unfold. I mean thus to explore power as a real manifestation of a form of life in its ontological structure. This means that power takes on different characteristics in different forms of life. If being physically stronger implies having more power than others in a form of life whose constitutive ontological principle is to survive, the powerful being those who aggressively impose themselves on others, in forms of life whose principles are maximising economic goods, expressing themselves aesthetically, pursuing wisdom or maximising the glory of God, the powerful will be respectively the one who is able to maximise the most individual benefits; the one who imposes his form of aesthetic self-expression; the one who has attained wisdom to the greatest degree; or the one who has self-imposed a life closest to that of sacrifice for the glory of God. Power in these and other cases follows the same structure but is distinguished by the form of life in which it is manifested. What I intend to show here is precisely that power is ontologically founded, and that just as one incarnates in different degrees a form of life, so on that gradual scale, power is distributed. In this way, responding once again to the relation between being

and power, it can be said that if the form of life gives being to the subject, power lies precisely in self-imposing it and advancing in it, becoming what one already is and has the power to be, but this being, and its power, can only present itself as mere resistance when it is subsumed (in the process of assimilation) under a form of life that is not its own, subjected to the absolute-Other.

The latter —answering the last two questions— does not give rise to relativism in the traditional sense of the term, but neither does a universal ethical consequence follow from it, and it does nothing of the sort for the following reasons: first, the ontological constitution of each form of life certainly implies a different way of being, acting, feeling and even valuing in each form of life, and this could be understood as relativism, but what it wants to show and I think can be clearly understood from the perspective opened up by this ontology is why we cling to our way of being and doing things considering it as the best possible and superior to any other. That is, it shows why, for each subject, his or her form of life is the best possible, and does not judge whether it certainly is or not, for such a judgement is, from the outset, invalidated. On the contrary, the point is rather to explore and understand why we are not relativists in a practical sense, for we accept only our form of life. This connects with the issue of ethics; contrary to other ontologies, this ontology does not lead to universal ethics, precisely because all ethics are internal to a form of life. It is the discursive justification of a particular form of life, so that universal ethics is by definition impossible, because it can be seen, rather, how all supposedly universal ethics have been nothing but the imposition of a form of life and its ethical-justifying discourse on the other communities. For each subject and each community, its way of living and acting is the best possible by definition, otherwise, it would change through a conversion process —this is an ontological principle. Thus, there is no other ethics than that of the herd or the tribe. The only exception that can be admitted is that of the generosity of the one who opens himself to the being, doing and feeling of the other form of life at the risk of ceasing to be who he is, which is more a spontaneous and temporary attitude than the expression of an ethical system, as I also hope to show in the course of these pages.

Two Words About the Method

Finally, I would not like to end this introduction without devoting a few words to the method employed, which consists of three hierarchical but interdependent procedures. These are the following: the transcendental level, corresponding to the form of life as a transcendental structure constituted by a set of actions and guided, in turn, by an anthropical image; the empirical-perceptual level, as that in which data from the empirical sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, history and psychology, are used; and the

phenomenological level, which serves as a bridge between the transcendental and the empirical. The transcendental level is the condition of possibility of the phenomenological, and this is corroborated by the empirical level. If the transcendental level is the decisive and determining one, without the data of experience and the analysis of actions in the world, that level is pure form. If the phenomenological level takes its data from consciousness—description of its intentional object—and the empirical level from the results of sensible exploration—perception and empirical data of the sciences—the transcendental level claims the philosophical intuition of the principles revealed to consciousness and expressed in actions, i.e., the principles that in the other two levels are taken for granted. For, in philosophy as well as in science, we cannot honestly get rid of the intuition that a posteriori is validated, in some cases by arguments and empirical evidence, and in other cases by experience itself. Without intuition of the principles as the law of a given inter-subjective totality, there can be neither knowledge nor praxis.²² Given the interdependence of the three procedures, it seems reasonable that the method of this book is to present them in parallel, reinforcing each other. The empirical data prove and shed light on the phenomenological level and the phenomenological level on the transcendental one. All three are necessary in a phenomenological ontology of the forms of life, in which our actions have to be understood in the light of our subjective experience and of the form of life as an ontological unit at the same time transcendental (anthropical image) and immanent (ensemble of actions).

Bourdieu understood the need to examine the last two levels I have referred to in an interrelated way, that is, the phenomenological and the empirical, which he calls physical. In this way, he thinks that the social sciences must rid themselves of both subjectivism and objectivism,²³ because the empirical social level determines the presuppositions of the phenomenological level, passing off as objective what is nothing but a projection onto the object—par excellence, society as an object—of the social structures that determine the subject from the outset. This is nothing more than bringing the paradox of the observer in Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy into the realm of the social sciences. The observer, as such, is already a participant, and therefore observes

²² The interdependence between intuition and observation has consistently been defended by Thomas J. Scheff, who wrote, 'as Peirce and many others have suggested, scientific inquiry is not merely inductive, but also deductive, a mixture of imagination and observation'. In *Emotions, the Social Bond and Human Reality. Part/Whole Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 229.

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 52.

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