Shared Grounds, Shifting Agreements: On the Liminal Structure of Deep Disagreements[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of deep disagreements through a reinterpretation of Wittgenstein's concept of *form of life*. Rather than adopting skeptical or relativist positions, it questions the assumption that disagreement marks a failure of rational communication. The central claim is that deep disagreements are *liminal* in structure: they unfold at the threshold between shared and divergent backgrounds of understanding, and must be approached as such. Drawing on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and related remarks, the paper argues that disagreement and understanding are made possible by the same background conditions. The possibility of partial understanding depends not on reaching a final consensus, but on our ability to recognize and respond to unfamiliar ways of speaking and acting. This account shifts the focus from resolution to acknowledgment, and from epistemic closure to the ongoing conditions of mutual intelligibility.

Key words

deep disagreement, form of life, Wittgenstein, liminality, acknowledgment

> "I forgot, it's no use arguing because of course I won't be listened to; because there is no will to understand, but only one not to hear what the other says".
>
> (Schönberg to Wassily Kandinsky, 4 May 1923, in Schönberg, *Letters*, p. 93)

1. Introduction: agreements, disagreements and liminality

The central theme of this paper is the nature of deep disagreements, a topic that has long fueled philosophical debate without yielding consensus – a fitting outcome, given their apparent resistance to resolution[2]. Rather than aligning with skeptical or

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[2] Deep disagreement refers to fundamental conflicts where disputing parties lack shared assumptions or methods of reasoning to resolve their differences. These disagreements often stem from incompatible

resigned interpretations of deep disagreement, this paper questions the assumption that rationality must culminate in final agreement. Its aim is not to relativize our standards of justification, but to unsettle the expectation that consensus represents the natural or necessary endpoint of understanding.

Examples of deep disagreements include debates over moral relativism, conflicting cultural frameworks, and irreconcilable metaphysical positions, such as those between science and religion or within ethical theory[3]. The significance of this issue lies in the high value traditionally placed on agreements: bluntly put, agreement is often seen as inherently preferable to disagreement. Moreover, deep disagreements challenge conventional models of rationality which assume that most conflicts can be resolved through open-minded, logical argumentation and access to relevant information. Their persistence calls this assumption into question.

The third element of my claim is liminality. The word "liminal" comes from the Latin "limen", meaning "threshold". It was the French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van who in 1909 coined the term "liminality" (Gennep 1960) understood as a state of transition between one stage and the next, to describe rites of passage in small-scale societies. Later, the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) further developed and expanded the concept to describe phases of ambiguity, in which individuals are neither in their previous state nor have yet assumed their new one. Liminality, then, refers to a threshold state – a transitional, in-between space where established structures and roles are suspended or blurred embodying both transformation and uncertainty. Over time, the concept has been expanded to encompass broader contexts of uncertainty and ambiguity, particularly in situations where identity, meaning, or understanding remain fluid. While the term has been widely applied across disciplines, its relevance to the philosophy of disagreement has remained, as far as I can tell, underexplored. It is in this light that I propose that the notion of liminality provides a fruitful lens through which to understand the dynamics of deep disagreement. By examining the transitional nature of agreements and disagreements, I aim to illuminate how these states are intertwined and how they challenge traditional philosophical approaches to consensus and conflict.

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worldviews, basic principles, or conceptual frameworks. For recent literature on deep disagreements, see Arroyo (2024), Baghramian, Carter, and Rowland (2024), Hales (2025), Lavorerio (2021), MacFarlane (2009), Ranalli (2018 and 2022).

[3]A classic example of deep disagreement is the conflict between evolutionary theory and creationism. Here, two divergent frameworks clash: supporters of evolutionary theory rely on scientific evidence, empirical observation, and the methodologies of natural science, while creationists ground their beliefs in religious texts and divine revelation, rejecting the premise that empirical science alone can fully explain the origins of life. This disagreement is resistant to resolution because it arises from fundamentally different epistemic frameworks – scientific empiricism versus faith-based reasoning. Attempts at persuasion often fail, as they presuppose the validity of their own framework, which the other side rejects. This conflict underscores the limitations of rational deliberation when interlocutors lack shared assumptions.

Deep disagreements, as conceptualized by philosophers like Robert Fogelin (Fogelin 1985), are conflicts that resist resolution through rational argument alone. Such disagreements often rest on divergent frameworks or worldviews that cannot be reconciled through standard means of deliberation. But if we consider deep disagreements not as static impasses but as inherently liminal what we get is a different picture of the matter in which deep disagreements to be sure, disrupt established norms and agreements, although not because there is something that participants ignore, but by pushing them into a transitional state where frameworks of understanding are unsettled. Of course, this may not seem much of a change and this unsettlement can be still seen as a hindrance. But it can also be interpreted as a space of possibility – the opportunity to reexamine assumptions, question commitments, and engage with alternative perspectives. Be it as it may, my aim is not to emphasize the optimistic view of this unsettled space as an opportunity for transformation. Instead, I argue that the liminal nature of deep disagreements supports a more radical claim: *no disagreement is ever truly as deep as the term suggests*. The very liminality of such disagreements reveals their provisional nature, undermining the notion that they represent ultimate, insurmountable impasses.

This paper, then, challenges the traditional understanding of deep disagreements. By pointing to their liminal nature, I wish to highlight that they are provisional disruptions that reveal the shared human form of life as the foundation for agreement, even in seemingly intractable cases. Specifically, I engage with Robert Fogelin's characterization of deep disagreements as arising from incompatible "forms of life," a Wittgensteinian notion that underscores the foundational role of shared practices, customs, and values in human understanding. While Fogelin interprets the notion of "forms of life" as a source of irreconcilable conflict, I challenge this view. I propose instead that our shared human form of life, broadly conceived, provides the ground for agreement[4]. Far from rendering agreement impossible, it is precisely what makes agreement possible – even if building bridges between distinct cultural or epistemic frameworks remains a challenge.

In engaging with this issue, I also consider Maria Baghramian's work on deep disagreements and relativism. Baghramian suggests that such disagreements offer an opportunity to cultivate intellectual humility and other virtues. While I appreciate her constructive take, I see it as a kind of resignation – as if the kind of agreement we could achieve in the face of deep disagreement are mere consolation prizes. My approach, by contrast, seeks to show that such immutable agreements were never necessary for the possibility of understanding or consensus. Instead, our shared

[4] For he purposes of my presentation there is no need to to take into account all the nuances of the expression "form of life"; suffice it to say that when talking of form of life here what I have in mind is something like a fundamental human perspective. The perspective characteristic of beings endowed with language and capable of finding their feet with other human beings, no matter the cultural and historical differences among them.

human form of life provides a dynamic, yet stable enough, foundation for agreement even amidst significant differences. This perspective, I argue, offers a more compelling reframing of deep disagreements and their implications.

A note before continuing with my exposition. The argument that follows is, at best, impressionistic. I am perfectly aware of this[5] and although it is deliberate, I understand that it will not appeal to everyone. Therefore, I will summarize what is to come in a more formal fashion:

(1) Debates and exchanges, whether philosophical or otherwise, begin with disagreement; (2) agreements cancel out disagreements; therefore, (3) we value agreements more than disagreements; (4) as the destination of argumentative exchanges, agreement is considered final; (5) as the starting point our argumentative exchanges, disagreement is also final – in the sense that it provides a fixed starting point; (6) disagreements can be superficial or deep; (7) deep disagrements as fundamental conflicts where disputing parties lack shared assumptions or methods of reasoning to resolve their differences; (8) in line with a widely accepted characterization, the concept of deep disagreements finds its roots in Wittgenstein's notion of "form of life"; (9) the notion of "form of life", as traditionally interpreted, is incompatible with the idea of a definitive, final, carved in stone for the rest of time, agreement; (10) an interpretation of both deep disagreements and "form of life" in terms of liminality calls all of the above into question and reframes deep disagreement as a contingent phenomenon dependent as much on our will to understand and acknowledge others forms of life as on any rational standard.

In light of this outline, my central thesis is that deep disagreements should not be treated as anomalies to be resolved or bypassed, but as thresholds that reveal the mutual dependence of agreement and disagreement. What I propose, therefore, is a shift of perspective: from understanding deep disagreement as a breakdown of rational discourse, to recognizing it as a constitutive feature of our form of life. This shift does not eliminate the difficulty of such disagreements. They are not to be solved once and for all, but explored as part of the human condition. The liminal structure I wish to foreground enables us to see that disagreement and understanding arise from the same background, and that their entanglement is not a failure of philosophy, but one of its proper topics.

[5] This paper has its origin in an oral presentation. The tone of the first drafts maintained the essayistic and lighthearted style of that presentation. None of the referees who evaluated my work criticized this aspect of it, but one of them did draw attention to some reiterations of ideas (which I have tried to reduce to a minimum), and to the need to shed greater clarity on the notion of "form of life" and on its role in my defense of the liminality of deep disagreements. About the latter I will say something more in the main text, about the other comment I have already said something in the previous footnote, and I hope that the (few) modifications I have made in this regard will be enough. If not, no disagreement is deep enough, or that is what I want to defend here; what is important, if I may paraphrase Rorty, is that we can keep the conversation going.

2. The Liminal Nature of Agreement

The rigidity of the traditional conception of agreements contributes significantly to the perception of deep disagreements as irresolvable. On this view, resolution demands a definitive and final consensus – a standard that often seems unattainable in contexts of profound conflict, and this is why agreements are treated as endpoints: the culmination of negotiation, inquiry, or debate. However, agreements are rarely permanent; they are provisional settlements reached within an ongoing process of negotiation. In this sense, agreements occupy a liminal space between stability and flux. They are thresholds rather than final destinations.

Consider Socrates' dialogues, where reaching agreement served as both a method and a goal. Through persistent questioning, Socrates sought to uncover the foundations of concepts such as knowledge, justice, or happiness, aiming to reach shared conclusions with his interlocutors. Agreements, in this case, emerged not as static truths but as provisional stopping points within a process of dialectical inquiry – open to revision in light of further questioning or reflection.

Yet the broader history of philosophy and inquiry reflects a recurring aspiration toward conclusive, enduring agreements. Intuitively, the term "agreement" refers to a mutual acknowledgment of understanding or alignment: it implies at least two parties recognizing shared terms, beliefs, or conditions. More precisely, agreement can be defined as a state of harmony or accord, marking the resolution – or at least the suspension – of competing views. Philosophically, agreements are closely tied to notions of truth, knowledge, and shared meaning.

From Aristotle's categorization of knowledge to Kant's search for synthetic *a priori* principles, philosophical traditions have often assumed that agreement, once reached, represents a form of finality or closure. In ethics, for example, John Rawls' notion of "reflective equilibrium" presupposes that agreement on moral principles can be achieved through iterative reasoning and adjustment. In science, paradigmatic shifts described by Thomas Kuhn suggest temporary agreements within frameworks of shared understanding – only to be unsettled when anomalies arise.

In these examples, the shared assumption is clear: agreements are markers of progress, achieved through rational deliberation and signaling a form of closure. The expectation of finality is built into this traditional conception. After all, something that shifts or dissolves from one day to the next scarcely seems to qualify as an "agreement" at all.

Still, is this closure as final as it appears? Upon closer inspection, agreements exhibit a fundamental tension: they strive for stability but remain embedded in conditions of flux. Contexts change, perspectives evolve, opinions vary, and the very terms of agreement may be reinterpreted over time. If we accept that agreements are inherently provisional then the perception of deep disagreements as static, unbridgeable impasses begins to erode.

To illustrate these ideas, consider practical examples of agreements within different domains:

a) In political contexts, treaties or coalitions are often formed to address immediate conflicts, but their stability depends on ongoing negotiation and adaptation to changing circumstances.
b) In science, consensus around a theory – such as Newtonian physics or the Standard Model in particle physics – reflects provisional agreement, subject to revision or abandonment when evidence or paradigms shift.
c) In ethics, agreements on shared values or norms (e.g., human rights) may serve as functional foundations for cooperation while remaining subject to reinterpretation across cultures or historical periods.

Each of these examples demonstrates the liminal quality of agreement in that they occupy a transitional state, offering a degree of closure while remaining open to reconsideration. This view of agreements as liminal does not entail a slide into relativism or conceptual indeterminacy. On the contrary, the very fact that agreements are situated within shared forms of practice provides the normative scaffolding that makes them both possible and revisable. What is at stake is not the abandonment of standards, but their contextual negotiation and renegotiation in light of shifting perspectives and experiences. Liminality, then, should not be confused with arbitrariness: it is a space where disagreement and agreement coexist within a framework that is stable enough to sustain communication, yet flexible enough to permit critical revision. This conception allows us to retain a robust notion of normativity while acknowledging the dynamic, evolving character of our linguistic and social lives.

Understanding agreements as thresholds rather than endpoints, then, reframes their philosophical significance. Rather than treating agreement as the resolution of disagreement, we can view both as integral to an ongoing process of understanding. Agreements, then, are not static endpoints but provisional alignments that exist within a dynamic interplay of perspectives.

This reframing has direct implications for our understanding of deep disagreements. If agreements themselves are liminal then deep disagreements too are never as insurmountable as they may appear. Disagreements are not to be seem, then, as failures of rationality but as opportunities to revisit, revise, and clarify the terms of agreement. Their perceived finality dissolves when we recognize the liminal nature of the agreements they challenge.

In the following section, I will extend these observations by examining how the liminal nature of agreements reshapes our understanding of deep disagreements. Drawing on Robert Fogelin's notion of deep disagreements as conflicts rooted in incompatible "forms of life", I argue that the shared human form of life provides a foundation for navigating such disagreements. By situating this analysis within

Wittgenstein's insights on meaning, I aim to show that the very frameworks that generate deep disagreements are also the grounds for their potential resolution.

3. Rethinking Deep Disagreements Through Liminality

Robert Fogelin (1985) is often credited with coining the term "deep disagreement". He introduced it to draw attention to a striking phenomenon in philosophical argumentation: a kind of disagreement that, unlike more superficial ones, arises from a clash between framework propositions or fundamental principles underlying our reasoning practices. He defines deep disagreement as a fundamental conflict between two parties where the dispute is not merely over facts or values but extends to the very framework of their reasoning: "[W]e get a deep disagreement when the argument is generated by a clash of framework propositions" (Fogelin 1985, 5). These disagreements are difficult to resolve because the parties involved lack the common background required for effective argumentation – they differ on standards of evidence, meaning, and even rationality itself. Giving this, Fogelin famously concludes that deep disagreement is, by its nature, impervious to rational resolution.

Since Fogelin's paper, it has become customary to distinguish between superficial and deep disagreements depending on whether rational evaluation is possible. Most disagreements over epistemic principles are relatively shallow. They can, at least in principle, be resolved through time, deliberation, and appeal to shared standards. In contrast, disagreements over fundamental beliefs – those that are not grounded in more basic assumptions – are considered *deep*, precisely because they concern the very conditions that make belief and understanding possible.

A distintive feature of Fogelin's conception is that it finds its roots in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. While Wittgenstein did not explicitly address "deep disagreement", his ideas – particularly in *Philosophical Investigations* and in *On Certainty* – laid the groundwork for later debates on the topic. Central to this connection is his notion of "form of life". Broadly understood, Wittgenstein's "forms of life" provide the normative and conceptual frameworks shared by members of a given culture, shaping the rationality of their practices and defining what counts as reasonable or meaningful within that context[6]. According to Fogelin, then, the clash underlying deep disagreement is ultimately a clash between "forms of life".

[6] Fogelin's work inspired a significant body of research. For instance, Turner and Wright (2005) distinguish disputes resolvable through argument from those beyond rational resolution. Lavorerio (2020) interprets Fogelin's theory as a form of relativism akin to Bernard Williams' relativism of distance. Melchior (2024) critiques the term "deep disagreement" and argues for alternative theories of disagreement, while Octav Popa (2022) challenges the idea that deep disagreements are categorically distinct from ordinary disagreements. Godden and Brenner (2010) explore how reason and persuasion might operate even within deep disagreements. Regardless of my sympathies to some of these works, my goal here is not to pursue all these avenues but to show that the Wittgensteinian concept of "form of life", rather than being an irremediable cause of deep disagreement, is its cure – if we abandon the notion

Yet beyond Fogelin's skeptical account – according to which deep disagreements are inherently immune to rational resolution because they involve foundational frameworks – there is no single conception of what constitutes rational disagreement[7].

Despite this diversity, I believe that at least as a starting point for thinking about deep disagreements and their consequences – rather than for providing a definitive taxonomy – the intuitions underlying Fogelin's view still hold. In other words, I am assuming that the notion of deep disagreement (at least in that they are fundamental and persistent) is well established and has sparked productive debates in areas as diverse as political theory, Wittgensteinian exegesis (mainly around the notion of "form of life", as in Fogelin, but also more recently from hinge epistemology[8]), and discussions of contextualism and relativism[9]. It is, by now, a self-sustaining field with its own networks of cross-reference and a relatively stable

that resolution requires fixed, absolute agreements. We somehow have to decide whether that is something we have to resign to or, contrariwise, acknowledge as if it were our birth's right, so to speak.

[7] Hales (2025), for instance, distinguises between disagreements about beliefs, values, emotions, and actions. Vid. note 2, above for more references. Since it is completely impossible to echo all the relevant works in this regard, I will limit here myself to pointing out a recent work that includes and comments a large number of them. Arroyo (2024) carries out a fairly exhaustive tour of many of the existing characterizations of deep disagreements, dividing them into "two ideal or paradigmatic forms that [he] calls 'models of deep disagreement.' The 'logical model' conceives deep disagreements as contexts where there is a conflict of propositions (or 'beliefs') that have the peculiarity of not being rationally assessable. [...] On the other hand, the 'dialectical model', unlike the logical model, is holistic and conceives deep disagreements as clashes of belief systems" (Arroyo 2024, 608). As Arroyo rightly points out, both models seem to be present in Fogelin's seminal work. I want to interpret this to mean that the important thing is not whether the disagreement is about certain particular beliefs or, on the contrary, about entire belief systems, but the depth to which the disagreement occurs, and although this is already pointed out in everything said so far in the main body of the text, I would like to highlight it because the debate has been led in another direction. The question then becomes: how much depth is necessary for a disagreement to be deep? And, does agreement, at such depth, depend exclusivelly on rational factors?

[8] In this context, hinge epistemology holds that there is a class of commitments – hinge commitments – which play a fundamental role in our structure of belief and rational evaluation: they are the most basic general presuppositions of our world views not subject themselves to rational justification, but which make it possible for us to evaluate certain beliefs or doubts as rational. Drawing on Wittgenstein's epistemology and within the conceptual framework that has shaped the so-called "hinge epistemology", Pritchard (2018) has explored the idea that disagreements over one's hinge commitments would seem to be a paradigm case of deep disagreement. Another prominent advocate of hinge epistemology as the correct interpretation of *On Certainty*, Annalisa Coliva (2025), defines deep disagreement as the kind of disagreement that depends on different and incompatible hinges, which prevent parties from utilizing a common epistemic method or practice to rationally resolve the disagreement. Ranalli (2020) also applies hinge epistemology to the issue of deep disagreements. According to Ranalli, a certain non-epistemic interpretation of our relationship with hinge commitments lends support to pessimism about deep disagreements (i.e., the thesis that such disagreements are rationally irresolvable). My own account here is that, the recognition of the liminal nature of deep disagreements shows that epistemic interpretations of Wittgenstein's hinges are theoretical impositions, and that, contrary to what Ranalli defends, being optimistic in relation to deep disagreements is possible only if we interpret non-epistemically our relationship with hinge commitments.

[9] Cf. MacFarlane (2007) and Cappelen y Hawthorne (2009); and Bahgramian and Coliva (2019).

conceptual repertoire. My intention, from within this space, is not to redefine deep disagreement, but rather to question whether such disagreements are truly as deep as they appear – by offering a *sui generis* interpretation of Wittgenstein's "form of life".

But before moving on, I want to mention the contributions of María Baghramian, particularly her efforts to bring the debate on deep disagreement into contact with to real-world cases in politics and cross-cultural understanding. Baghramian (2015) has explored the possibility that deep disagreements might lead to extreme relativism, where "anything goes". She, however, offers a perspectivist approach to deep disagreement, viewing such disagreements as conflicts between incommensurable perspectives. Resolving them, she argues, requires acknowledging the legitimacy of these perspectives within their respective contexts. Her approach thus embraces a form of philosophical and epistemic pluralism. She proposes that moderate relativism should not be understood merely as a doctrine or fixed thesis, but as a philosophical *stance* – a broad orientation with significant normative implications. Embracing this stance, she contends, can cultivate intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, tolerance, humility, and curiosity.

For Baghramian, intellectual humility is especially important in navigating deep disagreements. She presents it as a constructive means of approaching such conflicts – one that avoids both unproductive relativism and rigid polarization. A mindset oriented toward dialogue and mutual understanding becomes, in this view, essential for engaging with disagreement in a meaningful and productive way. However, despite the appeal of her position, I cannot help but feel that both her emphasis on humility and Fogelin's resignation are, in different ways, expressions of what Richard Bernstein (1983; 1992) famously described as *Cartesian anxiety*.

Bernstein defines Cartesian anxiety as the fear that without a secure foundation for knowledge, we risk falling into chaos, relativism, or intellectual nihilism. As writes: "[e]ither there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos" (Bernstein 1983, 18). I would argue that Wittgenstein's later philosophy aims to dissolve this anxiety – not by offering a new foundation, but by reconfiguring how we understand rationality and disagreement. It is from this refusal of foundational anxiety that the liminal reading of "*form of life*" gains its philosophical traction – precisely where resignation and humility fall short.

4. Humility or Anxiety?

As I have just suggested, Baghramian's stance, in my view, does not fully embrace the brighter aspects of our epistemic condition. The intellectual humility she advocates seems to conceal a certain disappointment with our epistemic state – as though the absence of certainties capable of definitively resolving deep disagreements were a regrettable limitation. In this light, humility begins to resemble a consolation prize

rather than a virtue in its own right. What this anxiety ultimately reveals is a dissatisfaction with the kind of certainty our form of life can offer – a certainty that, it seems, falls short of our expectations or needs.

These expectations, once again, can be traced back to Plato's notion that the ordinary world is inherently flawed by movement, change, and instability. This perspective is sometimes, mistakenly, attributed to Wittgenstein's notion of a "form of life", casting him as a relativist. More specifically, motivated in part by his attention to the diversity of human experience, some interpretations of Wittgenstein associate "forms of life" with a kind of cultural relativism: Does the notion of 'forms of life' commits Wittgenstein to a form of relativism or not?[10] Can members of different conceptual communities meaningfully engage with one another on Wittgenstein's view? Isn't our shared form of life a sufficient common ground for reaching satisfactory agreements?

The problem is that if we limit ourselves to noting only the few places where Wittgenstein uses the expression "form of life"[11], that is, if we choose to stay with the letter rather than with the spirit of what he might have meant, we run the risk that the trees prevent us from seeing the forest. Thus, while it is possible to draw contradictory interpretations – such as an biological reading (where "forms of life" are patterns of behavior rooted in our nature, cf. Garver 1994) and a cultural reading (in which "forms of life" are social constructions providing the context for meaning, cf. Baker and Hacker 2009; Glock 1996) – we will do better to pursue an integrative account. On this view, Wittgenstein's "forms of life" are understood as an intersection of the biological and the cultural, functioning as a background that makes both language and human action intelligible (Cf. Cavell 1979 and 1989; Moyal Sharrock 2015).

According to Wittgenstein, learning our mother tongue is not merely acquiring a language; it is also an initiation into a form of life. To learn a language is, in essence, to adopt a particular worldview. This characteristic is shared by all forms of life. However, nothing guarantees that the resulting worldview will be identical for all participants in a given form of life. For this reason, if sharing a form of life is the condition for agreement, then the possibility of deep disagreement is an inherent feature of that same condition. Such disagreements can arise even among those who share the same form of life, language, and worldview.

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[10] Different relativistic interpretations of Wittgenstein's thought, some stronger, others not so strong or even in favor of a healthy amount of relativism, can be found in Arrington (1989), Ashton (2019, 2020), Baker (1991), Chauviré (2020), Gellner (1998), Glock (2008), Kusch (2016, 2018), Rorty (1993), Tonner (2017) and Trigg (1991), to name just a few.

[11] Wittgenstein mentions the concept of "form(s) of life" only 8 times in all his writings, four of these mentions can be found in the *Philosophical Investigations* (IF §§ 19, 23, 241, Part II.i p. 174) one in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (§§331, 630), another one in "Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness" (p. 397), and the last one in *On Certainty* (§358).

What is often overlooked is that Wittgenstein distinguishes between *forms of life* in the plural and *form of life* in the singular[12]. While learning a specific mother tongue is part of every particular form of life, the act of learning a language itself is part of the broader *human* form of life. If we focus exclusively on the plurality of forms of life, it may seem that being a stranger to a another's form of life constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to cross-cultural agreements through rational means. But if we recognize that the diverse forms of life are simply expressions of the broader human form of life, we may find that agreement, though difficult, is not impossible. This is because we share a fundamental common ground – for example, being human and possessing language or the capacity to learn one. As Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*: "The common human way of acting is the frame of reference by which we interpret a strange language" (PI §206). This shared frame allows us to make sense of difference and navigate the challenges of intercultural agreements.

This interpretation of the concept of "form of life" offers a philosophical lens that helps explain why some disagreements resist conventional forms of resolution. It brings us face to face with the moral and existential dimensions of disagreement, reminding us that our failures to reach consensus often stem from deeper differences in how we live and see the world. But, recognizing these differences is the first step toward resolving any disagreement, no matter how deep it may seem. Intellectual humility is valuable only if it does not involve underestimating the potential embedded in our shared form of life. This reading does not erase the depth of disagreement, but reframes it as part of the shared terrain of our humanity – where difference and mutual intelligibility are not mutually exclusive. To paraphrase Hölderlin: "Where there is disagreement, agreement also grows".

5. Deep Disagreements and the Potential for Resolution

In the *Investigations*, agreement in form of life is presented as contingent – so intersubjective understanding is not guaranted in advance. But it does not follow that Wittgenstein was skeptical about the possibility of reaching such an understanding; if anything, he deniedy that it dependes exclusively on rational factors. When, in the second part of the *Investigations*, he writes about the lion – remarking that even if a lion could speak, we could not understand him (IF II.xi, 225) – his point is that agreement requires the shared framework of a human, in our case, "form of life", which is what enables mutual understanding and interpretation. Or more precisely: "our agreement is... in form of life" (PI §241).

[12] Cavell (1989), Conway (1989), and Moyal-Sharrock (2015) are three well known exceptions.

> "It is [...] important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them" (IF, II.xi, p. 225).

Wittgenstein's point in this passage is that understanding falters when there is no shared background of human practices. In the lion's case, the barrier lies not in vocabulary or syntax, but in the absence of any broader connection between what is said and the life in which saying it would have meaning. Human beings, by contrast – even those whose customs seem remote or unfamiliar – remain within a range of possible comprehension. Though their language may at first resist interpretation, we can imagine establishing links between their words and the patterns of behavior, reactions, and expectations that accompany them. In such cases, understanding becomes conceivable – not because of abstract reasoning, but because we are capable of adjusting our perspective, of relating what they do and say to the framework of human life we also inhabit. When understanding occurs, it does so not by inference alone, but through a widening of our perceptual and practical horizon.

These reflections point to a crucial distinction: while some beings (like the lion) remain beyond the reach of mutual understanding due to the absence of shared practices, human beings – no matter how culturally distant – remain within the horizon of possible intelligibility. This intelligibility is not automatic, nor guaranteed by reason alone, but it is structurally possible because of our shared form of life. And it is precisely this possibility, however fragile, that casts doubt on the idea of insurmountable disagreement.

The strong thesis, then, is this: no disagreement is so deep that agreement is impossible. Ultimately, it depends on where we place emphasis – on the objective features of the disagreement or the subjective dispositions of those involved. While both undoubtedly play a role, my argument is that no disagreement is insurmountable if the willingness – or unwillingness – to reach agreement is the decisive factor.

If we, like Fogelin and nearly everyone that followed him, assume that deep disagreements arise from a clash of forms of life, then neither rational nor objective factors can definitely resolve the disagreement. What is really at stake is our mutual interest in one another – the acknowledgment of our respective forms of life (belonging to one is what makes us capable of acknowledging the others'). In other words, resolution hinges on acknowledging the otherness of one's interlocutor – their subjectivity, interests, prejudices, and experiences. Equally – and perhaps even more importantly – it depends on recognizing that each of us is an "other" to everyone else, and must likewise be acknowledged.

This conclusion draws together the central threads of my argument: agreements are liminal and dynamic, never final; deep disagreements are not fixed impasses but invitations to engage, listen, and to acknowledge the others. Through the shared human form of life, we possess the tools to transform even the deepest disagreements into possibilities for mutual understanding. This might involve, for example, acknowledging the different paths that other forms of life have taken. Rather than fearing the depth of disagreement, we might instead come to see it as a pathway toward more meaningful, more human forms of agreement.

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