

# Familiarity and Forms of Life\*

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*ABSTRACT.* The aim of this paper is to shed new light on the concept of “familiarity,” and to outline a Wittgensteinian point of view on the problem. In so doing, a central notion in Wittgenstein’s philosophy will be discussed, namely, the “form of life”. It will be shown that offering a “transcendental perspective” on this concept could provide some essential theoretical tools to better understand the meaning and sense of the notion of “familiarity”. For this reason, the original aim of the work appears to be indeed twofold: on the one hand, familiarity will be better understood through a deep insight on the notion “form of life”. On the other, the discussion about familiarity will represent the point of departure to interpret one of the most debated notions in Wittgensteinian philosophy, the one of “Lebensform”. In particular, since both concepts are related to the “inconceivable,” introduced by Wittgenstein as the “unheard of,” we believe that a combined discussion of them could be particularly productive.

*KEYWORDS.* Familiarity; Feeling of Familiarity; Form of Life; Perceptual Familiarity; Transcendental Philosophy; Discrepancy Attribution Hypothesis.

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The notion of “familiarity” has been largely discussed not only in philosophy, but also in psychology and epistemology. Despite such discussions, a unitary definition of it seems to be lacking, maybe due to its trivial connection with the realm of the obvious and everyday life, which makes it almost impossible to observe it from an external perspective. For this reason, the aim of this paper is to offer a new insight on it, proposing a Wittgensteinian perspective on the problem. In particular, challenging the notion of *form of life* from a “transcendental” point of view will provide us with the necessary conceptual tools to reinterpret this notion. That is why the main aim of this paper will be indeed twofold: in elucidating the highly disputed concept of *form of life*, a better understanding of familiarity will come to light; in turn, the discussion about familiarity will represent the pretext to deeply understand one of the most debated concepts in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, namely the one of “Lebensform”. Therefore, the two notions will turn out to be strictly intertwined, considering also their relationship with the dimension of the “inconceivable,” also understood as the “unheard of”.

The paper develops in five sections. Section one provides a brief and general overview on the concept of familiarity, focusing on its nature as it is depicted by psychology and epistemology, two disciplines which tend to interpret it as a kind of feeling. It will emerge that, despite those attempts, a unitary and specific definition of it is still missing and some central characteristics related to it are being ignored. Section two moves from the uncertainties sketched in part one, challenging the problem from a philosophical—in particular phenomenological—perspective and legitimating a Wittgensteinian point of view on it. Specifically, section three analyzes Gordon Lyon’s interpretation of the feeling of familiarity in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, taking on a critical position against it. Section four, which represents the core of the argument, shows that a proper understanding of the notion of familiarity is strictly interconnected

with a redefinition of the notion of *form of life*. Consequently, the stringent interconnection between the notion of familiarity and the one of form of life will be elucidated, thanks to their mutual relationship with the realm of the inconceivable, introduced by Wittgenstein as the realm of the “unheard of” and by means of a “transcendental” perspective on forms of life.

Finally, section five presents an alternative account of the notion of familiarity, which will turn out to be a “granular” one, acting on a micro-level and influencing the development of the coupling and decoupling with the environment that the subject interacts with.

## 1. An Overview on familiarity as a feeling

One field of study in which the notion of familiarity is traditionally discussed is psychology, together with epistemology. The central question challenged by these disciplines concerns the nature of familiarity and concentrates on the possibility to interpret it as a feeling. Despite the attempts to provide a precise definition<sup>1</sup> of it, a unitary account seems to be lacking, for multiple reasons. First of all, *feelings* themselves are difficult to define, especially when trying to distinguish them from emotions. From a general stance, feelings differ from emotions in that the latter have a positive or negative valence and present a particular physiology<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, similarly to emotions, feelings vary in intensity and are directed to a specific appraisal<sup>3</sup>. What is peculiar to feelings is that they are generally more directed to the development of cognitive processes, rather than to the affective sphere of human experience, and that they should not be confused with sensations<sup>4</sup>.

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1 WHITTLESEA & WILLIAMS 1998; 2000; 2001; GARCIA-MARQUEZ & MACKIE 2001.

2 MEYLAN 2014.

3 TERONI 2017, 29.

4 The word “sensation” refers to the localized reactions to external stimuli perceived on the body. Sensations are spatiotemporally contextualized, resulting from the active

This characterization also involves the feeling of familiarity: in general, familiarity as a feeling is defined as the sense of having prior experience of something, independently on whether one actually has it<sup>5</sup>. This turns out to be a rather vague definition, especially because it underlines the fact that reference to prior experience must not be necessarily actual. This vagueness is also related to the difficulty of observing from the outside a condition constantly experienced by subjects, an element constituting and shaping our daily worldly relations. As a matter of fact, one of the main questions, which needs to be answered, concerns the frequency with which this feeling emerges: do we experience a feeling of familiarity whenever we encounter familiar objects, persons, or contexts? If so, how should we define it? Contemporary epistemology and psychology are trying to provide a solution to this problem, including the feeling of familiarity in the category of the so-called “epistemic feelings,” which build up a group of feelings not necessarily connected to the affective dimension. Also known as “metacognitive feelings,” epistemic feelings are in fact mental states, playing a self-normative role during the development of a subject’s experience. Indeed, they “inform” the subject about the experiential flow<sup>6</sup> she’s encountering, signaling changes on a micro-level. Albeit acting on a micro-level, their effect is displayed on the surface, since they can foster or, on the contrary, inhibit a particular action<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, in so doing they necessarily conditionate the affective space as well as the bodily reaction of the subject—or, better, her action tendency—who might *feel* at ease or not in a particular situation, depending on the fluency of her interaction. To understand this point, it might be useful to narrowly observe one of the most debated epistemic feelings, namely, the “feeling of knowing”. An example provided by Arango- Muñoz and Michaelian in their review on epistemic feelings might be useful to understand it. They write:

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reaction of the body and the passive reception of the external environment. For a phenomenological insight on the concept, see: GANDER 2020, 82.

5 WHITTLESEA, 1993; WHITTLESEA AND WILLIAMS, 2000

6 See: ARANGO- MUÑOZ & MICHAELIAN 2014; ARANGO- MUÑOZ 2019; DOKIC 2012.

7 See: MEYLAN 2014.

Imagine that you're participating in a TV quiz show such as Question pour un champion or Jeopardy, where participants compete to answer general knowledge questions. Each participant should press the buzzer if and only if he knows the answer to the given question: pressing the buzzer gives one the opportunity to earn points by answering the question, but if one presses the buzzer but is then unable to answer the question, one loses points. Moreover, each participant, if he is going to press the buzzer, should do so as quickly as possible, since if another contestant presses it first, he loses the opportunity to answer the question. In this situation, you press the buzzer, in some cases, because the answer to the question immediately comes to mind. But in many cases, you press the buzzer before having retrieved the answer, relying on a gut feeling that tells you that you'll easily be able to retrieve it. This is the feeling of knowing (FOK).<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is no guarantee that the participant will effectively answer the question, once pressed the buzzer. In fact, her sudden reaction relies on a certain level of pre-comprehension of the topic, based on previous encounters with the same or related arguments. As the authors underline, the feeling of knowing is a «gut feeling», something difficult to conceptualize and sharply define, but instinctively connected with a certain degree of *familiarity*. Needless to say, in case the participant had no clue at all on the subject, she would have avoided to press the buzzer: that's why it is important to underline to what extent the action of epistemic feelings can foster or inhibit a specific action, influencing the *bodily responsiveness* of the subject. We could dare a generalization, identifying basically two different categories of reactions: those connected to the *novelty* of the stimulus and those connected to *familiarity*, in general. In the first case, the bodily perception of the general situation is neutral, if not unclear. The subject perceives the incapacity to make a move, or to act, taking

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8 ARANGO- MUÑOZ, MICHAELIAN 2014, 99.

distance from her actions and consciously reflecting on what she's going to do; while in the second cases her heartbeat will go faster, and her moves will proceed without further hesitation or reflection. Therefore, we can say that epistemic feelings are essentially *embodied*: they are not only displayed in the reaction of a particular subject, but are indeed bodily *felt* as well.

Based on the general distinction between novelty and familiarity, we might say that the degree of familiarity, which characterizes the reaction to specific stimuli, could represent the deep core of all epistemic feelings. In particular, this interconnection can be observed considering, for example, the “tip-on-the-tongue” feeling (TOT feeling), often confused with the feeling of knowing. When encountering the TOT feeling, while trying to recall a specific word or concept in a precise context, the subject collects the familiar traces she has at her disposal, getting always closer to the word she wants to express. The incapacity to do so, despite the degree of familiarity underlying this process, generates hesitancy in carrying on the action of recalling and ultimately producing a stalemate. Moreover, this hesitancy is shown in specific facial expressions (e.g., frowning, raising the eyebrows, closing the eyes, etc.), underlining the fact that epistemic feelings can be externalized in terms of bodily interactions. This is one of the cases where the action of an epistemic feeling clearly influences the reaction of a subject and her action tendency, following the general distinction we presented between novel and familiar stimuli.

An exhaustive review of all epistemic feelings would go far beyond the purpose of this contribution and has been already done by other experts on the field<sup>9</sup>; however, it is interesting to highlight the central role played by the feeling of familiarity in relation to them. One could think, for example, of the feeling of error, the feeling of forgetting or the feeling of confidence: they all rely on a particular degree of familiarity with the experience the subject is undergoing. However, this connection can only be *grasped*, but difficultly explained. It might

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9 ARANGO-MUÑOZ 2019.

be intuitive to understand familiarity as a tracing element characterizing the subject's relation to the world, but any definition that claims to go beyond the domain of intuition would be doomed to failure. As Smith underlines, feelings represent a preconceptual and preverbal relationship, which is scarcely verbalized or expressed through a predicate and should be rather grasped by pure intuition<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, pure intuition and common sense would in turn ignore one important characteristic of familiarity, which represents one of the main topics discussed in psychology: the connection between familiarity and discrepancy. As a matter of fact, according to Whittlesea and Williams<sup>11</sup>, the feeling of familiarity emerges mostly in moments when the subject perceives *unexpected familiarity*. For example, meeting a friend when travelling abroad without expecting it would elicit a stronger feeling of familiarity than meeting him at home, although meeting him abroad would actually represent a disruption in the expected evolution of that particular experience<sup>12</sup>. Trying to relate this aspect to the example provided at the beginning of the paragraph, it might be said that the participant of the quiz, when perceiving that she could be able to recall the topic of the question, would perceive a strong feeling of familiarity because of the de-contextualized situation in which those traces are recalled. We will go back to this aspect later, when discussing the concept of the "inconceivable," or the "unheard of".

Although problematic, the relationship between familiarity and discrepancy can be conceived without many troubles, since it relies on already perceived stimuli, which are just encountered though in a different context than usually expected. This point generates some problems, especially considering another important aspect of our discussion, namely, the role of *expectations*, which play a key role when analyzing the encountering of familiar elements in unexpected contexts. Which degree of expectation characterizes the "unexpected"

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10 SMITH 1976, 93.

11 WHITTLESEA & WILLIAMS 1998; 2000.

12 WHITTLESEA & WILLIAMS 1998; 2000.

familiarity? Which elements can build up different expectations in different contexts? Does familiarity emerge only when unexpected? Contemporary discussion on epistemic feelings and on familiarity as such do not investigate this issue deeply: remember that Whittlesea and Williams vaguely define familiarity as “the sense” of having encountered something before, independently from the actuality of this previous experience or from the specific degree of expectation. For these reasons, we believe that a philosophical point of view on this issue—even though often implicit—should be thoroughly considered, since it might “integrate” the psychological perspective presented in this paragraph.

## 2. Familiarity and Philosophy: from phenomenology to a Wittgensteinian perspective

If in psychology and epistemology familiarity is mostly regarded as a feeling, in philosophy it has not always been the object of a direct discussion and has not reached a commonly shared definition. In this scenario, phenomenology undoubtedly represents one of the most fruitful traditions thematizing the realm of the *familiar*, even without putting it always forward explicitly as a problem to be challenged. It is sufficient to think about the father of the phenomenological tradition, Edmund Husserl, to find out that one of the most famous statements in *Crisis of European sciences* implies that philosophers should thematize «the obvious»<sup>13</sup>. Husserl regards it as a genuine *mission* and as a necessary conceptual torsion that needs to be done, in an era where the objectivation of science and its reduction to a mere data collection implies the loss of the original purpose for humanity. That is why he proposes to orient the philosophical reflection on the *lifeworld* dimension, regarded as the world of experience as such, the daily world we live and act in, together with intersubjective connections<sup>14</sup>

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13 HUSSERL 1970 [1954].

14 HUSSERL 1970 [1954], §§28-55.



displayed with tradition, culture, and common history. The ease with which we can grasp Husserl's idea goes together with the difficulty of a unique definition of the lifeworld dimension, maybe because of its strict intertwining with the concept of *familiarity*.

In the phenomenological environment, Husserl has not been the only one focusing on the realm of everyday life. As a matter of fact, proposing a much more concrete and sociological development of the phenomenological reflection, Thomas Schütz, both in *The Homecomer*, and in *Structures of the lifeworld*, discusses familiarity in a twofold way. First, he describes a situation where someone goes back home after having been far from it for a while. The distance generated by this experience makes him see the familiar surroundings he was used to under a new light<sup>15</sup>, together with a modification of his "feeling at home," generally described as the «highest degree of familiarity and intimacy»<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, Schütz depicts familiarity with more neutral tones, as the basis of our «stock of knowledge». In particular, he underlines that «I familiarize myself with the 'relevant' elements and aspects of the world only insofar as it is necessary to master the situation»<sup>17</sup>. That's why he recognizes different degrees of familiarity depending on the context: in his view, this notion seems to have a *functional* and *regulative* role, helping the subject to orient her action in everyday as well as new situations. A further aspect thematized in these pages is the connection between familiarity and *typicality*: according to Schütz,

To be sufficiently familiar with something means that it can be 'concretely' determined with the aid of typification at hand in the stock of knowledge, in order to deal with the plan-determined necessities of the situation<sup>18</sup>.

The way subjects act and react in specific contexts builds up a typified

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15 SCHÜTZ 1945, 370.

16 SCHÜTZ 1945, 370.

17 SCHÜTZ 1973, 139.

18 SCHÜTZ 1973, 146.

bunch of knowledge, which is constantly and unconsciously re-enacted each time a particular situation is faced. The relation between familiarity, typicality, and habituality has been largely discussed in phenomenology. These considerations will also play a crucial role in the proposal for a re-definition of the concept of familiarity. However, even if we recognize that phenomenology plays a central role in thematizing and questioning the main features of familiarity, some issues related to this concept remain unsolved if relying exclusively on this perspective. In the first place, it is still unclear whether familiarity should be considered as a precondition or as a result of our practices. In fact, if on the one hand it is essential for the establishment of the intersubjective realm, as Husserl's reflection on the *lifeworld* dimension seems to suggest<sup>19</sup>, on the other, it represents the core of sedimentation and typification—as underlined by Schütz—showing a resultative character. As a matter of fact, in some manuscripts written at the end of the 1930s, Husserl describes the so-called «Vertrautheit» as one of the key elements to establish the socio-communicative world, which is in turn the basis for the development of a specific home-world (*Heimwelt*). Secondly, its being a feeling or not should be challenged as well. Husserl does not describe a specific feeling of familiarity. However, he thematizes the *felt* role of norms in our daily interaction with the environment, as directly influenced by the affective dimension<sup>20</sup>. To this respect, Wehrle talks about «affective intentionality», to express the way motivation, curiosity, and the social dimension in general influence how subjects direct their attention to specific objects of perception<sup>21</sup>, guided by interest. Re-interpreting the Husserlian well-known concept of intentionality, which could be roughly understood as the property to be always directed towards something<sup>22</sup>, Wehrle expresses the intertwining between affective and cognitive dimensions of the human interaction with the world.

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19 HUSSERL 1973b.

20 HUSSERL 1973a.

21 WEHRLE 2015. See: «[...] so erscheinen Gefühle als die eigentlichen Motoren und Quellen des Interesses» (HUSSERL 2004, 101).

22 GANDER ET AL. 2010, 153-7.

According to her, there's no neutral perception, since experience is always imbued with social characterization. However, in this relationship, familiarity (*Vertrautheit*) represents an element influencing the affective dimension of intentionality, but is not pinpointed and discussed as an "isolated" feeling. Since it seems impossible to reach such a level of accuracy in the exposition of this concept, even integrating the psychological arguments with a philosophical perspective, we should start by considering the possibility to choose for an all-encompassing definition of familiarity. Our proposal, for this purpose, is to start from the phenomenological stance about familiarity and look at later developments of the history of philosophy, in particular at Wittgenstein's account, combining the different perspectives on the problem. As we hope to show during our argumentation, each perspective gives justice to one particular aspect of familiarity, which turns out to be a complex and multi-layered notion.

Wittgenstein is not generally considered as a philosopher who expressively addressed the problem of familiarity and its implications: even though some interpreters recognize the centrality of Wittgenstein's discussion on the later concept of *Certainty*<sup>23</sup>—which presents some points of contact with the process of sedimentation and the constitution of typicality—familiarity in its specific role is often ignored in connection to Wittgenstein's philosophy. Nevertheless, reading through the lines of his later works could provide us with a new perspective on the problem. We believe that integrating the offered overview with a Wittgensteinian insight could help us filling some gaps related to the meaning of familiarity, even though a debate on it seems to be lacking in the literature.

To reach a redefinition of familiarity, our strategy will develop in three steps: first of all, we will discuss one of the few direct arguments on Wittgenstein's account of familiarity, offered by the work of Gordon Lyon in the 1990s. Secondly, we will argue that a direct clarification of the notion of familiarity is made possible by a deep

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23 MOYAL-SHARROCK 2005.

understanding of the highly debated notion of *form of life*, which will be challenged through a transcendental perspective. As we hope to show, this investigation touches all the elements depicted in the previous paragraphs, providing an overarching and general framework of the concept.

### 3. The problem of perceptual familiarity

When talking about secondary literature on Wittgenstein's account on familiarity, Gordon Lyon's paper on the notion of «perceptual familiarity» represents one of the most detailed contributions on the topic<sup>24</sup>. According to him, it's improper to talk about a "feeling of familiarity" in a Wittgensteinian sense, since

The distinctive quality of experience of familiarity, which philosophers and psychologists alike have tended to call a "feeling" of familiarity may simply be an amalgam of the quality of facilitated perception characteristic of familiar stimuli and the occurrence of an explicit, conscious judgment of familiarity<sup>25</sup>.

In particular, he opposes Russell's as well as James's accounts to Wittgenstein's, insofar as they understand familiarity as a feeling, often associated with a gratification of expectations. This reading identifies familiarity with a *positive feeling*, also related to the connection with the perceptual fluency discussed in the first section. Precisely for this reason, Lyon argues that Wittgenstein focuses on a much more general perceptual experience of familiarity, with a neutral and generic tone. In his paper, Lyon writes:

My thesis is that the experience of something looking familiar

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24 LYON 1996.

25 LYON 1996, 94.

is characterized by one's having a relatively detailed perceptual impression of the object in less time and with less effort (less directed perceptual attention) than would be necessary were the object unfamiliar<sup>26</sup>.

In this way, he defines familiarity as an «awareness of unhesitating behavioral responses»,<sup>27</sup> depriving it of both its affective and mental characterization. Behind this refusal there is the impossibility, according to Lyon, to pinpoint the correspondence between a feeling of familiarity and a specific element in perceptual experience: when looking at a specific object, how can one recognize the element eliciting the feeling of familiarity? Is it the object in its totality which is responsible for it, or rather a particular aspect? Moreover, the sensory multiplicity involved in perceptual experience makes it difficult to firmly define which sense should be responsible for the detection of the feeling of familiarity<sup>28</sup>. Lyon underlines that, since perceptual experience is generally complex and multi-layered, it is impossible to track down a single aspect that would function as the source of a feeling of familiarity, which would anyways fall outside every chance of a univocal definition. The author concludes that, for these reasons, there is no need to postulate the existence of a feeling of familiarity, and proposes to rather focus on the way we behave and react in specific situations. As a matter of fact, he argues that something or someone can "look" familiar, even without necessarily "feeling" familiar with it or eliciting a feeling of familiarity of any kind.

What is interesting for our purposes is that at the core of Lyon's account there are some passages taken from section II of Wittgenstein's *Brown Book*, as well as from the *Philosophical Investigations*. In these works, Wittgenstein discusses the relationship between everyday experience and the possible emergence of a feeling of familiarity, as in the following quote:

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26 LYON 1996, 91.

27 LYON 1996, 87.

28 LYON 1996, 89.

Do we have a feeling of familiarity whenever we look at familiar objects? Or do we have it usually? When do we actually have it? It helps us to ask: What do we contrast the feeling of familiarity with? One thing we contrast it with is surprise. One could say: 'Unfamiliarity is much more of an experience than familiarity'<sup>29</sup>.

As Wittgenstein suggests in this passage, one way to approach the meaning of familiarity could coincide with a negative perspective on it. This is one of the arguments Lyon relies on at most, which in a certain way seems to meet some of our thoughts. We cannot deny that, as underlined in the introduction, we are constantly embedded in the realm of familiar experience, that's why unfamiliarity or surprise might represent a strategic point of departure for the analysis of this condition, difficulty approachable from the outside. Regarding this point, one could say that the feeling of familiarity emerges as a sort of "compensation" of the feeling of surprise: when the subject is not impressed or disturbed by a particular situation, then she automatically feels familiar with it. However, this implication is far from being trivial. As the next textual passage pinpoints, the absence of surprise does not imply the emergence of a proper feeling of familiarity. That is why Wittgenstein underlines the contrast between what we imagine to be "familiar" and the emergence of a genuine feeling:

There are feelings of old acquaintance: they are sometimes expressed by a particular way of looking or by the words 'The same old room!' (which I occupied many years before and now returning find unchanged). Equally there are feelings of strange-ness. I stop short, look at the object or man questioningly or mistrustfully, say 'I find it all strange'. But the existence of this feeling of strangeness does not give us a reason for saying that every object which we know well and which does not seem strange to us gives us a feeling of

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<sup>29</sup> WITTGENSTEIN 1969a, 127.

familiarity<sup>30</sup>.

This is one of the main arguments sustaining Lyon's thesis. There seem to be different degrees of familiarity: one level relates to the feeling of warmth, which represents a general positive connotation, another level is related to the *confidence* characterizing everyday experiences and actions. Despite the differences, both nuances seem to be connected to the impossibility of a verbal or even conceptual articulation of this experience, which would make the characterization of a proper feeling of familiarity impossible, as we have already observed in the first paragraph. In his writings, Wittgenstein does not address the feeling of familiarity directly, but describes this difficulty with an analogy, thematizing instead the feeling of similarity:

Does this experience consist in having a peculiar feeling?', I should have to say that it certainly isn't characterized by any such feeling alone, that a most important part of the experience is that of letting my glance oscillate between the two objects, fixing it intently now on the one, now on the other, perhaps saying words of doubts, shaking my head, etc. There is, one might say, hardly any room left for a feeling of similarity between these manifold experiences<sup>31</sup>.

This quote, which supports Lyon's interpretation, explains the idea that, to define a feeling, one should be able to isolate its sensory source, which turns out to be a difficult task when one is involved in the manifold of experience. The focus, according to Wittgenstein, should be rather oriented toward the development of experience alone and to the way the subject behaves in given situations, a statement representing exactly the point of departure for Lyon's argumentation.

As we also read in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

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30 WITTGENSTEIN 2009b, 596.

31 WITTGENSTEIN 1969a, 133.

I know my way about in a room: that is, without needing a moment's reflection, I can find the door, open and shut it, use any piece of furniture, I don't have to look for the table, the books, the chest of drawers or think what can be done with them. That I know my way around will come out in the freedom with which I move about in the room. It will also be manifested in an absence of astonishment or doubt<sup>32</sup>.

The core of the feeling of familiarity, according to Wittgenstein (and to Lyon's interpretation of his writings), seems then to lie in the *reaction* that a subject irreflexively displays when facing a specific place or object and in the automatic response she shows when interacting with the environment. This idea develops coherently with what we said in the introduction about the relationship between the feeling of familiarity and bodily responsiveness. As a matter of fact, moving confidently in a room implies having internalized a pattern, resulting from the continuous encounter with it. This process is described by Lyon as «perceptual familiarity»: things and situations may appear familiar to us, without *striking* us as familiar, and we do not have necessarily to feel it. Considering some aspects, we cannot do nothing but accept this perspective. We believe that Lyon—recalling Wittgenstein—is right in underlying the main role of action and reaction in the investigation about the realm of familiarity. However, as we will see in the next paragraph, it will be argued that this focus does not necessarily need to *reject* the existence of a feeling of familiarity at all. To support this argument, we should move beyond the textual passages where Wittgenstein directly addresses familiarity, as the ones presented above and analyzed by Lyon. As a matter of fact, we believe that a deep understanding of Wittgenstein's account of familiarity might emerge only if we approach and clarify a further central concept of his later philosophy, namely the notion of *form of life*.

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32 WITTGENSTEIN 2009b, §295.



#### 4. A necessary pit stop: understanding Wittgenstein's forms of life

'So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?'-It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life<sup>33</sup>.

This quote represents one of the most discussed textual passages when referring to the notion of form of life. Although some interpreters believe that this concept plays only a marginal role in Wittgenstein's production<sup>34</sup>, others see it as fundamental for the evolution of his thought. Despite this, it is still difficult to understand which meaning Wittgenstein wants to convey with this notion, also considering its scarce occurrences in his writings.

The first possible interpretation is equaling it to "language games". The textual evidence which often leads to such interpretation is the famous quote from the *Philosophical Investigations*, saying:

It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. - Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no - and countless other things. - and to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life<sup>35</sup>.

If we interpret the "is" as a sign of an identity relation, then to different languages correspond different forms of life, characterizing diverse communities. This interpretation makes the concept of form of life a "plural" one. However, there seems to be also a unique human form of life, as opposed to the animal one, strictly connected to the

33 WITTGENSTEIN 2009b, §241.

34 See, for example: HACKER 2015; TAYLOR 1978.

35 WITTGENSTEIN 2009b, §19.

biological constitution of beings, as this passage from *Philosophy of Psychology* suggests:

One can imagine an animal angry, fearful, sad, startled. But hopeful? And why not? A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe that his master will come the day after tomorrow? - And what can he not do here? - How do I do it? - What answer am I supposed to give to this? Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of language. That is to say, the manifestations of hope are modifications of this complicated form of life. (If a concept points to a characteristic of human hand writing, it has no application to beings that do not write.)<sup>36</sup>

Here, the biological connotation of the notion meets the reflections on language we developed before. The mastering of a language is seen at this stage as the key element characterizing the human form of life, as opposed to the animal one. Concerning this point, the notion of form of life is given a “singular” and global meaning, which would theoretically contrast with the plural description founded with reference to different language games. A third option, which could represent a balance between the singular and the plural meaning, is to be found in those interpreters who associate the concept of form of life with a set of rules<sup>37</sup>. Connected to the role of language games, our form of life would set the necessary criteria and norms useful for playing language games correctly. This would mean, referring to the first quote we mentioned in this paragraph, that an *agreement* in the criteria we use would be necessary to intersubjectively play the game and follow the right rules.

Once again, we inevitably face some questions regarding the complexity of this concept: How to define the agreement at the core of

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36 WITTGENSTEIN 2009, §1.

37 OGIEN 2016.

the concept of form of life? Also in this case, there are basically two different ways to understand the meaning of this agreement. On the one hand, it can be seen as explicit consensus among subjects, playing a foundational role, and acting as paradigm to set up rules. On the other, as Moyal-Sharrock suggests, this agreement can be understood as an *instinctive adhesion*, constituted by the way we act and, above all, re-act<sup>38</sup>. Now, this latter way of interpreting it would be justified by the following quote, in which Wittgenstein refers to the set of basic certainties constituting the core of our form of life:

Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well). But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal<sup>39</sup>.

This perspective would also enhance a deeper understanding of the fact that agreeing on a specific language does not mean to agree in opinions, but essentially in *actions*, recalling the quote mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph. It would also explain why Wittgenstein underlines that agreement is displayed on the level of language *use*: as Laugier correctly pinpoints, individuals agree *in language* and not *on language*, basically because this agreement should be interpreted as a sort of coordination *in* the form of life they acquire and, at the same time, actively constitute<sup>40</sup>.

Regarded in this way, the notion of form of life can be observed under a pragmatic and practical light, which can be allowed thanks to a “transcendental” perspective on it. With the word “transcendental” we associate a perspective which goes back to Fichte’s philosophy<sup>41</sup>, but finds moments of reactivation also in modern and contemporary

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38 MOYAL-SHARROCK, 2015.

39 WITTGENSTEIN 1969b, §§358-359.

40 LAUGIER 2015.

41 RAMETTA 2008; RAMETTA 2022.

thinkers<sup>42</sup>. Generally explained, according to the transcendental perspective, philosophical concepts develop autonomously and are displayed *in* actions and *with* actions, where subjects with their embodied constitution play a mediation role, without representing the source of concepts themselves<sup>43</sup>. Focusing on the autonomous development of concepts and the necessary—but not constitutive—role of bodies, *practices* and *actions* obtain the primacy in the constitutions of forms in general and of forms of life in particular. This point represents a key passage to understand that forms of life should not be understood as a paradigm imposed on human actions: as something laying beyond being justified or unjustified, our form of life *is* constituted by reactions, actions, and above all *practices*. A further argument in favor of this reading is given by Wittgenstein himself, who writes that: «the word ‘language game’ is used here to emphasize the fact that speaking a language is part of an activity, or a form of life.»<sup>44</sup> If we read this “or” as inclusive, then the concept of form of life should be interpreted essentially in terms of an *activity*. This interpretation does not exclude the normative role of forms of life as emerged in connection with rules. What is peculiar, instead, is the fact that forms of life do not “impose” themselves on practices: they “emerge” together with them, being essentially *acted* and *enacted*. Due to this distinctive nature, strictly connected with the potentiality and successive execution of actions, forms of life are said to be “groundless” and autonomous, connecting to the transcendental perspective introduced above.

Moreover, this groundlessness seems coherent with the main feature of Wittgenstein’s philosophy: as a matter of fact, he privileges a descriptive perspective, rather than insisting on searching for an ultimate foundation for his philosophical system. That’s why also forms of life can be regarded as ultimately *ungrounded*. Nonetheless, it

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42 RAMETTA 2012.

43 See: ADINOLFI ET AL. 2021, 214. See, in particular, RAMETTA 2022, 122-5. In those pages, he focuses on the role of the subject in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* from a transcendental perspective.

44 WITTGENSTEIN 2009b, §23.

is important to underline that they are not arbitrary, and this apparent discrepancy, together with its resolution, plays a central role when focusing on the connection between forms of life and familiarity. As already said, our idea is that a proper understanding of the notion of form of life might provide the right conceptual tool to reinterpret the concept of familiarity and, in particular, the possibility to discuss the emergence of the feeling of familiarity as presented in Wittgenstein's philosophy. The next paragraph brings this connection to light, proposing a "granular" account of familiarity in relation with forms of life.

## 5. Toward a "granular" account of familiarity

As already observed, Wittgenstein underlines the difficulty to talk about the postulation of a feeling of familiarity; despite this, it's still unsolved whether this obstacle should imply the total rejection of it, as Lyon proposes. All in all, it seems like there is something which could be defined as a peculiar element in the switch from familiar to unfamiliar things in our experiential course and that Wittgenstein identifies in the sensation of *relief*, as we read in the following passage: «Now isn't it the feeling of relief just that which characterizes the experience of passing from unfamiliar to familiar things?»<sup>45</sup> Apparently, there is something that characterizes this transition, although it is not univocally definable. Even though it might appear disappointing, our proposal insists specifically on this point, focusing on the *impossibility* to offer a unitary account of familiarity. As we found in the first paragraph, familiarity can be defined in multiple ways, without necessarily landing to an exclusive definition. However, we believe that this impossibility does not delegitimize the role and the existence of a *sui generis* feeling and, above all, does not diminish the central meaning of familiarity in the development of everyday experience.

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45 WITTGENSTEIN 1969a, 129.

It can be useful to have a closer look at this multiplicity, recalling some crucial characteristics mentioned in the first part: as an *epistemic feeling*, familiarity refers to the way we interact with the external world, informing the subject about disruptions in the experiential flow. But as we have seen with reference to phenomenology, familiarity is also associated with a particular "feeling of warmth", which could be identified with the "relief" Wittgenstein talks about in the switch from unfamiliar to familiar things. The latter can be also associated with being «emotionally discharged» from the tensions we find in unknown situations<sup>46</sup>. As Caminada underlines, from a phenomenological point of view, it implies an implicit «joining the background», which influences the way we perceive our environment, we move around and interact with other people, sharing the focus on actions and instinctive reactions that Wittgenstein and Lyon also propose. Taking all those elements into account, can we really demand the definition of a single, distinctive, conscious affective state? Or, more generally, of a unique feeling of familiarity? Our idea is that, instead of looking for a unique definition of the feeling of familiarity, we should rather resign ourselves to its complex nature and, giving value to it, try to propose a multi-prospective observation of this concept. In what follows, we will observe the main features of this notion with reference to our interpretation of the concept of forms of life, in order to obtain an overarching picture of it.

First of all, we should consider the *embodied nature* of familiarity: the fact that the feeling of familiarity relates to perceptual ease is also connected to *bodily responsiveness*<sup>47</sup>, as we said, and to the way the body interacts with the environment, as Wittgenstein himself underlines<sup>48</sup>. The embodied character of familiarity is mostly unconscious: according to Thomas Fuchs, since familiarity represents the precondition for our lifeworld sharing<sup>49</sup>, it is displayed in our everyday actions, hence it does not need to be thematized as a specific

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46 CAMINADA 2014, 200.

47 See: DINGS 2018.

48 See also: ARANGO- MUÑOZ 2019.

49 FUCHS 2015.

feeling or judgment, which on the contrary is an element Lyon seems to accept<sup>50</sup>. As a matter of fact, even if we agree with the idea that a univocal definition of familiarity would be too reductive, dismissing the reflection on a feeling of familiarity would oversee the *felt character* it displays in bodily responsiveness. The focus on the body, rightly underlined both in Wittgenstein's and Lyon's account, does not reject the idea of a feeling of familiarity; on the contrary, it relies on the fact that also mental states, as for instance epistemic feelings, have an *embodied nature* and above all are shown in our actions<sup>51</sup>. When we presented familiarity as an epistemic feeling, we said that it emerges mostly when disfluency is detected, when something in our everyday experience is perceived as unusual, as underlined by Whittlesea and Williams. In this situation, when trying to recall familiar traces, we *feel* our body reacting in a specific way. The "oscillation of the glance", the "shaking of the head" that Wittgenstein analogically describes in the case of similarity, *are* the elements constituting the *felt character* of familiarity. As such, it is not always felt consciously, and maybe because it rather "crumbles" on a micro-level in everyday actions. That's why one way to think about familiarity could be using an approach which abandons the struggle for a unitary account, analyzing it as a "granular" element, constituting and guiding the development of our experience.

When invoking the transcendental perspective with reference to the concept of form of life<sup>52</sup>, we said that, according to this view, forms of life should be understood as developing autonomously, though not arbitrarily, while displaying in action. Now, closing the circle, we could say that it is familiarity itself that, as a granular element acting on a micro-level, guides and regulates the development of forms of

50 Remember his main thesis: «The distinctive quality of experience of familiarity, which philosophers and psychologists alike have tended to call a "feeling" of familiarity may simply be an amalgam of the quality of facilitated perception characteristic of familiar stimuli and the occurrence on an explicit, conscious judgment of familiarity» (LYON 1996, 94).

51 See: ARANGO- MUÑOZ 2019. In particular, let's think about the peculiar nature of the *tip-on-the-tongue* feeling.

52 RAMETTA ET AL. 2021, 214.

life, which find their embodied nature in the actions and reactions of subjects. In so doing, familiarity allows the basic form of agreement in the intersubjective dimension, preserving the non-arbitrariness of this development. Once again, Wittgenstein offers us some interesting textual elements to rely on, which seem to sustain our proposal. As a matter of fact, in a well-known passage from *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein talks metaphorically about the relationship between the bedrock and the river with reference to the constitution of our form of life. He writes:

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened, and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened, but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other<sup>53</sup>.

As Coliva states, by “mythology” Wittgenstein means a set of «ungrounded presuppositions of our language-games and epistemic practices which can’t sensibly be called into doubt as this would deprive us of those practices, and with them, of the possibility of distinguishing between what is warranted and unwarranted, rational and not rational.»<sup>54</sup> Starting from the pictures of the bedrock and the river, we could use this image to say that familiarity, as a granular, minimal element, can be said to belong to the bedrock and constituting it. At the same time, it develops together with the river,

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53 WITTGENSTEIN 1969b, §§ 95-97.

54 COLIVA 2010, 14. Emphasis added.



shifting with the movement of water. It is the core of our form of life, but evolves with it. This view confirms what we said at the beginning of the first paragraph, when introducing the idea of familiarity as a tracing element, acting mostly on the background. However, a new element has been introduced at this stage, namely the mutual interchange between the two dimensions: following the bedrock-river picture, the tracing element not only guides the development of the experience, but it is in turn modified and constantly reshaped. By now, this interpretation seems to coincide with Lyon's account: since familiarity actively guides and at the same time passively follows the development of forms of life, it is improper to talk about it as a feeling. How can we then satisfy our attempt to legitimate it?

Let's recall for a while what we said about the "negative" perspective on familiarity: if we come back to the passage of the *Brown Book*, in which Wittgenstein questions the necessity of an explicit feeling of familiarity, we read that "surprise" is much more of an experience than familiarity. Moreover, with reference to epistemic feelings, we have seen that *unexpected familiarity* in connection with experiential disruptions elicits a stronger feeling of familiarity. These considerations can function as a valuable starting point to give justice to the feeling of familiarity, but from a different point of view. Instead of helping us in defining or conceptualizing the feeling of familiarity, a "negative approach" might be useful to think about the *emergence* of familiarity as a feeling. Observed in a much more general way, we could think about the moments of disruption during ordinary experience as those in which the role of familiarity emerges and can—without having to—become *conscious*. This statement would slightly clash with Lyon's idea that there is an explicit judgment of familiarity connected with perceptual ease. In this context, on the contrary, *disruption* (and not fluency) represents the element bringing familiarity to consciousness<sup>55</sup>. In a well-known passage from *On Certainty* Wittgenstein asks himself: «What if something *really unheard-of*

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55 See also: WHITTLESEA AND WILLIAMS 1998; 2000.

happened?<sup>56</sup>». The answer is that we would lose the basic coordinates constituting our form of life, the hinges around which our everyday practices develop, in a nutshell: the fundamental, granular familiar traces essential for our form of life. The realm of the *inconceivable* would consequently mine the automatic and instinctive agreement in actions and reactions bonding different subjects in the same form of life. Nonetheless, in our view, this mining has a “positive” connotation, since thinking about the inconceivable represents the point of departure to bring the mythology constituting our form of life to consciousness, generating a distance-taking from the realm of everyday experience, and considering the familiar traces to which we appeal to decode the new situation. This process, in our view, is described in a well-known passage of the philosophical investigations, where Wittgenstein writes:

It is, of course, imaginable that two people belonging to a tribe unacquainted with games should sit at a chessboard and go through the moves of a game of chess; and even with all the appropriate mental accompaniments. (...) But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a game—say into yells and stamping of feet. And now suppose those two people to yell and stamp instead of playing the form of chess that we are used to; and this in such a way that their procedure is translatable by suitable rules into a game of chess. Should we still be inclined to say that they were playing a game? What right would one have to say so?<sup>57</sup>

In our view, encountering a tribe playing “chess” in a new, unusual way would trigger the search for familiar elements in their actions and, at the same time, the conception of new, possible ways of interpreting the expression “playing a game”. Similarly, sticking to the geological metaphor conveyed by the bedrock-river picture, cracking

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56 WITTGENSTEIN 1969b, 67.

57 WITTGENSTEIN 2009b, §200.

the bedrock allows the emergence of the familiar, granular elements. Not only that, but it also allows the establishment of new levels of familiarity, regulated by the previous traces: we might say that the familiar traces can be *sedimented*, building up the basis for the emergence of new practices and constituting the core of forms of life themselves. As a matter of fact, as we have seen, the hinges are not static and fixed, but in a relation of mutual influence between the bedrock and the river. Hence, losing the basic hinges of our everyday experience allows for a renewed search for familiar traces and a distant observation of daily practices, encouraging the emergence of new levels of familiarity.

That's why forms of life are not "arbitrary," as mentioned before: their groundlessness does not equal superficiality, but discloses their *performative* rather than *conceptual* nature, which develops in a disciplined way, following the path offered by the familiar "grains" constituting our bedrock<sup>58</sup>. This trace is reflected in the way we behave, acting mostly in a silent manner; but when moments of disruption occur and the river flow meets the realm of the *inconceivable*, familiarity emerges as a feeling: the geological language helps us also in this case to gain a clearer understanding of the process. Precisely in these moments, when subjects encounter discrepancy, we can say that conscious judgments about our familiar experience can be formulated; otherwise, the tracing action of the familiar traces develops unnoticed. Consequently, "agreement in form of life" implies belonging to the same bedrock-river constellation, which emerges through the practices performed by the subjects with the "grains" of familiar traces, modifying the already sedimented layers with the practices themselves.

Thinking about familiarity in a granular, fluid way, could allow us to accept the diverse definitions we encountered, promoting a mixed account of it. This statement does not equal generality or loss of conceptual depth. On the contrary, it makes justice to the complex

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58 This is also a characteristic of the transcendental reading we propose: the primacy of action does not imply arbitrariness, but a regulated development.

nature of this notion, which permeates our everyday experience and interfaces the emergence of disruption. Familiarity guides our relationship with the world, embracing the basic certainties which allow a fluent experience with our environment. As Lyon underlines, it is difficult to isolate it as a specific and unique feeling, but we believe that it is *felt* by the subject *in* the way she interacts with the world and in terms of bodily responsiveness. This interaction is not an isolated one, but has essentially an intersubjective nature, based on *agreement* interpreted as instinctive adhesion.

## 6. Conclusions

To sum up, the purposes of this paper were essentially two: on the one hand, it offered an overview on the notion of “familiarity,” providing different perspectives on it. In so doing, it gave the opportunity to pursue its second goal, which consists in shading new light on a core concept of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, the well-known notion of “form of life”. Concerning the first aim, we have seen that it is worth discussing familiarity not only from a philosophical, but also from a psychological and epistemological perspective, since it represents the core of diverse aspects of human experience and can be considered as one of the main “epistemic feelings”. In our attempt to gain a deeper understanding of this concept, we proposed to approach it from a Wittgensteinian point of view, which seems to be often overseen by interpreters and secondary literature. Discussing specifically the legitimacy of a “feeling of familiarity” with the help of Lyon’s interpretation, we proposed a mixed account of familiarity, encompassing all dimension in which it is involved.

At the same time, since the notion of form of life is highly discussed, as well, we offered an overview on the different ways to interpret it. Analyzing some textual passages, we offered a *pragmatic* and *performative* connotation of this notion, underlying that forms of life emerge and develop together with practices and actions and

privileging a “transcendental” reading. According to this reading, forms of life are seen to be essentially displayed in practices, evolving together with them and being in constant development. This consideration allowed us to close the circle of our argumentation, considering the role played by the notion of familiarity: questioning the nature of familiarity, we understood it as a “granular” element, playing the tracing role in the autonomous, though not arbitrary evolution of our form of life. In so doing, we underlined that its precarious and all-encompassing nature makes a unique and precise definition of it almost impossible.

As a matter of fact, familiarity represents the core of the practices constituting and legitimating our form of life and at the same time changes with their evolution. Forms of life, in this account, emerge performatively with practices, following the “familiar traces” constituting the bedrock along which the river of our experiential stream flows. Concurrently, those traces allow the emergence of new levels of familiarity, since they modify the bedrock itself with their development. In this process, both familiarity and forms of life become object of self-reflection in connection with the dimension of the “inconceivable” or, as Wittgenstein calls it, the “unheard of”. Disruption and disfluency, in this sense, do not represent an obstacle, but the possibility for redefinition and transformation of everyday practices.

Proposing this reading implies accepting a genuine Wittgensteinian perspective on the problem of familiarity, helping us in solving some problems we detected in the first paragraph: instead of searching for definitions and fixed characterizations, we should rather *observe* and *describe* this notion *in action*. In this way, looking at it as a precondition or as a result for our experience do not represent two alternatives, mutually excluding each other. On the contrary, since familiarity constitutes the bedrock and develops with the river, it represents both the precondition and the result for our everyday experience and should be regarded and analyzed in its paradoxical nature.

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