

How Can an Action Be Symbolical of an Entire Form of Life? Towards a Philosophical Anthropology of Forms of Life

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Abstract: In this article, the objective is to delimit the concept of form of life, a concept commonly used in various fields within the social sciences and in everyday life, but which has had few philosophical formulations in the history of thought. Although related to culture, the form of life is a more practical concept, associated exclusively with human praxis in society. Contrary to the more empiricist proposals, and relying on the symbolism defended by authors such as Cassirer, Sartre and Žižek, this paper argues that the most appropriate method for the study of forms of life is, on the one hand, the phenomenological, since, taken as a totality, the form of life can only be covered from a phenomenological distance that, in turn, leads to a critical reflection on the conditions of possibility of the actions that constitute it. And, on the other hand, it is the symbolic method that must complement the phenomenological attitude, since the understanding of the form of life requires an intellectual effort of decoding to be reconstructed as a symbolized totality through its actions as images-symbols.

1. Introduction

In this article I aim to delimit the concept of form of life, a concept commonly used in many mass media and in everyday life, but which has had few philosophical formulations in the history of thought. Perhaps it is this paradigmatic lack of definition caused by their relationship and even identification with the also labile concept of culture. In this and other articles, I defend and have defended a concept of form of life that is not, however, simply identifiable with the broader one of culture.

The form of life is a more practical concept, related exclusively to human praxis in society and not to the more or less linguistic manifestations of culture, with which it maintains an important relationship but which are not strictly speaking the form of life, rather these manifestations (defined as speeches of different types: literary, philosophical, political, religious, scientific...) justify and reinforce the praxis developed by a given community (these manifestations can be included in the form of life, but then they cease to be literary, religious or political and become acts of integration and identification).

The sections in which this article is divided attempt to explore, respectively, the problematic of how a form of life can be studied *philosophically* (and here I emphasize the modifier *philosophically*) based on the actions carried out by the members of a community; and what must be the strictly philosophical

definition of the form of life that the task entrusted in previous lines puts before us. My conclusions are in this respect that the method for the study of forms of life can only be phenomenological, contrary to the most empiricist proposals, since the whole, the big picture, can only be sought from a phenomenological distance by which to identify (description of the mental image or praxical image) and to reflect critically on the conditions of possibility of actions as well as to reconstruct by an intellectual effort the totality symbolized through its images-symbols. In order to do this, I support my analysis with the proposals of Cassirer, Sartre and Žižek.

2. How Does a Symbolical Action Works?

In addition to its capacity to be charged with a greater meaning, the particular characteristic of the symbol is that of representing another entity. Therefore, a symbolic action is not an action that merely refers to some abstract concept; it is an action that represents another entity, an entity that generally has greater universality and with which the symbol establishes a synecdochical relation of part-whole [4]. But that the whole is in the part and the part represents or stands for the whole is not a relationship free of theoretical burdens. So, in order to deal with symbolic actions, we must take into account and confront the criticisms that this relationship had in one of its earliest and finest formulations in Western thought: Plato's theory of forms.

Plato's theory of forms, exposed mainly in the dialogues *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Parmenides*, expresses, as is well known, the ontological and epistemological need, that every entity on the earthly plane is a copy of an entity on a higher plane who calls the world of ideas, through a relationship of participation or imitation.

In his theory, 5 fundamental principles can be identified [7]: 1. the first is the so-called one-over-many. It means that there is always a relationship between a group and the entity that makes the group the group, as for example, the idea of red gives group identity to red objects. 2. This principle derives from the principle of causality. The idea of red causes a group of "red" objects, just as beauty is the cause of beautiful objects. 3 A third principle is that of uniqueness. There can only be one form or idea with respect to a particular group, that is, there is only one idea of red of which all red objects partake, just as there is only one idea of beauty of which all beautiful objects partake. 4. The fourth principle is that of self-predication (renamed self-instantiation by Bailey, 2009) [1], and endorses that an idea or form is defined by itself, so that the idea of beauty is, in turn, and by itself, beautiful. 5. The fifth principle is that of non-identity or separation. It claims that there must be a separation between the objects that partake of the idea of beauty, otherwise the first principle of one-over-many would be broken, and also, for the same reason there must be separation or non-identity between the objects and the idea of which they partake.

Parmenides, in the dialogue that bears his name, uses complex forms of at least 4 arguments against the theory of forms: the impossibility of knowledge (133a-134e); the argument of likeness (132c-133a); the whole-part argument (130e-131e); and the third man argument (132a-b). I only will develop in this occasion the last two arguments, which are of greater interest for the topic of the article. The third man argument (Plato, 132a-b) says that if the idea causes the quality of the object, for example, beauty is the cause of the beauty of the object, what is the cause of the beauty of the idea of beauty? In other words, if the criterion that serves us to judge the beauty of a beautiful object is the idea of beauty, for the same token there should be a second idea of beauty (b2) by which we could judge beautiful the first idea of beauty (b1), and the same would happen with the second idea of beauty, which, in turn, would require a beauty (b3) that would serve as a criterion. And so on to infinity. This argument of the third man is especially recurrent as opposed to the attempts to justify the universal concepts of morality, aesthetics and justice. And it will have to be taken into account when we discuss the problem of forms of life, which cannot be analyzed in this way, as a kind of platonic form, idea or spirit as the incipient European nationalism of the 19th century wanted as well as a good number of poets and thinkers of the Romantic movement. The second argument that I want to emphasize is the whole-part argument [5]. If the previous argument sought to invalidate the principle of causality by recourse to infinity, Parmenides' critique of the

theory of forms, in this case, takes as its fundamental object the one-over-many principle. Reducing drastically the different and complex versions that are given in the dialogue of the aforementioned argument [6], it can be stated as follows: if the sensible objects partake in the idea of them in the world of ideas, can be understood that the idea is the whole of which sensible objects partake as parts. In this way, Socrates (Plato's spokesman) said that the whole was within each of its parts, so the beauty was within a beautiful picture or a beautiful body. To this Parmenides responds with an argument that has to be taken into account for its effective power against the theory of ideas: if the whole were entirely in itself, the argument goes, and at the same time, in each of the sensible objects, it would cease to be one (against the principle of one-over-many), being separate from itself (against the principle of oneness related to uniqueness, by which the form or idea is one among several different forms); and, in addition, in the case that it was replied that the form or idea is complete in all the objects because all of them and the idea are identical, then we would return once again to claim the argument of the third man to examine the quality of said identity.

The same criticisms of the theory of forms serves to sustain its ultimate need after all; that is the paradox in which Plato keeps us: despite the possible theoretical failures, if we intend to defend the possibility of knowledge, his theory of forms cannot be dismissed without further ado [5]. And even the induction process (or Aristotelian abstraction) requires some universals or more general truth from which to derive and to confirm the otherwise weak and no-necessary inductive claims. But this, according to the philosopher in the dialogue of *Parmenides* [5], is only possible if there exists for each individual and each group a form of its defining features with which it can be identified as partaking of it and contrasting with other forms of which it does not partake.

But if we retain the need for Platonic theory, as Parmenides does (in the Platonic dialogue of the same name), the action we carry out in our daily life must respond to an idea, or even more, it must partake of and even give reality to an idea. And this, ultimately, means either to explain causally a real action by an idea, with which we would have two realms causally connected, one ideal and another real, leaving us in doubt whether the causality between two entities of dissimilar ontological levels is possible (apart from the legitimacy of such duplication of worlds as from William Ockham onwards can be discussed); or to assume that everything is an idea (crude idealism) and that, therefore, our actions also share the essential ontology of the world of ideas, but this would reduce the explanatory power of the theory, since it would replace the partaking in reality by conceptual or even linguistic relationships. And yet, to maintain the Platonic theory, we should say that an action stays for an idea or represent that idea, precisely what we have come to call a fundamental feature of the symbol. Our actions are symbolic of a reality or a greater entity, which they represent, embody or identify. The theory of forms thus can be revived from its empowerment as a symbolic theory. This is not a new claim and, in general terms, can be found on different accounts from Neoplatonic thinkers to Symbolist poets such as Charles Baudelaire and his theory of correlations. In this sense, the process of symbolization connects an individual with a universal, a part with the whole, in such a way that between both there is a relation of identity that, according to the cases, can go from the merely semantic to the ontological.

But then, a particular answer needs to be found regarding the question of what is symbolized by human action. In the twentieth century, there are three authors who have made the symbolizing process their main tool of philosophical analysis. These authors are Ernst Cassirer, Jean-Paul Sartre and Slavoj Žižek. Briefly, I will point out their main contributions with respect to the relationship between the individual and the universal and, in particular, to the relationship between human activity and a certain totality in which it is inscribed, be it the totality of meaning, of a subjective world or of a cultural universe.

For Cassirer, the philosopher of symbolic forms, the symbol is the tool that distinguishes human beings from animals (1944). Symbols are the way in which human beings codify their response to natural physical stimuli. This symbolic response constitutes human culture, which as a symbolic process is understood by Cassirer as the Kantian scheme responsible for synthesizing the data of the senses and the categories of the intellect. That is, in the so-called symbolic forms of human culture, the German

philosopher thought he had found the specific way by which we apprehend the world beyond the simple universalism of his master Kant, because each symbolic form (among which stands out language, myth, religion, science and art) makes it possible for us to look at the world in a different way, although all of them have as their foundation and common element the language, as the symbolic form par excellence, which accentuates the fact that, although language is the specific form of human culture, each language offers a different perspective, in line with the relativist criticism of its time in Franz Boas, Sapir-Whorf, etc. The important thing to retain from Cassirer's philosophy for the analysis of forms of life is, therefore, that each symbolic form is a different approach to reality, with which different worlds are created (the religious world, the world of myth, the scientific world and so on), and that this means that each form is stagnant and specific, although linked by the use of language. This concept of symbolic forms of Cassirer already at the outset seems very broad, too much to have true explanatory power over human reality. And, in addition, an explanation about the motivation that drives the symbolic apprehension is missing in his thought [3]. However, the concept of symbolic form as the organizer of the way in which the human being relates to reality remains one of the important remarks of his philosophy.

If we examine transversally the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, we can identify with the subjective world (totalization of human experience) what action and individual life symbolize. For the French philosopher, the individual can be considered an epitome of the world in which he lives: a universal singular [10]. And that world, which the individual experiences, is the totalization in which the individual is integrated to the extent that with his thought and action is identified progressively with it [11]. Totalization, in the ontological phenomenology of Sartre, is the world as it appears before the consciousness of the subject and from which, as a condition of possibility, particular thoughts emerge, which are mental images; a mental image that it is identified with consciousness in imagining mode, and not an image within consciousness (what he calls the fallacy of immanence); thus, this consciousness-image made possible by the world as a totalization of pre-reflective consciousness does not stop responding to the essential features of reality as being-in-itself (Sartre, 1948: 26), in such a way that, in the subjective, the objective is also reached (indebted thinking of Husserl's intentionality). The action, according to the above, for Sartre, is a type of representation or analogue with which it is translated into reality the image-consciousness (Sartre, 1948: 23). This world that is symbolized in every mental image and in every action is an intricate complex of the way in which the consciousness has apprehended a series of events, attitudes, feelings, opinions, relations, etc. The world thus conceived seems a tool of difficult access for the exhaustive study of human beings and their actions. But if we think of it as a form of life, which is my claim, that totalization of consciousness, which refers to the activities and attitudes of a community, takes on a more precise meaning, considering that each action (especially in the sense of social habits as I specify below) is made possible by that totalization, which it is in turn symbolized by it, that is, the action represents the totalization, or form of life, as its universal.

For Slavoj Žižek, the third author that I consider important for my purposes, ideology is precisely what actions do not show explicitly but carry symbolically (1989). The core of his thinking in relation to the form of life, from Lacanian analysis, can be condensed with the terms of *point de capiton* and unattainable object X. If the signifier that makes the quilting of others meaning in order to constitute a totalization is the so-called *point de capiton* (or nodal point), the object of ideology concentrates or symbolizes the totalization and becomes an object of desire precisely because of what is in it that is more than itself, thus, the *point de capiton* by quilting the network of meanings becomes auto-referential or with words of Žižek: "the *point de capiton* is rather the word which, as a word, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity" (1989: 105). That object-cause of desire ceases to have its own characteristics and functions or utilities, and it becomes an object of desire for itself insofar as it concentrates the meanings of the field. The example of Žižek is that of Coca-Cola, which as a signifier that connotes America (Coke, this is America), through ideological inversion goes on to concentrate the meaning of America as the *spirit of America* (America, this is coke), and, in this way, coke is not a simple connotation of America, but America takes its identity from coke, which becomes its signifier. And what this procedure seeks, in the Lacanian vocabulary of Žižek, is precisely the surplus-X that makes coke an

object-cause of desire, which is the “real thing” the “unattainable X” (1989: 106). Although Žižek departs from a linguistic level, he considers ideology as a quasi-magical procedure by which, through the inversion of the *point of capiton*, the new quilting of the network of meanings creates, in a certain way, a new reality, a totalization that is concentrated or symbolized by a concrete object, which has its end in itself. This description can be read as another version of the Platonic relationship between the individual and the universal, in which it is precisely the ideology that indicates or proposes the individual that is going to symbolize the universal, becoming a tool of epistemological and social manipulation. The study of the form of life of a particular community can also benefit greatly from Žižek’s perspective insofar as it can also be understood as an ideological construction. Every action within a form of life, in terms of habit, ends up being an object-cause of desire that loses its previous function or utility and is shown as something more than itself, that is, as a symbol or representative of a form of life with which the agent identifies. To this I return below in the last paragraphs of this article.

Making a synthesis of the concepts and visions of the three authors mentioned above, I have been defending previously and I am prepared to defend in this article as well that an action is symbolic of a form of life (which coincides with Cassirer’s view of cultural forms as forms through which the reality is ultimately apprehended) where the form of life is a totality of possible actions or praxical images (which takes up Sartre’s phenomenology and its emphasis on the imaginary totalization from which our experiences are nourished) and these praxical images (which I define as phenomenological experiences of actions) are symbols per se that connote the form of life as a whole and, therefore, on a symbolic level (what takes me to the analysis of ideology deployed by Žižek in the last decades). Each action thus represents the totality through the symbolic connotations, in this way, the action in itself is no more than the object of a discontinuous knowledge and emptiness of sense, typical of perception, which, only after the distance of the phenomenological experience (when there is no perception but noematic description and reflection), it obtains an explicit and encompassing meaning, made possible only by the totalization in which the mental image arises. These are two interrelated levels: the phenomenological and the symbolic.

As stated above, the form of life is thus a totality of meaning that is given by our experience in a concrete society and through our exposure to their customs and habits. This totalization forms our pre-reflexive consciousness and is the condition of possibility of our praxical images or phenomenological images of the action we desire to carry out. In this sense, the first one who referred to the form of life as a philosophical concept was Wittgenstein, who wrote in his *Philosophical investigations* (1958: 226) that the form of life is the given, from which we start thinking. My proposal also takes into account this first orientation, since, when speaking of the form of life, one is referring to the consciousness that the individual has of his social community, of what he is able to do in it and of his identity or of the identity that these actions grant him. But for actions to really constitute a form of life they must be habits (repeated actions, with which the agent identifies). Hence, the definition of form of life is the series of habits typical of a community and guided by a common principle. This common principle is a symbolic principle or meaning that each of these habits connotes.

And this brings us back to emphasize the two levels of analysis that the study of life forms requires: the phenomenological, in which the description of the praxical image, that is, the description of an action as it is experienced in the consciousness of the subject or agent, provides the essential features of the reality in which they emerge; and the symbolic, in which these images, from the reflective and symbolic consciousness, are interpreted as symbols, since every image, as a phenomenological content and cultural meaning, is in itself, symbolic [9]. This image is therefore symbolic, but what does it symbolize? It symbolizes, as we discussed above, the totality of the one that emerges precisely, and that totality is the form of life as a symbolic principle, what I have called: anthropical image. For, if the set of actions or habits constitute a form of life, and both belong to the empirical level or object of perception, a level in which, as we have argued above, there can be no knowledge as such (since the being-in-itself does not allow the necessary distancing so that the object can be captured on the background of a whole), only in the phenomenological experience of those actions or praxical images (when the action is captured by the imaginative consciousness) can the anthropical image as the principle and condition of possibility of said

images. Therefore, knowing a form of life, from this cultural phenomenological method that I propose, means to understand the anthropical image or totalizing principle of the form of life. The anthropical image is, therefore, the ultimate organizing and finalizing principle that each action, or more properly now, each praxical image, symbolizes. As a symbol, it makes a correlation between the experience of the singular action and the experience of the form of life as a totality. It is precisely the Sartrean distinction made between being-in-itself and being-for-itself (Sartre, 1946) that serves to distinguish the philosophy of forms of life with respect to cultural anthropology: the anthropologist gives us information about practices in a culture particular, but the final interpretation and organization of this information requires taking a distance to infer or assume the totality that each of the activities require as a condition of possibility. Said totality includes the activities that a certain group understands that defines the human being.

3. Conclusion

In this brief and schematic presentation of the method of cultural phenomenology applied to the forms of life are many aspects that must necessarily be left unexplained. But I think it is necessary to finish this succinct explanation by going back to the theory of Platonic forms to clarify the way in which its formulation affects this philosophy of life forms. In the first place, it is obvious that the forms of life are universal and that they maintain a relationship of identity with the actions that derive from them. In this sense, every action in relation to its form of life, as Sartre would say about men in relation to their time and historical circumstance, are universal-singular. Because in concrete actions what is resolved is the ability of the subject to react to his world, in this case, the form of life (being-in-itself) to which he is exposed. In this way, the symbolic principle of that form of life, as a totality of possible praxical images, determines the action and the latter has in the symbolic principle or anthropical image its ultimate meaning. Thus, the universal fulfils with meaning the individual, which would not exist without the universal, but which, existing, constitutes the universal (as the part to the whole) and, in turn, makes it real. The universal as totalization of the image-consciousness is being-for-itself and the action as analogue or representation of the praxical image shows the universal as being-in-itself, it brings it out to reality. The universal as totalization of the image-consciousness is being-for-itself and the action, as analogue or representation of the praxical image, shows the universal as being-in-itself, it brings it out to reality. Therefore, the individual reality or being-in-itself only symbolizes an entire form of life by mediation of the consciousness, that is, as a being-for-itself. It is in the realm of the consciousness and human experience that the action becomes (or it is produced) as a symbol of an entire form of life. And then, following Sartre very closely in this, while the praxical image is the symbolization of the universal, the action realized in reality as an analogue of the image, acquires that opacity of being-in-itself, without ceasing to be for that matter, a representation of the image-consciousness. And here the problem of the Platonic theory of forms lurks again. And both in Sartre and in my formulation of life forms, a detailed explanation of the way in which this transfer of the praxical image or image-consciousness (which Sartre calls the realm of the imaginary or unreal) to the reality. And this required explanation seems to be an aesthetic theory.

Some of the questions that this philosophy of forms of life has to deal with exhaustively are the following: How can we define a form of life? How can we know what actions belong to a form of life? How can we even know what is the meaning of actions and form of life? As there is no room to answer in detail in this article, I will only add that the response to these questions must recognize at the outset that the phenomenological description of an action provides the necessary features with which to postulate a symbolic or anthropical image, a totalization that the praxical image would be symbolizing. This first finding would serve to deduce other praxical images from this totality and check the relationship or contrast between the images to find new connotations of the symbolic principle or anthropical image. Thus, the journey has to be in both directions, inductive-deductive and phenomenological-symbolical. For instance, the use of chopsticks to eat. A first phenomenological description of its use as a physical and mental skill will put us before the symbol of mind-body harmony, and said symbol will be understood as a

connotation of the symbolic principle of the form of life of traditional Chinese human being [12], said principle or anthropological image will have other connotations in a network of meanings (individual-society balance, society-nature balance, and so on) that, in turn, will be posited by a certain amount of actions or habits, which then, will be understood as parts of a particular form of life.

This approach has also a main critical purpose, centred in the critique of ideology. Each form of life is a particular mode of ideology, for the symbolic principle is always an anthropological image or totalization of the praxis required by each member of the group to be identified as such. Ideologies such as nationalism can be analyzed by the group identity that the national anthropological image imposes on the agents that identify with it.

There are many aspects left aside, of which I will name only some of the most important, which already have been addressed in some other works: 1. why and how we adopt a form of life (by three principles: imitation, identification, totalization). 2. The relation action/habits. 3. The impossibility of giving a detailed account of all actions under a form of life (even of those that are habits) but the possibility of establishing the limited connotations (meanings) of the forms of life as an anthropological image. 4. The difficulty of contrasting forms of life and the influence or temporal confluence between several of them within an individual's behaviour. A comprehensive study of forms of life should address at least these mentioned issues. And that is the purpose of my on-going research (2019).

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