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Desubstantializing the critique of forms of life: relationality, subjectivity, morality

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ABSTRACT



Abstract: **Rahel Jaeggi's *Critique of Forms of Life*** represents a welcome new development in critical social thought. It aims to overcome the 'liberal abstinence', which forbids criticizing the ethical fabric of social life, and proposes to connect normative evaluation with a serious social-ontological model of 'forms of life'. In this article we argue, however, that Jaeggi's **ontological characterization of the concept of form of life** is problematic in ways that introduce a number of adverse consequences for social critique. In section 1, we lay out the main components of Jaeggi's account. In section 2, we present four interconnected **problems that beset Jaeggi's substantializing conception** of forms of life. In section 3, we present an alternative construal of the idea of forms of life, one which does not utilize the concept for grasping substantial unities, but rather focuses on the 'forms' that specifically human life takes, and which grasps social practices as concrete collaborative activities involving **expectations of recognition**. We thereby bring together the recognition-theoretical strand of critical social thought with Jaeggi's welcome new gambit. In section 4 we briefly put forth three mutually complementary ways to conceive of recognitive expectations immanent in social life understood as a collaborative endeavor.

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KEYWORDS Rahel Jaeggi; form or life; relationality; recognition; social ontology

1. Introduction

Rahel Jaeggi's recent *Critique of Forms of Life* represents two interrelated developments in critical social thought in the 'Frankfurt School' tradition, developments which resonate with formative experiences of our age, and are thus likely to be warmly welcomed by many. The shock of the Global

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Financial Crisis in which the capitalist world-system was on the brink of collapse, and looming ecological disasters, including the recent zoonotic pandemic, have brought to the fore fundamental questions about the very sustainability and goodness of contemporary social organizations. To the extent that critical social thought, or 'critical theory', has subscribed in recent decades to Rawlsian or Habermasian versions of methodological neutrality concerning the 'ethical' fabric of particular ways of life, it has to a large extent rendered itself impotent and irrelevant in the face of today's most urgent questions. Rahel Jaeggi's explicit aim in *Critique of Forms of Life* (henceforth, CFL) is to **move beyond 'liberal abstinence'** and, applying key principles of the Frankfurt School tradition, to develop conceptual means for a critical evaluation of what she calls 'forms of life'.¹ Going beyond liberal abstinence is related to another development represented by Jaeggi's work, namely a push to connect **normative evaluation and ontological questions**, instead of keeping them **separate**. Jaeggi's critical apparatus aims to present a serious social-ontological model of what 'forms of life' – the basic unit of critique on her account – are and on what grounds they can be criticized.

We fully endorse both developments that CFL represents. What this article will argue, however, is that Jaeggi's ontological characterization of the concept of form of life is problematic and that the particular ways in which it is problematic may introduce a number of adverse consequences for a critical theory project. Our aim, however, is not merely to offer another critical review of Jaeggi's book, as many aspects of her work have already been critically discussed and she has responded to critics in substantial ways.² Rather, we will propose an alternative approach to the notion of forms of life, one that is arguably better positioned to satisfy key desiderata of a critical theory project. To put things in a preliminary way, in CFL the concept of a **form of life is utilized in a 'substantialist' way**, conceiving what it grasps as substantial unities, and saying little about their **constitution**; their **internal differentiations, constitutive processes, and internal and external relations**. This substantialist and relatively undifferentiated construal leads to several difficulties, descriptive and normative. To avoid these difficulties, we suggest an alternative way of utilizing the general idea of form or life, one that focuses on internal differentiations,

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¹See Jaeggi (2005) for an earlier critique of the 'neutrality thesis'.

²See Critical Horizons special issue, 'Immanent Critique of Capitalism as a Form of Life: On Rahel Jaeggi's Critical Theory', Critical Horizons, vol.22(2), 2021, edited Marco Salinas and Italo Testa. See Jaeggi's extensive rejoinder, in the same issue, 197–231; as well as A. Allen, and E. Mendieta, (Eds.) *From Alienation to Forms of Life. The Critical Theory of Rahel Jaeggi* (Penn State University Press, 2018).

constitutive processes and relations, giving a more concrete and action-theoretical account of social practices that both Jaeggi and ourselves identify as a core constituent of life with the human form. Our 'relational' approach is meant to avoid the problems encountered by Jaeggi's 'substantialist' account and to provide sharper conceptual tools for social criticism. In particular, the relational approach is better placed, we will argue, to account for dimensions that are underplayed in Jaeggi's account, namely moral expectations that participants in social practices and interactions have with regard to each other, as well as the different types of tensions that arise from engaging in them. Importantly, we will draw heavily on the resources of the **recognition-theoretical paradigm** which Jaeggi's approach leaves by the wayside, thereby addressing what we see as an unnecessary 'Kuhnian loss' in this respect.

In section 1, we lay out the main components of Jaeggi's account. In section 2, we present four interconnected problems that arguably beset Jaeggi's substantializing conception of forms of life: indefiniteness of the boundaries of forms of life thought of as substantial unities, or the **'boundary problem'**; lack of internal differentiation within Jaeggi's forms of life, or the **'internal differentiation problem'**; lack of an account of individual and collective subjects of experience and action, or the **'subjectivity problem'**; and finally absence of **criteria for adjudicating** between morally good and bad solutions to problems, or the **'morality problem'**. In section 3, we present an alternative construal of the general idea of forms of life, one which does not utilize the concept for grasping substantial unities, but rather focuses on the particular 'forms' that specifically human life takes, and which grasps social practices as concrete collaborative activities in which expectations and attitudes of recognition are a crucial constituent. By understanding recognition as an ontological factor, we hence bring together the recognition-theoretical strand of the Frankfurt School tradition with Jaeggi's welcome new gambit of a critical social ontology of human forms of life. Finally, in section 4 we briefly put forth three mutually complementary ways to conceive of the expectations of recognition immanent in social life understood as a collaborative endeavor.

2. Jaeggi's conception of a form of life

Jaeggi's CFL marks a **major new development** in Frankfurt School critical social theory. The rich and detailed study puts forward a new model for inquiries in that complex tradition of thought. Jaeggi rejects the move made by many liberals and Habermas consisting in bringing forward

core moral norms while underplaying what is called in German philosophy *Sittlichkeit*, or 'ethical life', namely, the socially/culturally embedded customs, norms and values which structure forms of communal life. This abstinence regarding ethics and the good life is based on, she argues, a debateable meta-ethical partition between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. For Jaeggi, we can and ought to critique ethical life. Jaeggi's project is to provide the conceptual resources to undertake such ethical critiques (see already Jaeggi 2009).

The conceptual core of her project is thus a notion of a form of life, which 'refers to a whole series of extremely diverse and more or less comprehensive phenomena' (Jaeggi 2018a, 35). They range from very large-scale structures like the Middle Ages and Capitalism (see also Jaeggi 2005) down to the modern nuclear family and even to community gardens (2018a, 35–36). A form of life is constituted by 'an ensemble of practices' (2018a, 40). But for an ensemble of practices to count as a form of life, it must possess an adequate level of functional coherence, stability, and self-sufficiency. According to Jaeggi, passing fashions, which are essentially transient, do not qualify (2018a, 44). Given the malleability of Jaeggi's conception of a form of life – applying to phenomena from the Middle Ages to community gardens – demarcating one form of life from a (temporally, spatially or otherwise) neighbouring one is bound to be a challenge, and as we will argue in the next section this also introduces problems for social analysis and critique.

In line with the Hegelian-Marxist roots of Critical Theory, Jaeggi does not take people within forms of life to be self-contained atoms. Rather, humans are conceived of as socialized beings whose nature depends on a dialectical relationship with their social context – their forms of life. A form of life forms the lives of its members while in turn being formed by their actions. In Jaeggi's words, forms of life are both 'given and made' (2018a, 73–74). They are 'made', as social entities produced by human activity, as the outcomes of practices that are carried out by individuals and social groups; but they are also 'given' because practices, individual and collective actions, sediment into institutions, in material artefacts and environments, in habits and tacit knowledge, all of which then confront individuals and groups as social realities that are relatively independent, persistent, and possess a degree of inertia. These ontological features of forms of life – their relative inertia combined with their susceptibility to social action – are relevant for critique (2018a, 85) since their given-ness involves a potential for reification while their made-ness means they can in fact be re-made differently.

She exposes this model by providing detailed analyses of the **four key concepts of: practice, norm, problems and learning processes.** Practices, according to Jaeggi, are ‘in the most general sense complex activities in which we engage alone or with others’ (2018a, 56). They involve a sequence of actions, which are **repeatedly performed**, and are rule governed. They have more or less explicit purposes that do not constantly need to be revised and these same **purposes can be fulfilled by functional equivalents.** Crucially, practices are governed by rules or norms (*idem*; see in relation to the practices involved in capitalistic economies, Jaeggi 2016). This is significant, Jaeggi argues, because it makes forms of life appropriate objects of critique in terms of the norms immanent to them (2018a, 86). Two kinds of justifications of norms are of central importance to evaluating forms of life, Jaeggi argues.³ **Functional justifications** are where norms are defended by appeal to their functionality, where functioning means that something **‘contributes to achieving or maintaining a certain state of affairs within a context in which it is situated,’** (2018a, 109). **Ethical justification ‘involves the claim that this [norm] is necessary in order to make a practice a good practice of its kind,’** (2018a, 111). However, Jaeggi also argues that functional justifications and ethical justifications are **‘constitutively interrelated’** (2018a, 112). Normative justifications of particular practices should be viewed from an ‘ethical-functional’ perspective, because “functioning’ always means functioning more or less well. There is no such thing as pure functioning without reference to criteria of goodness immanent in the practice,’ (2018a, 113).

Notably, however, Jaeggi’s formulations actually render the attribute ‘ethical’ here redundant, reducing it to functionality, i.e. good functioning according to the immanent criteria or norms of the practice. Nothing is implied with regard to distinctively moral or ethical evaluation and critique of practices or their immanent criteria of goodness – something which we will argue in the next section is a problem for the critical enterprise.

On Jaeggi’s account, external criteria – moral or otherwise – which one might want to apply to evaluate practices and forms of life as ‘ensembles’ of practices (2018a, 73 and elsewhere), are not applicable, since they ‘claim to be unconnected with the normative structure of a particular community’ (2018a, 177–178). Following a well-known requisite of critical theory, Jaeggi wants critique to proceed immanently. Jaeggi’s key idea is

³For a clarification of the relation between norms and practices see also Neuhouser (2018) and (Jaeggi 2018b).



that we can establish an **immanent model of critique by focusing on the notion of 'problems,'** since problems provide a litmus test for an appropriate 'ethical-functional' evaluation of forms of life.⁴ On her account, forms of life do more than just exist as ensembles of practices; she characterizes them as **'problem-solving entities'** (2018a, 133). Like forms of life themselves, **problems are given and made.** On the one hand, problems have a reality as 'obstacle[s] to be overcome' (2018a, 134). On the other hand, they are the result of previous problems and past solutions to them, and they also 'depend on interpretations' (2018a, 139). As such, **problems themselves 'undergo historical transformations,'** (2018a, 236) and therefore solutions must be appropriate to the historical stage at which the given problems present themselves. It is in reference to problem-solving and learning processes that Jaeggi, like Habermas before her (Habermas 1987, 313–316), seeks to surpass the shortcomings of internal and external critique. On Jaeggi's conception, **immanent critique proceeds by evaluating whether a form of life is able to successfully deal with its problems** (see an early articulation in Jaeggi 2009). By contrast, *internal* critique can only restore practices to pre-existing norms, and *external* critique has no foothold in the form of life and thus remains ineffectual.

3

This conception of immanent critique connects with Jaeggi's claim that successful forms of life have **successful learning processes.** Forms of life do not merely change, but learn by recognizing and effectively solving problems. Immanent critique, therefore, is not merely an academic exercise of evaluating a form of life, but by diagnosing contradictions and generating productive solutions to them it can be conducive to the form of life's learning process. Jaeggi's argument concludes with a synthesis of Hegel's, Dewey's and MacIntyre's approaches to problem-solving. She blends the **open-ended experimentalism** of Dewey, the **narratological traditionalism** of MacIntyre, and **dialectical contradictions from Hegel** (Jaeggi 2018a, 190–191). Special emphasis is placed on 'an experimental pluralism of forms of life,' (Jaeggi 2018a, 319).

4

3 Problems in Jaeggi's conception

Despite the wealth of insight and the promise that the book holds, the way Jaeggi utilizes the notion of forms of life leads, however, to a number of interrelated problems. We do not point out these problems

⁴See a first presentation of the model in 'Rethinking Ideology', Jaeggi (2009).

to question the general feasibility of utilizing the idea of forms of life in critical social thought, but rather to call for a reorientation in how it is utilized. In brief, our critique will focus on the following interrelated issues:

- (a) 'The **boundary problem**', in other words the expectation that a particular form of life can be demarcated from its environment and at the same time the lack of precise criteria for doing so;
- (b) 'The **internal differentiation problem**', or an insufficient thematization of plurality, diversity or differentiation within a given form of life;
- (c) 'The **subjectivity problem**', or a missing account of individual or collective subjects of experience and action;
- (d) 'The **morality problem**', or the absence of criteria for adjudicating between morally good and bad **solutions to problems**.

3.1. The boundary problem

In order to criticize a form of life as a 'problem-solving entity' in Jaeggi's sense, it seems a necessary condition is to be able to identify or demarcate it from its environment, or draw its boundaries in a sufficiently articulated way. Even if these boundaries may often be difficult to strictly define, they cannot be entirely up to grabs, lest the diagnosis and evaluation be arbitrary. Any particular framing of the object will introduce a particular set of problems and of feasible solutions, and thus what is considered inside or outside is of crucial importance. And yet, Jaeggi's account does not provide much in the way of criteria for drawing the boundaries. Due to the extreme malleability of the concept – examples of forms of life range from the Middle Ages to community gardens – it is no surprise to be faced with this difficulty.

Let us try to illuminate the problem in light of a concrete example from contemporary social reality: a city consisting of rich suburbs and poor suburbs or favelas, characterized by severe inequality in terms of material wealth, education prospects, health outcomes, and so on. People in the affluent suburbs enjoy high standards of living, good quality private education, and world class private health services. Many people in the favelas in contrast live close to starvation level unless they are able to feed themselves or their families by taking on poorly paid jobs, working in the shadow economy, or perhaps engaging in illegal activities; they have at best the opportunity for primary education in severely underfunded public schools; and they have access only to poor or non-existent health services.

As we saw, on Jaeggi's account, forms of life are 'problem-solving entities' and assessing the success or failure of a given form of life turns on its capacity to solve the problems it faces (which are partly created, worsened, or ameliorated by its history of solving earlier problems). Looking at the example, the first question for social analysis and critique operating on these terms is how to carve the boundaries of the form of life to be diagnosed and assessed in this case. Is the relevant entity here the city as a whole? Or should one consider the rich suburbs to be forming one form of life, and the favelas another? Depending on the carving, the problems and the potential solutions to them will obviously be quite different.

For the rich, everything is fine – let us assume – if the poor are willing to do menial service work for them on cut-throat salaries, not spill unacceptable levels of crime outside the favelas, and remain politically inactive. As long as this remains the situation, the favelas are not a problem for the rich. **If they become a problem for them, there are solutions:** more policing, hiring paramilitary forces, more surveillance technology, guarding the physical boundaries between the rich and the poor, manipulation of the information space, and so on. Given that the rich largely run the state and are thus able to effectively allocate funds for solving their problems, and given the rapidly developing surveillance, military and information technologies, these ways of 'solving the problems' become increasingly efficient by the year.

What is obvious here for the critical observer, as well as a lived experience for those facing the sharp end of these solutions, is that one person's or one group's solution is often another's problem. But that does not diminish the fact that the solutions can be actually effective, creative solutions to given problems. If we consider the rich suburbs – or the bundles of their relevant social practices – as a form of life, then they are a relatively successful one. That another form of life, that of the favelas, is, as a consequence, not doing equally well, or that this other form of life is not able to solve its own problems or indeed learn from them, is not a problem for the first.

Here the critical observer may want to say that the city as a whole should be considered as one form of life, and she may support this choice by Jaeggi's characterization of forms of life as interconnected bundles of practices (2018a, 29). This is to suggest that if social groups or their practices are interconnected in such a way that solutions for one will be problems for the other, then what we have is clearly an **inter-connected bundle of practices**, and hence something that should be

considered as one form of life. Though we suspect that this solution, if generalized, may lead to some counterintuitive consequences,⁵ let us accept it here for the sake of the argument. Doing so will bring to fore the next problem.

3.2. *The internal differentiation problem*

Assuming now that the critic would want to consider the city in question, or the relevant overall bundle of social practices, as a single form of life on Jaeggi's model, what are the resources that CFL offers for dealing with the sort of divisions and tensions we have depicted? In order to remain critical, ascribing an overly monolithic character to what one is out to analyze and criticize is bound to be a problem. For the purpose of analysis and critique, it is surely important to keep in view the many kinds of inner differentiations that real social life and real societies involve.⁶ The problem in CFL, however, is that the substantializing take on forms of life does not provide an account of these differentiations and the role they play in forms of life as bundles of practices and as problem-solving entities.

Let us take another example from contemporary social reality to make the problem tangible. A powerful state apparatus mainly led by the majority ethnicity of a large multiethnic country is engaged in huge infrastructure projects with the aim of extending its influence beyond state borders, thereby further bolstering its grip on power within the country. An ethnic minority group with a mixed history of political independence, semi-independence, incorporation into the country, and separatist tendencies which occasionally have erupted in violence, presents potential risks for the project. The state apparatus responds with increasing religious, cultural and ideological repression, massive investment in real-time surveillance of physical space as well as the virtual space of communication, AI-driven 'preventative policing', and eventually through the incarceration of significant portions of the minority ethnicity.

Let us assume that the infrastructure projects are likely to create wealth for the country, which enables many internal problems to be solved, and that they are also likely to extend the country's power and influence

⁵Think, for example, of colonial expansion, exploitation and plundering. Should a nation colonized and exploited by another be considered as forming part of the one form of life with the colonizers because of this interdependence of solutions and problems, the exploitation solving problems for the colonists while creating problems for the colonized?

⁶See Solinas (2021) for a similar critique. Jaeggi is aware of the problem, but does not seem to develop means to overcome it. See CFL, p. 9–11.

abroad and thus give it better means for dealing with external problems. In this scenario, the adverse effects of the described measures for the minority ethnicity could be considered as an unfortunate, but excusable consequence of effective solutions to problems. After all, there are hardly any solutions that do not also produce *some* other problems. Assuming that we consider the relevant form of life to consist of the state and the population(s) – and the relevant very large bundle of social practices –, we can see it having aims that provide overall direction for the practices, we can see that problems are faced in achieving these aims, and that solutions are being found to solve these problems. If the **solutions are, all things considered, actually the most effective ones available in light of the problems and aims**, then it seems that on Jaeggi's account that form of life is doing well and there is nothing here to be critical about.

If such a cynical conclusion is allowed by the model in CFL, then something must have gone wrong. The problem is, we want to suggest, in the undifferentiated notion of a form of life as a substantial unity that it operates with, and in the consequent conception of problem-solving as undertaken by a form of life **conceived as an undifferentiated monolith**. As the example illustrates, identification and solving of problems in the real world should instead be seen as a complex process of social action that is usually riven with splits and tensions, reflecting divergence between interests, values, worldviews, or core beliefs of the individuals and groups concerned. These differentiations raise their heads in social life in the form of concrete questions – whether or not explicitly articulated – such as **who actually has a say on what are the most pressing problems, and what are acceptable solutions**. Such questions and the inner differentiations they reflect are a crucial fact of social life which, we want to argue, any social ontology useful for critical purposes needs a firm grasp of. Failing to account for them by positing an undifferentiated substantial unity runs the risk of unwittingly providing theoretical support for the obfuscation of differences that serves the powerful.

=> decisive authority = ??

3.3. *The subjectivity problem*

This leads us to the next problem, to do with subjectivity. While attention to the functionality of forms of life is a useful perspective for thinking of the reproduction of human societies, Jaeggi's account arguably goes too far into *functionalism*, as it includes little in the way of a theory of subjectivity or subjects of experience and action. Yet, an account of **subjectivity – both individual and shared** – is crucial lest one loses sight of the

concrete activities of reproduction as they are enacted and experienced by members and constituent groups of a collective. However one draws the boundaries of a form of life in Jaeggi's sense, and whether one looks at phenomena internal to it, external to it, or at aspects of its relations with other forms of life, it is, we suggest, **crucially important to thematize 'who'-questions**, such as **'who sets, who accepts, or who goes along with collective goals?'**; **'who experiences problems or has a say on which problems are significant?'**; **'who decides what are the best, or acceptable, solutions?'**; **'who learns?'**; **'who contests or challenges?'**; or **'who enacts changes in particular social practices?'**, and so on.⁷ These questions are present for social actors themselves – whether in inchoate form or explicitly articulated – and what they remind the theorist of is the primitive ontological fact of the plurality of subjects and **therefore** the plurality of subjective perspectives on which social life and whatever unity it may have is premised. These questions hence also remind us of the potential for **agon** in the many senses of the term that is a **constitutive fact of human social life**.⁸

struggle of competition

Let us introduce a third example from recent or contemporary social reality to further concretize the problem, this time formulated in terms of the notion of **'experimentation'** which Jaeggi, drawing on John Dewey, utilizes in the **context of problem-solving**.⁹ Think of a social experiment in a small country meant to address problems of structural inequality, poverty and exploitation by nationalizing health, education, transportation, as well as significant natural resources that have so far mainly profited multinational corporations and a political and economic elite. Let us assume that this social experiment could be helpful in addressing the problems. The experiment is the work of a democratically elected government, but it is from the outset confronted by serious opposition by the corporations, by a powerful foreign government supporting their exploits, which is itself ideologically hostile to nationalization, and which has a history of sabotaging attempts to it elsewhere, often by brutal means, as well as by individual and collective agents within the country whose interests are well served by the existing system. The experiment fails and debates rage on whether it could have succeeded had the foreign actors not intervened to impede it. As this all too familiar example


⁷The most explicit discussion of practical subjectivity or agency in *Critique of Forms of Life* is a discussion of the figure of the 'world historical individual' (pp. 308–311) in Hegel. Arguably, this is not among the most fruitful Hegelian figures of thought for contemporary critical theory.

⁸See also Celicates (2018).

⁹See CFL, chapter 10.1.

who
cares ?
who is
caring ?

shows the notion of experimentation has little traction in social and political reality if one abstracts from the plurality of individual and collective subjects, their diverging interests and ideas, their relative positions of power, and the potential for conflicts of various kinds. The practical lesson to learn from the failure in our example is precisely that abstracting from the plurality of subjective perspectives is likely to doom social experiments (or other attempts at progressive social change) from the outset. The theoretical lesson is that **accounting for the plurality of subjects**, their perspectives, and relations between them, **is fundamental** to any program in critical theory.

Notably, these themes of plurality and conflict are central to the work of another leading contemporary author of the Frankfurt School Axel Honneth – more exactly in the particular form of struggles for recognition between individuals and groups. Whether or not one is sympathetic to every detail of Honneth's account of the *agon*-aspect of social life, it is striking that Jaeggi's own account seems to abstract from it altogether. What is especially noteworthy in Honneth's program in the context of our discussion, are the connections he draws between a number of relevant elements at stake here: the plurality of individuals and groups, relations between them, their attitudes and subjective experiences, the interpretations and articulations of these experiences, collective mobilization, and **emancipatory action in the form of struggles for recognition**.¹⁰ The many connections involved  and indeed one does not need to follow Honneth in every detail – are fertile ground for thinking of the requirements of social progress. Honneth's work also alerts us to one last, key dimension of social life inadequately accounted for in CFL: morality.

DCR's emancipatory axiology

3.4. The morality problem

Almost any reader of the above three examples will have responses to them that can only be described as moral. Even more importantly, the individuals directly involved in the realities described will have moral responses, intuitions and convictions concerning them. This experiential moral dimension immanent to social life – emphasized by the recognition-theoretical approach – is crucial to keep in view in a critical theory program that aims to tap onto the social actors' lived experience and potential sources of motivation for emancipatory action; yet it is something which Jaeggi's model of critique largely abstracts from in CFL.

¹⁰See especially Honneth (1995).

This problem is related to a line of argument,¹¹ which concludes that since correctly performed critique is immanent, and since reference to morality is by necessity universalistic and context transcending,¹² social criticism cannot be properly conducted from a moral point of view. Jaeggi adds a further point that seems to confirm the need to eject morality from social critique: namely, that what counts as a context-transcending moral issue and what counts as a contextual ethical issue is actually decided from inside the context of the given form of life.¹³

What these meta-ethical worries risk missing, however, is the primary way in which morality plays out in real life: not as context-transcending reflection, but as a key layer in the form of experiences of how one is regarded or treated by relevant others. What we witness in each of the above three examples is not adequately grasped as mere conflicts of interest, as clashes between 'ethical' views of the good, or as 'internal contradictions'¹⁴ at the level of the social system. The crucial insight that can be drawn from the recognition-theoretical tradition is that these examples involve moral experiences with causal efficacy: they may lead to distrust and resultant dysfunction, to apathy and stagnation, to outrage and riot, or even full-scale revolution, or to any mixture of these, depending on various factors. This is to say that 'morality' is immanent to social life and thus directly relevant for a descriptively adequate account of it, including a functional one, and not a consideration external to it. What 'moral' means exactly here is a tricky issue, but what we can say at the very least is that it cannot be grasped by either one of the Kantian options: disappointment of prudential expectations, or judgments from a point reached through a philosophical abstraction or universalization. Rather, 'morality' here denotes an intersubjective, experiential dimension inbuilt in human social life.¹⁵

Making full room in critical theory for this intersubjective moral dimension of life is one of the important feats of the recognition-theoretical approach, as it is represented by Honneth, as well as in different ways

¹¹See for instance Jaeggi (2009).

¹²See CFL, p.12 and also very clearly in Allen, Jaeggi and von Redecker (2016, 228–229).

¹³See CFL, p.16–21.

¹⁴See CFL, Chapter 9.

¹⁵As Jaeggi is well aware, there is a rich tradition of conceiving morality as a dimension of everyday life and social encounters, including not only the household names of the recognition-theoretical tradition, but also authors such as Buber or Levinas, as well as contemporary moral phenomenologists such as Bernhard Waldenfels. See also Jay Bernstein's (2015, 1–6) critique of modern moral philosophy for losing sight of what morality actually means in real life: a concrete lived relation between humans, rather than a matter of abstract principles.

by neo-Hegelians such as Brandom, Pinkard, or Pippin.¹⁶ In what follows, we will argue that by accommodating rather than abandoning that tradition in an account utilizing the idea of forms of life, one can address the problems introduced above, and develop an ontology of social life that is well equipped to connect the perspective of the critical theorist to the perspective of social actors themselves.

4. Another take on the idea of a form of life

How, then, should we go about the concept of a form of life so that problems identified above are avoided? To begin to answer this question, we **should** first distinguish between two different ways to utilize the idea of 'forms of life': a substantialist one that treats the notion as referring to entities or substances, and a **non-substantialist** way on which it **refers to the 'forms' or 'structures' that life takes**. Jaeggi's way of conceiving of forms of life as 'problem solving *entities*' implies a substantialist take on the notion, and it is on the substantialist way of thinking that the boundary problem arises as the problem of demarcating one entity or substance from another. This problem, however, is in our view only a product of the substantialist conceptualization, rather than a real problem, and hence an indication that something is wrong with the conceptualization.

consisting ≠ post -structuralism

4.1. A **relational** take on forms of life

What, then, does the non-substantialist way to understand the notion of a form of life look like? Rather than positing forms of life as distinct substances or entities, here, as said, one rather starts from the idea that *life* necessarily has **forms or structures**, and one then focuses on the specific structures **of human life**. Since one is not conceptualizing forms of life as singular entities or substances, one is not at the outset faced with the boundary problem. This 'structural' way of talking of forms of life nevertheless also allows for, and is indeed complemented by, a substantializing approach, that of talking about a particular Form of Life as a unit and spelling out its **characteristic features** by referring to the distinct constellation of forms or structures that characterizes it. This is how the traditional distinction between vegetative, animal and human Forms of Life works: what distinguishes the human Form of Life are

¹⁶See also Gleeson and Ikäheimo (2019), and Ikäheimo (2007, 2022).

Morenian Role \ Sociometry
Primary - Secondary Tertiary Memory

particular forms or structures characteristic of it. Articulated in these terms social critique is obviously focussed on the Human Form of Life and that is also what Jaeggi's different take on 'forms of life' is out to conceptualize. What Jaeggi calls 'forms of life' (in the plural) are specific instantiations of variants of the Human Form of Life (in the singular).

The next key idea for the non-substantialist account of forms of life in critical social thought that we are proposing is prominent in Hegel, as well as in Jaeggi's earlier book *Alienation* (Jaeggi 2014), yet largely absent in CFL: that of **constitutive relationality**. Relationality is a general feature, **form or structure of all life**. It is constitutive of all living entities that they engage in processes, activities or praxes which involve dynamic relationships with various 'others'. All life involves a **metabolic relationship with the natural environment; sentience and more complex forms of consciousness** which characterize 'higher' branches of life are equally dynamic relations with something other; and human social life obviously involves many specific kinds of **constitutive relations and inter-actions**. No entity in social or political reality can be adequately grasped by abstracting from its relations with its various 'others'; hence also no social problems, solutions to problems, or overcoming of pathologies are adequately thinkable without taking these relations into account. Indeed, constitutive relations with otherness are, we want to argue, a fundamental form or structure that critical social thought should focus on.

A second key Hegelian idea that is in our view indispensable for a conception of forms of human life to be descriptively adequate, useful for critical theory, and capable of avoiding the problems discussed in the previous section, is the **constitutive role of relations of recognition** in distinctively human social life. It is notable that the two influential strands of recognition-theory in recent decades mentioned above – the Honnethian and the neo-Hegelian – have been associated with forms of anti-naturalism, or at a minimum with an unease about associations with anthropological ideas of human life in general.¹⁷ In fact, however, the combination of the recognition-theoretical tradition with the idea of forms or structures common to all distinctively human life is potentially highly fruitful. Let us explain.

Jaeggi's emphasis on the practical aspects of social reality is highly commendable. But instead of the substantializing and rather abstract talk of forms of life as 'problem solving *entities*' and '*bundles* of social practices' (our emphasis), we suggest a conceptual shift to conceiving of

¹⁷See Zurn (2000), for an early critique of anthropological tendencies in Honneth's works.

human social life as consisting of social practices involving individuals and groups engaged in forms of joint, social action. Rather than being made up of entities and bundles, social reality is better conceived of as comprising collaborative activities that concrete individuals and groups are engaged in as experiencing subjects and agents. ‘Collaborative activity’ should be understood here in a very wide and formal sense, the minimal case of which is ‘collaborating’ to maintain separation (whether between individuals, neighbours, tribes, nation states, or any other collective entities). In this general sense of collaboration or collaborative activity, which can very much entail antagonistic relations, collaboration is non-existent only between individuals or groups who really are separate without having to maintain separation. In each of our three examples, there is clearly **collaboration in much more substantial senses** than this minimal one.

A further general feature or ‘form’ involved here is that any collaborative activity has a goal or *goals* that are responsive to some *needs*,¹⁸ *problems*, *interests*¹⁹ or *concerns*. Another feature is that **collaborative activities are governed by various kinds of rules or norms that give them structure**. And a third feature is that they obviously **involve contributions by the participants**.²⁰ These are three very general features that apply to *all* human social life, or structures or forms that all variants of the Human Form or Life has. These three basic ontological features imply others which are crucially important for critical social thought: namely, what we propose to call **‘recognitive statuses’**. **category theory maths**

L1
L2
L3

To return to the ‘who’-questions above: needs, problems, interests or concerns are always *someone’s* or *some people’s* needs, problems, interests, or concerns. In a collaborative context, a decisive question – whether dormant, vaguely felt, or explicitly raised – is therefore *whose concerns count* in setting the goals and in determining what is regarded

¹⁸Though it is true, as Jaeggi writes, that ‘the concept of needs is often used in a static and ahistorical sense’, as she herself points out, such use of the concept has been criticized at length, and the malleability and historicity of needs emphasized, notably by theorists of the Budapest School (for instance Agnes Heller (1976)). Importantly, the very same problematic affects the concept of ‘problem’ favoured by Jaeggi. One might well refer to universal human problems (say, physical vulnerability or death) and contrast this use of the concept with context-specific uses, or to historical and cultural specifications. Given this, contrary to Jaeggi, we do not see an obvious reason to choose between needs and problems as the more central concept for critical social thought. See CFL p. 135–136.

¹⁹By ‘interests’ and ‘concerns’, we mean something more mundane and localised than Habermas’ reference to ‘human interests’ in his *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Habermas 1968). The point here, once again, is a point of basic social ontology.

²⁰Think of the minimal case which already involves a shared goal, namely that of remaining in separation or avoiding any more substantial form of interaction, or collusion; rules or norms, namely implicit or explicit agreement on ‘borders’ or other means of maintaining the separation; and ‘contributions’ in the sense of the parties doing what it takes to maintain the separation.

as a more or less successful realization of them. For someone's or some people's concerns to count in this sense requires that the other participants in the collaborative activity *take them to count*, or in other words *care about* them. This is recognition in the general sense of *care between the participants*, with the relevant senses of care ranging from purely *prudential* or instrumental to *intrinsic*. As we shall argue below, this is an issue in all the three examples above and central to their moral dimension.

contributive decisive authority

Another 'who'-question is the question of *who has authority* or *a say* on the norms, terms or rules governing the collaboration. Again, someone can only have a say or authority if she is taken, or in other words recognized, by the respective other participants as having it. This is recognition in the general sense of attribution of authority, and that too ranges from purely instrumental or prudential to intrinsic. This is equally a crucial issue for the moral dimension of the three examples.

contribution award

A third set of 'who'-questions are questions about *who is recognized or appreciated as contributing* to the collaborative activity and appreciated *in what way*. It is entirely possible to participate in collaborative activity without one's concerns counting in the setting of its ends. And it is entirely possible to participate in contributing activities without having a say on its rules or terms. Equally, it is possible to participate in collaborative activity without being recognized, at least adequately or appropriately, by the respective others as a contributor, or for the full contribution one makes. When one or the other participant (individual or group) in a collaborative activity is *unhappy about* the recognition of their concerns, authority, or contributions in the collaborative context, the who-questions, and thereby the recognitive relations between participants *become thematic*.²¹

The three constitutive features or forms of human social life and the questions immanent to them that we are analytically distinguishing here roughly map onto Honneth's influential distinction between the *three dimensions of recognition (love, respect, and esteem)*, to abbreviate, see Honneth 1995). However, whereas Honneth has mainly thought of these in terms of social structures and principles which he believes are specific to European modernity, in the very formal way in which we talk

²¹ Many of the key concepts used in critical theory such as exploitation, disenfranchisement, or alienation can be well analysed using these types of questions as analytical guidelines. Importantly, they are not merely questions the theorist may or may not choose to introduce from an outsider's perspective. Rather, they are questions of *relative recognitive status* that are necessarily implied by constitutive features of all human interaction. As such, they are questions immanent to human forms of life and potentially present to all participants in them.

of the three dimensions here they are generalizable to any human collaborative activity and social practice. In this regard, our approach shares an important feature with Jaeggi's in CFL: since its defining features are highly formal, describing social life from a social-ontological perspective, the approach applies, in principle, to any instantiation of human social life, across cultures and epochs.²² The model is also highly malleable in that it does not assume any particular social unit or any a priori way of demarcating the unit of analysis and critique. In not being committed to substantialism, it proves indeed more malleable than Jaeggi's account.

4.2. Defusing the boundary problem and addressing the internal differentiation and subjectivity problems

In light of the above, let us now return to the three examples and see whether the problems they pose for Jaeggi's model can be addressed in the relational, collaborative terms we are proposing. As for the first example, whether or not the inhabitants of the favelas and the rich suburbs like it, they are in fact interacting in 'collaborative' ways: the inhabitants of the favelas working for those of the rich suburbs and thereby contributing to the aims or goals of the latter, and the latter providing forms of employment for the former. Whether or not the two groups should be considered as two distinct substantial 'forms or life' or rather one such entity – the boundary issue – is not an issue that arises on this approach. What matters are the empirical facts on the ground, such as the fact that there is a geographical, economic, educational and so forth divide between two parts of the city, and that the inhabitants of those two parts are in fact engaged in 'collaborative activities' across the divides involving specific aims, norms, and contributions.

What is relevant for the normative evaluation of the social reality in question is not the morally neutral meta-, or second-order criterion of whether or not a form of life thought of as a substantial unity – however one chooses to demarcate it – is capable of 'solving its problems'. Rather, what is relevant is the first order phenomenon of lack of

²²Here we follow Jaeggi's own characterization of her approach: 'My approach is in a certain sense an intermediate position between anthropological universalism and constructivist culturalism. Just as it is implausible (but also unnecessary) to deny certain universal constants of the *conditio humana*, it is equally absurd to assume that all of us always confront the same problems – as if the problems actually always arise in the same way irrespective of any historical-cultural constellation'. (CFL, 144–145). One strong model for combining general, social-ontological facts about human social life with their specific historical specifications is provided by Marx in the initial, methodological sections of the *Grundrisse*, where basic elements for the analysis of modes of production are presented, before they are applied to the analysis of modern capitalism (Marx 1973, 81–111).

appropriate recognition of one party by the other party in the collaborative context – and more exactly of their concerns, their authority, and/or their contributions. Though from a purely functional perspective increased policing, surveillance and so forth might be an efficient way of ‘solving problems’ in this setting, at least for a while, it does not address what should matter for critical social thought, namely the extreme inequality between the two groups. This **situation will not change until the concerns, the authority and the contributions of the parties are appropriately and mutually recognized.**

As for the second example, that of the minority ethnicity and the state apparatus, neither asking whether what is at stake here is one form of life, nor focusing on the idea of ‘problem solving’ really gets at the sense relevant for critical theory of what is wrong in the example. Whether or not the minority ethnicity, or the state apparatus likes it, they are involved in an interactive context which requires that they act ‘collaboratively’. And as soon as the situation is viewed in this relational, interactional way, this introduces the question of appropriate recognition for the ethnic group’s concerns, for their **having a say in the relevant rules or terms by which the relationship is regulated or governed, and for their contributions to the collaboration** – in short, questions about their *recognitive status*. What the shared aims would be once all relevant concerns are sufficiently taken into account, what the rules or terms would be once all participants have an adequate say on them, and how different contributions would be assessed, cannot be known in advance, but can only be found out once each party enjoys an **adequate recognitive status** in terms of their concerns, authority and contributions. ~~On the account~~ we are putting forth, not only should differentiation in the sense of divergence of concerns or interests, normative disagreements and **challenges be thought of as an inbuilt** feature of social life as intrinsically relational, but, furthermore, **normative assessment** should focus on the **recognitive quality of the relations**. As the recognition theoretical tradition has always emphasized, the recognitive quality is not something merely given to, or posited by, the theorists, but something experienced – potentially at least – **by the social actors themselves.**

The above should have made clear already that the issue of subjectivity or agency that we illustrated with the third example – the social experiment and its opponents – is central in an adequate account of social life, both descriptively and for the purposes of social critique. The concrete reality of life with specifically human forms consists of collaborative activities by real human beings who are both agents and subjects of

experiences of various kinds, including those of recognition and lack thereof. Social experiments are a prime example of collective activities which, by unsettling the prevailing social order, thematize the fact of the plurality of subjects with a plurality of interests and ideas, relative positions of power, and hence potential for conflicts. They also highlight the crucial importance of the **recognitive quality of the relations between the concerned (collective or individual) subjects**. A social experiment whose design abstracts from these facts is unlikely to succeed, and the sabotage of the experiment depicted in our example is highly likely to create widespread experiences of injustice and (thus) misrecognition. These may be motivational fuel for further social changes down the track, whether constructive or destructive.

4.3. Addressing the morality problem

How, more exactly, does the model we are proposing address what we called the morality problem? On the recognition-theoretical account of social life that we are putting forth, broadly moral experiences of adequate recognition, or lack of it, are an inbuilt aspect of all human social practices as collaborative activities. These experiences have motivational significance and are thus of direct relevance for a functional account of human social life.²³ What is wrong in the relationship between the people of the favelas and the rich suburbs, between the ethnic minority and the central government, and between the suffering people potentially profiting from the social experiments and those resisting or sabotaging them, is that one party is not afforded adequate recognition by another in one or more of the senses we distinguished: in terms of the first party's concerns, of them as having a say, or of them as contributors to collaboration. The 'moral' dimension is here not to be grasped in terms of moral theories which abstract from the concrete lived experience of these relationships, but in terms of basic recognitive expectations immanent to it. Or to put this differently: **'the moral standpoint'** is primarily not a result of abstraction from the immediately lived experience, but an **experiential aspect of any interhuman encounter and collaboration**. By tapping into this

²³A particularly important case concerns the discussion of economic and distributive mechanisms, and whether they can be accounted for from a recognitive-theoretical perspective. Since the debate with Fraser and right until today, notably in *Freedom's Right*, Honneth has constantly emphasised the 'moral embeddedness' of markets (Honneth 2014, 178–197). For an account of economic mechanisms that includes recognition as an explanatory dimension, see Deranty (2013). For a critique and constructive reformulation of Honneth's account of the market, see Ikäheimo (2022, 188–195).

experienced morality of cognitive expectations and the cognitive quality of relations, social critique attains an immanent foothold in social reality.

5. Conceptualizing the cognitive expectation immanent in social life

Let us finish by saying a bit more about **cognitive expectations**. There are at least three different, yet mutually complementary perspectives or ways of articulating default expectations of recognition in social life understood in collaborative terms. These default expectations might not be visible, let alone articulated, at given historical times, yet they are implied in the very notion of social reality being made up of collaborative activities.

1 First of all, there is the idea of **equality** that our discussion above already made references to: by default, unless some qualification can be justifiably brought forward, **my needs and your needs**, my interest and concerns and your interests and concerns, ought to have **equal weight in determining the goals of the collaboration** we are engaged in. Also, by default, I ought to have equal say with you on the terms or norms of our collaboration. And finally, by default, unless some valid qualification can be provided, **equal contributions ought to be appreciated equally.**²⁴

2 A second idea, one connected directly with the **dimension of authority** is that of **justification** implied in the thought 'by default, unless some valid qualification is provided'. Often, in relation to particular issues, the concerns of all parties may not deserve equal weight, not everyone may deserve an equal say, or the contributions of some participants deserve to be appreciated more than those of others. This introduces the **cognitive expectation of justification**: we find **inequality in particular respects unobjectionable, if we are presented with an acceptable justification for it**. A whole host of further difficult questions obviously follow from saying this, questions about criteria of justifiability, about ideology, and so on. But what matters for our purposes is the basic idea of justification: if you expect me/us to accept being treated unequally in the collaborative context we are interacting in, then you owe me/us a justification which I/we find acceptable.

²⁴See Deranty (2017) for a way to articulate equality as a general demand in human social life with different historical specifications (and blockages) of it.

This connects directly with a third idea, that of **unconditionality**. As Rainer Forst (2011) has argued, the expectation of, or 'right' to, **justification is unconditional**: it cannot be subject to further considerations since the validity or relevance of any such considerations is itself subject to the expectation and the right. There is nothing you can say that deprives me/us of the right to be offered good reasons or justification for being treated inequally by you in some issue or some regards. That right is unconditional and the **expectation that it be respected** is, arguably, a fundamental moral expectation. But the idea of unconditionality also has another familiar application, namely with regard to concern or care. Here the thought is that while prudential or instrumental care for someone's concerns or well-being may be (depending on the circumstances) better than no concern, the **morally good form is unconditional concern, or concern 'for someone's own sake'**.²⁵

It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate further on the three fundamental ideas of equality, justification and unconditionality – not to mention to attempt a philosophical justification of any one of them. Here they serve merely the purpose of providing a host of immediately illuminating ways to think of the **moral dimension of recognitive expectations immanent in social life**. Crucially, they are not mere inventions of philosophers, but articulations of fundamental moral expectations of individuals and **groups participating in concrete collaborative activities** which the social life with human forms consist of. These three ideas point to three complementary articulations of what is wrong in the social realities described in the three examples above, from the point of view of the participants, in terms of their moral expectations of recognitive status.

categories <==> consisting 'forms of life'

6. Conclusion

The idea of rejuvenating the social ontology of critical theory, by replacing the categories inherited from classical sociology with the more adaptable notion of **'forms of life'** is fruitful on many fronts. It allows for more focused, agile analyses of social phenomena, beyond the massive categories of state, civil society or even lifeworld. The idea of 'form' invites a **pragmatic focus**, insisting on the different levels, types and dimensions of action that produce complex, social realities. The idea of forms of 'life' invites social theorists to take up a substantive, realistic

²⁵This idea features prominently in the young Marx's moral critique of capitalism. See Ikäheimo (2018).

descriptive stance, one that is not afraid of linking normative with ontological viewpoints.

But what is an adequate conceptualization of the promising notion of ‘forms of life’, and what form of critique should be linked to it? In this paper, we have suggested that the move to forms of life as a basic analytical concept for critical social theory best delivers on its promises if the notion is taken in a **relational rather than a substantialist** way. That means putting the **emphasis on the interrelations and interactions**, often tense and internally conflicting, between individual agents and **groups engaged in collaborative activities constitutive of human social life**. Built into these interactions are **basic moral expectations of recognition**, central aspects of which can be articulated by the **ideas of equality, justification and unconditionality**. These fundamental ideas have been fleshed out in many different ways across times and cultures. And they have been realized to a lesser or larger extents; indeed, often they have not been realized at all. Unsurprisingly, most human cultures have come up with justificatory discourses or ideologies explaining, justifying, and reifying practices and institutions that disadvantage certain groups in contrast to others in terms of their recognitive status.

In many cases the weight of these ideologies has been so strong that it has taken decades, often centuries, to challenge them. However, precisely the focus on human social life as made up of normatively constituted forms of ‘collaboration’ allows us to look at cultures and societies in this way. Learning processes at the level of a collective are not necessarily for the benefit of all involved. They might be functionally efficient and yet deprive some participant individuals or groups of adequate recognitive status and thus be morally deficient. Our suggestion is that instead of the **second order notion of learning processes**, it is the first order fact of moral normativity built into human forms of interactions that should be the primary leverage point for an immanent critique utilizing the concept of forms of life.

ZFC set theory +
category theory

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