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## Kritik von Lebensformen

By Rahel Jaeggi

Suhrkamp, 2014, pbk €20, ISBN 9783518295878, 451pp

by Hans Arentshorst

Does contemporary philosophy need to concern itself with the question of the good life? Among liberals there is a strong conviction that the answer has to be 'no.' Political liberals, such as John Rawls, argue that political neutrality is needed in ethically plural societies if one wants to realize a workable *modus vivendi* – an argument that goes back to the religion wars in Europe. In a similar way, Jürgen Habermas emphasizes the importance of the Kantian distinction between morality and ethics: whereas philosophy should focus on universal moral norms, it is now the responsibility of each individual to realize his or her own conception of the good. By privatizing the question of the good life, liberals aim both at the neutralization of unresolvable conflict, and at the securing of individual autonomy and the avoidance of paternalism.

In her book *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Rahel Jaeggi questions these liberal claims. She does this not by simply demanding a return to ethical discussions about values – as it has been voiced by conservative communitarians – but by approaching the problem from a social-theoretical and social-ontological perspective. Her starting point is the modern paradox, which has been pointed out by Hegel and Durkheim, that as the modern individual becomes more autonomous, it also becomes more dependent on society. As the individual frees itself from the traditional and religious structures of pre-modern societies, it becomes intertwined in the complex practices and institutions of modern society – such as the division of labor, the modern family, democracy, the city, the education system, infrastructure, etc. – that both contribute to the autonomy of the individual, but also determine to a large extent how an individual can live its life. Jaeggi stresses that these overarching social practices, which she calls 'life-forms' (*Lebensformen*), are not neutral, since they already give an answer, at least implicitly, to the question of how to live.

This modern paradox concerning autonomy and dependency is in itself not problematic, according to Jaeggi, as long as individuals are able to collectively appropriate and transform these overarching life-forms. However, this ability is undermined when we follow the liberal strategy of treating life-forms as being beyond rational discussion, which can lead to a

*naturalization* of life-forms. Jaeggi gives the example of the market, which is a life-form that determines to a large extent how people can live their lives, but at the same time has become more and more naturalized in our time, as if it were a force that is beyond discussion.

Jaeggi's claim is that liberalism – in contributing to an understanding of life-forms as natural and beyond criticism – in the end undermines its own goals: ethical conflicts are not neutralized, but simply covered up, which can potentially lead to new conflicts instead of rational debate; and there is a return of paternalism and a decrease in autonomy, since individuals are no longer able to appropriate or transform the overarching conditions of their existence. Jaeggi argues that if we want to reinforce the autonomy of individuals, then we need a *de-naturalization* of life-forms, which requires that they are treated as dynamic social practices that can be criticized and questioned.

However, this brings us back to the problem of ethical pluralism, because it is still unclear how we can rationally discuss the value of life-forms in an ethically plural society. This is the central question that Jaeggi wants to answer in her book, namely: is it possible to rationally discuss life-forms? Can they be evaluated as being good, successful or rational? Jaeggi wants to convince us that this is possible by sketching the outlines of a Hegelian-inspired critical theory that she calls a 'critique of life-forms.'

In the first part of the book she tries to define what a life-form is, and how it differs from related concepts such as lifestyle, tradition, or culture. It soon becomes clear that her concept of life-form is largely based on Hegel's notion of 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*). As her conceptual analysis progresses, she comes to the definition of life-forms as bundles of social practices, orientations and institutions that aim at solving problems concerning the cultural and social reproduction of human life – problems that are both historically situated and that have a normative character. Life-forms are thus understood as dynamic complexes that constantly have to cope with new problems and historical situations.

Jaeggi further stresses that life-forms are characterized by a certain lack of transparency, since they are both constructed and given: life-forms such as the modern family, the market, and democracy are undeniably the result of human action, but at the same time – and here one can think of Heidegger's notion of 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*) – we are thrown into a world in which these life-forms are already in place and form the implicit background of our actions. Jaeggi argues that it is usually only in moments of crisis and breakdown – when the life-form is no longer able to solve its problems – that it comes into view *as* a life-form, as just one possible normative answer to certain problems that collective life poses. This can then

potentially lead to critical reflection and to the transformation of the life-form.

By describing life-forms as attempts to solve problems, Jaeggi thinks to have found a fruitful alternative to the liberal strategy of dealing with ethical pluralism. Although she agrees with liberals that we cannot rationally discuss the specific values of life-forms, she thinks it is possible to rationally evaluate and compare *how life-forms deal with problems and crises*. In order to make this possible, Jaeggi develops her own version of the critical approach known as *immanent critique*, which is inspired by the left-Hegelian tradition that wants to criticize society from a perspective that is both context-dependent and context-transcending. What this means, can be illuminated by looking at how Jaeggi differentiates immanent criticism from both external and internal criticism.

Whereas external criticism projects its own norms and values externally on society, internal criticism tries to reconstruct and recover the underlying ideals that guide society and then criticize the gap between current social practices and these underlying ideals. What makes external criticism problematic for Jaeggi is that it results in an unfruitful moralism, whereas the problem of internal criticism lies in its static conception of life-forms, which is usually accompanied by a conservative tendency that obstructs the potential for transformation. Immanent criticism differs from both these approaches because it starts from the problems and internal contradictions of a life-form. In this sense it is more negativistic and formal than internal criticism: it is not interested in recovering certain values, but it wants to contribute to the transformative potential of a life-form by raising consciousness about its internal problems and contradictions. In this sense, immanent criticism is context-dependent, since it analyzes the internal problems and contradictions of a life-form, but it is also context-transcending because it aims at the transformation of the current life-form in order to overcome its problems.

At the same time, Jaeggi has the ambition to equip her immanent approach with more general criteria for evaluating and comparing different life-forms. This brings us to the last part of the book, where Jaeggi tries to develop criteria for evaluating the dynamics of life-forms as more or less successful *learning processes*. She turns here to the work of Hegel, John Dewey and Alisdair MacIntyre, because each of them – in a different way – understands social change as the result of the confrontation of life-forms with problems and crises, and each of them provide general criteria for evaluating the dynamics of these social changes. In her discussion of these authors, Jaeggi tries to balance Hegel's strong teleological and dialectical understanding of the dynamics of life-forms – whereby all social change is

the result of contradictions that are already immanent to a life-form – with the pragmatic emphasis of Dewey and MacIntyre on the contingent character of problems and on the open and experimental character of social change.

This results in her notion of a dialectical-pragmatic learning process, which she poses as the criterion for rationally evaluating and comparing life-forms. This means that life-forms, in their coping with problems and crises, can be evaluated according to the depth and completeness of their self-understanding, their ability to transform and make new experiences possible, and most importantly, according to the degree to which its transformations can be understood as processes of collective self-determination. In the final pages of the book, Jaeggi concludes that from the perspective of her ‘critique of life-forms’ the liberal strategy of refraining from the evaluation of life-forms hinders the possibility of learning-processes and can potentially lead to a blindness towards regressions within life-forms.

Jaeggi’s book is a bold attempt to develop a fresh perspective in critical theory, which aims at re-actualizing many of Hegel’s ideas, but in a style that is seldom seen in Hegelian scholarship or in critical theory, namely in the form of a social ontology that rests on clear conceptual analysis and that stays close to everyday experience. In order to further evaluate Jaeggi’s book, it is tempting to compare her work to that of Axel Honneth, since they both have similar ambitions, but have a slightly different approach. Their common aim is – besides re-actualizing Hegel’s ideas – to rehabilitate the discipline of social philosophy (cf. Honneth, 2007; Jaeggi/Celikates, 2015), which, as Honneth argues, ‘can be understood as providing an instance of reflection, within which criteria for successful forms of social life are discussed’ (2007, 4). More specifically, social philosophy tries to identify the social obstacles and pathologies that obstruct the self-realization of individuals. As Honneth further argues, the main problem when trying to rehabilitate the tradition of social philosophy (i.e. Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Horkheimer, Adorno, Arendt) is that it rests on essentialist assumptions about the anthropological and historical-philosophical preconditions of human self-realization, which are hard to defend nowadays.

From this perspective one can read Honneth’s *Struggle for Recognition* (1995) and Jaeggi’s *Alienation* (2014) as attempts to deal with the anthropological problem of social philosophy – both trying to formulate preconditions of autonomy and self-realization while avoiding an essentialist conception of human nature – whereas Honneth’s *Freedom’s Right* (2014) and Jaeggi’s *Kritik von Lebensformen* deal with the historical-philosophical problem – both providing rational criteria for analyzing social change while avoiding a teleological perspective.

In both cases, Jaeggi has a more formal approach than Honneth.

Jaeggi's central criterion for determining the success of a social life-form is the ability of individuals to appropriate and transform the overarching social conditions of their lives, whereas Honneth applies the much more substantive criteria of reciprocal recognition and social freedom. That Jaeggi's formal approach is perhaps more fruitful, can be illustrated by going back to the example of the naturalization of the market. Both Honneth and Jaeggi want to de-naturalize the market as being a contestable, normative institution instead of being an unquestionable social condition of our lives. However, Honneth does this in *Freedom's Right* by reconstructing the market as a normative sphere of social freedom, thereby de-naturalizing the market but also immediately closing off genuine conflict and debate about the different possible ways a market could function. Jaeggi's negativistic and formal approach seems more promising in this respect, because it only aims at raising consciousness about the problems, dysfunctionalities and contradictions at work in the market in order to stimulate transformation, without pointing beforehand to the right solution. At the same time, it should be reminded that Jaeggi's *Kritik von Lebensformen* only explores the conceptual and methodological problems related to the possibility of a critique of life-forms; it still has to be shown if the actual application of her critical theory will result in fruitful analyses.

A final remark on Jaeggi's critical theory concerns the somewhat unclear role of politics. Her major concern seems to be the de-naturalization and politicization of the overarching social conditions of individual's lives, and in this way, just like Honneth, she seems to defend a radical-democratic position. It remains unclear, however, how her approach relates to existing political institutions (the state, representative government, etc.). If one has the ambition to defend rational criteria for evaluating social change – as Jaeggi does – then more should be said about the complex relation between the social and the political. Perhaps the biggest challenge for Jaeggi is therefore to complement her interesting social theory with a convincing political theory.

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