

**Rahel Jaeggi.** *Critique of Forms of Life*, transl. Ciaran Cronin. Harvard University Press 2018. 416 pp. \$46.50 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674737754).

Rahel Jaeggi's important and fascinating book, *Critique of Forms of Life*, offers a theory of social change that synthesizes pragmatic and dialectical approaches (311). Jaeggi is not the first to attempt such a project, as her copious and impressive endnotes suggest. By trying to combine Hegelian dialectics with Deweyan pragmatism, she violates some of the commitments of both approaches. The result, though, is very productive and thought-provoking. Jaeggi's prose is luminously clear, and her argument is subdivided nicely and is easy to access. Readers familiar with either or both of the Anglo-American analytical tradition and continental philosophy will profit a great deal by engaging with this impressive achievement.

The book has an introduction and four sections. The introduction explains why this book is needed. Section I defines forms of life and practices. Section II defines forms of life as problem-solving formations. Section III provides an overview of the types of social criticism and their uses, and Section IV explains the dynamics of forms of life as transformative processes of social learning.

Why do we need this account? For Jaeggi, academic liberalism has arrived at a cul-de-sac. Liberal neutrality, or the bracketing of comprehensive views of the good life associated with the later work of John Rawls, results in a liberalism that is too normatively weak to critically engage with problematic social practices. Thus, what Jaeggi calls ethical abstinence is not the solution (15). Nor is mere cultural relativism (317) or a return to pre-modern forms of life (xi), or a communitarian account of the good's priority over the right, or a purely pragmatic account of ethical vocabularies, à la Richard Rorty (377n35). Nor is continuity in forms of life as defined by their narrativity, à la Alasdair MacIntyre (290). The answer is that we need a strongly normative theory of forms of life in order to understand social change in a rational, progressively historical manner (311). And that historical interpretation of progress and regress is arguably Jaeggi's key commitment.

What are forms of life? They are problem-solving entities, and the problems they solve arise from internal contradictions, although sometimes Jaeggi identifies contradictions as tensions, at least in this translation (246). Social problems are identified from internally arising contradictions, which come to light through a pragmatically deflated philosophy of history that borrows almost as much (but not quite) from John Dewey's approach to problem-solving as it does from G.W.F. Hegel.

Within forms of life are practices. Jaeggi defines practices as 'complex activities' that we engage in with others, either as repeated or as habitual behavior (56). They enable or set the stage for action, and they are prior to abstractly defined intention: they form and enable intentions (60-1). Jaeggi's forms of life are thus ensembles of practices that structure individual actions. They are '*clusters of practices*,' and '*collective formations*' (41-2, emphasis in original) that are both active and passive, involving voluntarism and habit, and both explicit and implicit knowledge.

In this book, forms of life *do* something. In Section II, Jaeggi argues that forms of life solve problems, as for example when a norm conflicts with a social practice. For a book about conceptualizing and solving social problems, there are few examples of social problems and how they can be solved. There are two important examples in Part II, the modern family structured by equal respect for each member's autonomy, and the failures of the work-oriented society. The traditional family is not necessarily a failing one; and Hegel's modern family is not wholly

successful. Jaeggi places her criticisms of the Hegelian ethical family in the footnotes, where they are somewhat buried; her engagement with Hegel's failings often feels less well integrated into the main argument than it could be.

In a later summary I found useful, Jaeggi explains that '[f]orms of life are bad, irrational, or inappropriate insofar as they are marked by systemic blockages or disruptions with regard to the perception and solution of problems' (216). The alternative to blockage is what Jaeggi variously calls a 'genuine' or 'rational learning process,' which entails theorizing 'the correct (and *unavoidable*) solution to a problem or a crisis' (213). It is this deep-seated normative grammar that leads Jaeggi away from Wittgenstein, about whom we hear little in this book, and into the domain of Hegel, where forms of life are instances of objective spirit.

Section III enumerates three types of criticism: external, internal, and immanent. External critics such as the foreigner, or the critic offering the 'view from nowhere,' do not share the norms of those criticized. Internal criticism is provided by the insider who suggests how a society could do whatever it is doing in a better way than it currently does. Michael Walzer's *Interpretation and Social Criticism* is deployed to help Jaeggi explore the 'connected' internal critic, but she chooses a more radical register, Hegel's immanent criticism, the several features and structure of which are helpfully reconstructed for the reader (199-206).

Part IV makes its argument on behalf of transformative social learning by engaging with Dewey, MacIntyre, and Hegel. Jaeggi reads Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* to construct an analysis of how a problem becomes a problem (274-80). She combines this with Alasdair MacIntyre's account of narrativity and crisis and then juxtaposes this account with Hegel's process of 'determinate negation' and immanent criticism in order to formulate a theory of rational learning processes. Given that Dewey is so important in the framing of problems, and that properly framing a problem is the first step toward solving problems, it is surprising that this portion of the argument did not come earlier in the book. Given Hegel's synthesizing use in the book, it might have made sense for the analysis of immanent criticism (193-206) to appear after the step of framing problems, in Part IV.

This is an excellent book. In part because of its clarity, it invites challenges. Four critical challenges to Jaeggi's critical theory of criticism of forms of life occur to me. First, Jaeggi's critical theoretic account insufficiently theorizes the 'how.' How material is the process of changing attitudes, discovering problems, and overcoming blockages to communication and learning? What exactly is this process *as a process* (discussed at 221-6)? How do 'we' (not just Hegel, but actual persons in an actual form of life) transform our entire relation to ourselves through reflection (303)? Second, as noted, Jaeggi's critical theory offers a 'synthesis' of pragmatic and dialectical approaches to forms of life (311). Invariably, one of the parties to the synthesis will claim that they've been under-theorized or misrepresented. From the pragmatist's vantage, Jaeggi's forms of life analysis is too Hegelian and too dogmatically progressive. It imagines the uninhabitability of some forms of life (128-9) without theorizing the path toward an exit from them. Jaeggi is also quite sanguine about the book's modern audience: scripture and tradition only make brief appearances as authorities. In short, Jaeggi may 'overestimate the power' we have in the 'conscious shaping' of tradition (83). Again, the paucity of examples works to the book's disadvantage in dealing with these sorts of criticisms.

Perhaps the largest outstanding question that must be raised about the book concerns its progressive historicism. Jaeggi amends Hegel's objective and unitary philosophy of history, softening its premises. She asserts that learning processes are open-ended (318), and (in an apt turn of phrase) 'pragmatically' deflates Hegel's philosophy of history (219). Hegelians will not like

this, and Jaeggi admits that social contradictions appear not to have the ‘compelling force sometimes attributed to them in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition’ (212). Are, then, they still contradictions? In an interview with Amy Allen (Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta, *From Alienation to Forms of Life: The Critical Theory of Rahel Jaeggi*. Pennsylvania State University Press 2018), Allen worries that Jaeggi’s language of contradiction implies a ‘teleological directionality’ that cannot be cashed out. In a related concern, Jaeggi spends less than a paragraph in *Critique of Forms of Life* exploring the Eurocentric aspects of Hegelian philosophy of history (311). Post-colonialists will not be satisfied with this, and even Hegelians will probably want more clarity here.

Some of these problems are accounted for, or at least confronted, in the aforementioned 2018 volume on Jaeggi’s work edited by Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta. There, the reader finds further engagement with the philosophy of history. Now, Jaeggi admits that she isn’t sure there is such a thing. And yet in *Critique of Forms of Life* Jaeggi insists that we need a criterion to distinguish between, on the one hand, progress and regress, and, on the other, mere change (312).

One suspects that Jaeggi wants to hold on to progress as a developmental standard for practical reasons, notably the ability to face down ‘regressive’ social forms such as Nazism. In the exchange with Amy Allen, Jaeggi admits that ‘[a]nalyzing fascism in terms of regression speaks to me.’ And although Jaeggi remarks in Allen and Mendieta (2018) that ‘progress appears only at the very end’ of *Critique of Forms of Life*, the idea of progress seems present all the way through her provocative and very rewarding text.

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