

# Education and Critical Thinking as Critical Behaviour: Following the Normative Structure of Forms of Life

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, following Rahel Jaeggi's critique of forms of life, I contend that to identify genuine critical thinking we should start from an analysis of the normative nature of forms of life as the basic constituents of the social world. In this view, critical thinking can be seen as a critical behaviour. While genuine forms of life can recognize and consider the variety of concrete and diverse situations, on the contrary non-functioning forms of life's critical rationality understands the norm as applied from outside of the form of life. In this case the norm, erroneously understood as a neutral and universally applicable principle, such as economic rationality, is not able to consider the particularity of forms of life as goods in themselves. I defend the meaning that an education in critical thinking must have, as a genuine and functional rationality characterising human beings in a social world.*

**Keywords:** critical thinking, education, epistemic injustice, forms of life, social norms

## **1. Introduction: Critical Thinking as Critical Behaviour**

According to a very widespread conception, critical thinking is reasonable thinking aimed at deciding what to believe and how to act. However, how should we understand this reasonableness?

In this paper I contend that in order to be able to identify the salient

features of reasonableness of genuine critical thinking one should conceive it as a *critical behaviour* in line with a critical-ethical *sensitivity*. In my view, one strategy would be to start from an analysis of the basic constituents of the social world and their normative nature as a form of “criticism”. Following Rahel Jaeggi I support the idea that it corresponds to an analysis of the normative nature of *forms of life*. While *genuine* forms of life can recognize and consider the variety of situations and contexts in which human beings live their life (i.e. the “concrete” *other*, rather than the generalized other), on the contrary malfunctioning forms of life are characterized by forms of a *critical rationality* that understands the norm as external and applied from outside of the form of life itself. In this case the norm, erroneously understood as a neutral and universally applicable principle, is not able to consider the particularity of many forms of life as goods in themselves. I will contend that many cases of normative failure of forms of life are due to the application of one form of instrumental rationality which is the economic style of reasoning and its critical rationality, like in some educational fads.

Having said this, addressing this issue, from the perspective of this paper, requires a first consideration of another question. As Christopher Hookway notes, knowledge involves exchange and participation in dialogue and discussion in research groups but participation in a debate does not only require an exchange of information, but also the presentation of questions and the consideration of alternative possibilities (see Marabini 2023: 82). However, in some cases, the participation of a speaker, although accredited as competent, is not taken into consideration as a valid contribution to the debate, (see Hookway 2012: 151–163; see also Poolhaus 2017; Marabini 2023). According to some well-known scholars, to avoid this, especially in educating people, one should encourage the development of a *critical* and at the same time *ethical* sensitivity.

But what should this critical *sensitivity* that incorporates an ethical component be like? How can we understand this critical behaviour so that it can overcome these criticisms? For José Medina, social epistemologist and scholar of race and gender theory, this sensitivity must be functional to an epistemic resistance, that is, to a use of our epistemic resources and abilities that weaken and change oppressive normative structures and cognitive functions (see Medina 2013: 3). To maintain a democratic temperament requires continuous effort, although this is not always the case. Resistance is thus the mechanism of contestation which, unlike consensus, represents for Medina the true characteristic feature of democracy. Indeed, as Elizabeth Anderson, a supporter of feminist epistemology and political scientist observes, we need a model of democracy for which epistemic success is the product of its ability to take advantage of the epistemic diversity of individuals (see Anderson 2006: 11, see also Medina 2013: 5). Democracy cannot correspond only to voting but assigns a fundamental role to the discourse and discussion that precedes the vote. If the latter holds the role of ratifying certain proposals, the debate that precedes it is fundamental to articulate those proposals and bring to attention the issues of public interest. An epistemic model adequate for democracy therefore requires, according to Medina, that we continue to critically address and revisit the consequences of decisions for which there were previously agreement and consensus.

The perspective of Anderson and Medina can be seen in line with John Dewey's experimentalist model. Now, for Dewey, this capacity for resistance is equivalent to understanding dissent as a process of social learning favoured by two aspects: *experience* and *imagination*. Medina thus captures the Deweyan character of the democratic process, refining the notion of epistemic resistance in two ways, namely *resistant experience*, and *resistant imagination* (see Medina 2013: 7). This means that our experiences are extended and critically evaluated

through imagination, which allows us to connect our current experiences with possible ones, projecting them onto alternative past, present and future experiences and comparing ourselves with heterogeneous groups. In this way, the epistemic interaction that results from these practices involves, for Medina, the result of a refinement of our critical and epistemic sensitivity, as well as democratic since it favours the development of cognitive-affective attitudes that facilitate and promote the ability to relate, to feel involved, and take care of the interests and aspirations of others.

At any rate, this model of sensitivity, emphasizing the role of dissent, although it does not aim at agreement and consensus, does not represent an attempt to valorise only disagreement over everything else, but rather operates at a different conceptual level. For the convergences or divergences between the various perspectives always represent *transitory moments* that require revision. In order to be able to operate in this way, according to Medina, an epistemic friction is needed, the same friction that Wittgenstein also means when he states: "We want to walk therefore, we need friction. Here we are again on rough terrain!" (11; see Wittgenstein 1958: §107). This involves primarily a commitment to particularism by rejecting easy idealisations. But "particularism", in this context, does not mean dispensing with ideals, but only understanding them differently, that is, as *historically situated*, and not as a-historical standards used to evaluate any type of society. Here Medina's idea, in line with Dewey's experimentalism, is that ideals take on the role of hypotheses or imagined solutions to solve particular problems only if they pass, so to speak, the "test" of experience, but also in this case they are never solutions given once and for all as standard meters that exist outside of history. As Anderson points out, circumstances change giving rise to unfamiliar problems that require other solutions and the construction of new ideals (see Anderson 2011: 6; Medina 2013: 12). To this particularist and

fallibilist approach to critical sensitivity, the “meliorist” character of learning and the expansion of knowledge must be added. This is the idea that trying to make things better means setting aside the concept of what is the absolute “best” for an ideal theory. On the contrary, the approach that Medina defines as “non-ideal” theory starts from the diagnosis of specific problems and discomforts that arise within society, rather than from a speculation on what could be a perfect theory of justice. Hannah Arendt, in her work “The Origins of Totalitarianism”, defining ideology as the inability to grasp experiences that are recalcitrant to a given theory as genuine challenges that require consideration, highlights how political failures are often due to the birth of ideologies. The error of these theories consists in becoming immune to other experiences in the world. This happens, according to Arendt, when an idea, placed as a premise, (if logic is understood as the movement of thought, and not as a necessary control of thought), is understood as sufficient to explain everything as a development of that premise; that is, when no new experience can teach her anything, since everything is understood as already understood in that process of logical deduction (see Arendt 2009/1966: 642–645; 1965: 18–19)

## **2. Critical thinking: which rationality?**

In introducing the themes of this paper, I started by asking what critical thinking is. I would now like go back to the contested position that understands it as an example of instrumental rationality, i.e. one that allegedly could guarantee the most rational choice because it is objective and neutral. The question then becomes: is a purely instrumental vision of rationality or human reason sufficient to form a critical capacity and *sensitivity*?

Instrumental rationality is a mode of rationality that deals exclusively with the search for efficient means, and which consequently is not interested in the evaluation of the goals pursued as goods in

themselves (see Cruickshank 2014: 19). This form of rationality, although already existing before, became dominant in the liberal, democratic, and liberal-economic societies that followed the Enlightenment period. As Cruickshank observes, it is a dominant conception because it shapes not only the economic sphere, but also the social practices that involve people and institutions. In a liberal and neoliberal economy, the economic elites aim to produce and sell everything that can achieve maximum profit, seeking the most efficient means to increase it. In the thought of classical liberalism, in fact, starting from the basic principle that individuals are rational beings in search of personal interest, political activity is reduced to the introduction and protection of a set of rules that regulate competition.

But what then is the domain of instrumental rationality? When and in what contexts does it apply? A problem that has already been highlighted by many is its condition of "anomia", i.e. the assumption that this form of rationality is neutral with respect to any moral or social norm (20). So, the feeling is that it allows us to evade the question of the meaning that social practices or forms of life in which they are involved have for human beings. This is in the belief that it is possible to replace it through procedural, formal and bureaucratic tools. Precisely because of its formal nature, centered on quantitative and symbolic quantities, instrumental rationality would represent, according to this point of view, the rationality par excellence, since it is understood as neutral with respect to any end. Instrumental rationality would be allegedly objective, therefore impartial, and applicable to any context. It follows that technical knowledge, including economics, characterised by sets of procedural rules, could be assumed as the sole true form of rationality capable of governing. Thus, economic, and instrumental rationality would not be limited to the economic sphere but would also shape social and institutional practices.

Now these social practices pertain, however, to forms of life that

characterise the organisation of human societies, such as education. In what way, therefore, going a little deeper into the substance, can economic-instrumental rationality influence education? Also, is economic - instrumental rationality neutral?

Starting from the second question, according to the economist Clara Mattei and the sociologist Elizabeth Popp Berman, the answer would be negative. For economic instrumental rationality, as well, includes its values, even if not explicitly declared, such as *efficiency*, *competition* and “rational” choice based on calculation (see Mattei 2023, Popp Berman 2022).

In addition, experience suggests that human reason is not limited to formal rationality when it must make choices and decisions; on the contrary, it includes a critical sensitivity that incorporates ethical questions. Therefore, an ethical dimension in the various *forms of life* in which we take part as human beings living a social dimension, appears unavoidable.

But what are forms of life? As Rahel Jaeggi put it, they are the basic constituents of the social world. As such, they have a particular normative nature which allows them to maintain themselves while at the same time assuming a dynamic trend because these *norms* have the characteristic of coinciding with one kind of critical *behaviour*. Thus when a form of life does not function anymore, this is due to a *normative failure*, because it no longer corresponds to an adequate critical behaviour (see Jaeggi 2021).

### **3. How “not” to think like an economist: the rationality of functioning life forms vs. economic-instrumental rationality**

So, what is the most appropriate critical behaviour for genuine forms of life? Forms of life are structures and social practices of the relationship of human beings within an ever-changing reality. They are evaluated on how well they can provide solutions to problems. As such, the typical

form of the normative nature of life forms corresponds to “critical behaviour” in the face of crises. This attitude is in line with a pluralistic conception of reasoning that takes into account multiple contributions and life contexts, within a value approach.

The difference between a form of life that works well and one that does not, as we noted above, depends on the type of behaviour and critical thinking that characterizes them. In turn, this aspect is a by-product of their normative nature inasmuch as social norms. A social norm is characterized by a set of interrelated customs or practices and by critical behaviour.

When a form of life works well, it is characterized by a criticism and a form of rationality which, in line with Jaeggi, I will call *immanent* rationality. It takes a distance from an instrumental, formal, and abstract rationality, as it is closely intertwined with material behaviours and social practices that involve individual actors within situations.

A significant example of how human beings think when faced with crises is one described by David Ross. Ross reports an autobiographical case in the article “Learning not to think like an economist: case-study” (see Ross 2007: 9). As an economics researcher, Ross was tasked with observing how economists’ modes of reasoning, known as *economic rationality* or “thinking like an economist”, determined public policy choices and how these decisions affected local governments. Having gone to Townsend, his village of birth, Ross observed the behaviour of the local religious community of Quakers as well as the village community and realised that the principle that neighbours were always able to resolve disputes between themselves if laws are clear and well-established regarding property rights, was patently false. According to this principle of rationality, which Ross defines as “thinking like an economist”, if for example Mary had used a chainsaw early in the morning and disturbed her neighbour Bob, Bob could have paid Mary to induce her to postpone the work or alternatively Mary she could have paid



Bob to endure in silence rather than report her (*Ib.*). But on the contrary, Ross observed that when faced with such situations, the inhabitants of Townsend did not adapt to this strategy; therefore, they did not adopt the solution of monetization and economic efficiency, but rather presented themselves to the village authorities asking for a solution to the problem. Townsend residents, in fact, met and protested so that the supervisors of Townsend would take action. Contrary to the economist's expectations, the case described by Ross shows that an instrumental rationality such as economic rationality cannot be applied in every situation. The example of Townsend village describes a situation in which two traditions or, rather, two forms of life meet, generating a crisis; the economic and instrumental rationality of the "thinking like an economist" type, understood as impartial since it is free from any value, on the one hand, clashes with another type of rationality which instead more faithfully characterises the way of reasoning and behaviour of the community of village, on the other. Therefore, the assumption that economic rationality can constitute the form of universal rationality, as in the case described above, seems here to be denied.

Yet, according to a widespread conception of rationality, the dominant rationality is merely the extension of a reasoning style born in the economic field, known precisely as "thinking like an economist" (see Popp Berman 2022). The alleged advantage of "thinking like an economist", or of economic rationality, would be precisely the fact that it coincides with an instrumental rationality equivalent to deductive logical reasoning, starting from premises such as self-evident and therefore undisputed truths. Thus "thinking like an economist" would represent the universally applicable form of rationality as it is allegedly objective and impartial.

A case of application of this economic rationality described by Elizabeth Popp Berman can help to understand this concept. Popp

Berman reports how in the 1980s, the United States had undertaken a policy that provided financial compensation to those who suffered environmental damage without measures being taken to intervene in the situation. For example, faced with the problem of pollution in their communities, African Americans responded with the demand for greater environmental justice. Since these communities were located in economically disadvantaged territories, frequently located near polluting factories, the inhabitants posed the environmental issue in terms of civil rights. In fact, African Americans claimed the “right to participate in the management of environmental policies as equal partners”. But although the request concerned the recognition of being a party to the dispute, the government’s response was exclusively economic. The demand for racial justice was in fact translated into an economic calculation of the risk factor affecting low- income communities. Action was not taken to reduce pollution, but by providing economic subsidies to compensate for the disadvantage. Thus, once again, the call to end the production of toxic waste was neutralized. The same happened when faced with the problem of housing shortages: no new houses were built, but compensation checks were given to those who had been victims of this situation.

What is striking in the situations reported above is the fact that a form of rationality born within the economic discipline, extending well beyond the sphere of economics, affects the sphere of sociality, justice, and forms of civil coexistence. However as Popp observes, a second aspect of economic rationality is that, although it is perceived by its supporters as neutral and objective, since it is understood as free from particular values, on the contrary it contains “values” exactly like other forms of criticism, and these are called ‘choice’, ‘competition’ and especially ‘efficiency’ (18–20). Popp observes how the progressive extension of the economic style to further areas has prevented people from asserting political claims that have their roots in values such as *rights*,

universalism, *equity*, and the *attempt to limit corporate powers*, regardless of political colour of conservative or liberal origin (8–11).

As regards education and schooling, on the contrary, according to economic-instrumental rationality's supporters, using logic and deductive reasoning would allow students to make the best rational choice. Therefore, the development of the analytical skills necessary to make the best decision with respect to one's own interests is then thought to have a positive impact on society. Once these skills are acquired, economists would be able to pursue the best policies that are best suited to meeting economic challenges and to making governmental decisions. Teaching to "think like an economist" would imply the claim of training students in an instrumental rationality according to which rational choice would constitute an individual choice starting from an atomistic conception of the individual, in line with the idea that economics is the "science" of individual choice (see Fullbrock 2010: 89–102; Kristjanson-Gural 2017: 341–359).

According to Kristjanson-Gural and Fullbrock, the consensus on this approach to economics and the mindset that an economist must achieve, dates to the 1930s and later to the 1950s/1960s, in the Western world and it is due to neoclassical economic theorists (see Fullbrock 2010: 89–102). For these economists the use of deductive reasoning starting from certain premises or axioms guarantees a rigorous mathematical formulation of the theoretical arguments, which can then be assessed and compared with the data of experience and then eventually be verified or not (see Olsen 2011: 181–195). In this respect, Popp contends that the spread of the economic style of reasoning is not only due to industrial organization economists of a market-oriented society in front of less government intervention in economy and society, like in neoliberal positions but was also adopted by system analysts to increase alleged government efficiency in making rational decisions in leftist positions (Popp Berman 2023: 72–73). At any rate, I contend

that the case illustrated by Ross, in light of Popp's analysis, shows how the economist's instrumental rationality, when conceived as neutral and applicable to any context, is one case of a deviant or malfunctioning form of life. But why? And what does a life form look like when it works well?

#### **4. Forms of life as social norms<sup>1</sup>**

As we said before, forms of life are social norms characterized by a set of interrelated uses or practices and by critical behaviour.

Jaeggi reports as examples of forms of life; the nuclear family, in contrast with 'alternative' family forms of life, the metropolitan form of life compared to the provincial form of life, the bourgeois and nomadic forms of life, the form of life of the Middle Ages and that of modernity. The way of life of community gardens, the "science" way of life, Europe as a form of spiritual life, capitalism, the 1968 movement, the bourgeois society founded on work, and so on (see Jaeggi 2021: 69–72).

Forms of life constitute attitudes and practices that follow pre-existing orientations that make them stable structures. Nonetheless, despite being stable, they are also characterized by the fact that they are open to transformation and change. Due to their structure, they allow speakers to question something that allows them to act; therefore, which constitutes them, but which at the same time limits their possibilities of action (71).

As Jaeggi well highlights, the normative character of forms of life, anyway since it is related to shared social practices, distinguishes them from lifestyles and habits. This happens because forms of life refer to a context in which one is already living as a "background" and the basis for action (73). This component of "background" and passivity links them to traditions, institutions, and culture (see Jaeggi 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> For this topic, see also Ch. 6 of Moretti, Marabini (forthcoming).

However, differently from culture, which recalls the idea of a set of practices, knowledge and contents relating to one society, the concept of a form of life rather is pluralistic. It aims to capture formations that cut across multiple cultures (77–78)<sup>2</sup>.

Another central aspect of life forms is that they are characterized as “problem-solvers” in a *historical* prospective. Indeed, these problems do not come from a zero-point as “bare needs” independent of cultural forms, because they are already culturally and socially shaped (202). Thus, life forms must be able to give a response that allows them to remain *active* when a specific problem arises within them, because we live within that structure, continuously creating it.

This explains the reason they also involve an *active component*. It is about the way in which a form of life, such as a city, a family, a state, can continue to be judged on the basis of the concepts of state, city, family even in situations in which these social formations, over time, lose certain characteristics that make them “deficient”. This fact determines the normative nature that underlies them as a critical behaviour.

The example of the slogan that appeared not too many years ago in Germany and reported by Jaeggi, of the family as an “entity in which there are children”, shows the evolution of a form of life that seems to have lost, over time, some characteristics considered essential in the past. While the latter were traceable in the bourgeois patriarchal family which also necessarily included a marriage between two heterosexual parents, mother, and father, it is now possible to understand a form of life as a “family” even in the absence of these characteristics. For example, in the presence of a same- gender couple with children or a single parent. In fact, it is not just a matter of accounting for the

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<sup>2</sup> Jaeggi 2021: 77–78. Culture for Jaeggi, as a complex set of knowledge, beliefs, art, moral principles, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society is the opposite of nature”. It is the “result of cultivation, of a refinement of relationships with nature and of the way of organizing social relationships” (69–72).

continuity of the form of life, but also of understanding the source of its guiding function in the face of a changing reality.

Now a particularly important aspect for the purposes of this work is the fact that the required transformations can be undertaken after deciding that a new course of action is necessary, i.e. only when a problem is recognized as such. The recognition of a problem as something that needs to be solved is therefore closely intertwined with the way in which *critical behaviour* plays a role in our lives in order to bring about the good functioning of the forms of life in which we take part.

This fact is then closely intertwined with two other essential aspects of life forms, namely the *reflection* necessary to be able to recognize the problem, and the *judgment* through which we give an interpretation of the situation as a crisis. This also explains the critical-hermeneutical character of forms of life. But the required recognition also involves the ability to recognize and judge a recalcitrant experience as a genuine challenge faced by a form of life that is unable to understand it. When the life form is no longer able to grasp this challenge and renew itself internally, ignoring it or not considering it relevant, it faces what Jaeggi calls a "learning block" which translates the form of life into an ideology. This is one case of what I have called before a *normative failure*, i.e. a case in which the norm *fails*.

To understand the reasons of this normative failure we should first understand what the normative nature of a genuine (not failing) form of life is.

Jaeggi highlights the difference between a failing norm and a functioning one comparing the norm underlying a genuine form of life to two other types of norms. The first of the two is a "definitive" rule, on the model of the "sample meter". The norm appears in this case as an eternally immutable standard in the face of a reality that is instead changeable, and which is "measured" by that standard. The second is instead a norm based on purely factual and descriptive aspects, as in

the case of norms conceived as binding only because they are the results of their history (190–191). Compared to these two types of norms, the normativity of genuine forms of life is that of being subject to directed transformations that interact with reality (192). Therefore, if the slogan “the family is where the children are” can still constitute an example of the successful interaction between concept and institutions, it is because the reference to the concept-form of life “family” shows how an obsolete concept such as that of family it has been successfully adapted to a changing reality. Although it takes on a normative function, the form of life (or concept) can thus be understood dynamically (my italics) because what in the past we defined as ‘family’ and which was identified with some institutions has now changed, while maintaining the concept of “family” (194–195)<sup>3</sup>.

As Jaeggi well underlines, forms of life are norms that are not independent of their implementation but come from the sphere of practice and the world. In fact, they are not simply means to achieve a predetermined end, such as instrumental economic rationality. The ability to solve problems is part of their meaning, not a task in instrumental terms dictated by external factors, although the encounter with an external factor can trigger an internal crisis such as to induce a transformation from within.

## **5. The normative nature of genuine forms of life: immanent critical behaviour**

Now what does critical thinking as critical behaviour have to do with all this discussion?

The answer is that the strategies with which life forms generate in

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*: 194–195 However, it must be said that for Jaeggi, although the normative force of the concept is based on its adequacy with respect to its functional description and the objective conditions linked to it, this does not mean that the latter must be understood as ahistorical.

response to crises, to solve problems, appear in the form of a “criticism”, i.e. a *critical behaviour*. It is, in fact, a type of behaviour that animates forms of life as social practices and structures of the relationship of human beings with a constantly changing reality. Thus, a crisis appears when a form of life is no longer a good normative guide with respect to reality. However, this criticism can take different forms depending on how the crises that provoke them appear. If the form of life responds positively, if it works, it implements a criticism correspondent for Jaeggi to an *immanent critical behaviour* that aims to solve *immanent crises*.

Now an immanent crisis is distinguished from two other kinds of crises: *external crises* and *internal crises*. External crises are caused by criticisms of the form of life coming from an external and “universalistic” point of view, such as “visions from nowhere” (255). The critical behaviour that gives rise to this crisis, or *external criticism*, is therefore caused by a *normative failure* since that critical behaviour is induced by norms understood as principles external to the form of life under discussion, but which claim to be valid for all human beings, regardless of concrete historical, social, and cultural situations. Such norms thus constitute the presupposition of a dominant rationality understood as objective, “impartial” and “neutral” although they are not connected to the normative structure of the community to which they are applied. A case of this type is precisely that of the Townsend community cited by Ross and mentioned above. In that context, according to supporters of the universal value of economic rationality, this model of rationality would have been sufficient to establish practices and rules that reduced disputes to monetary compensation. In this case an instrumental rationality, conceived (erroneously) as a universally valid standard norm, is applied to a form of life such as that of neighbourly relations in the Townsend community, which instead contains ends as goods in themselves, such as *solidarity, cooperation, tolerance*. In fact,



let us remember that the inhabitants of Townsend did not feel satisfied with this rule of conduct. Mary and Bob preferred to go to the governor to see if they could find an alternative solution.

Unlike external crises, *purely internal crises* occur when social practices are measured against ideals understood as always already contained in the community in question, although not yet perfectly realised (257). Faced with internal crises, *internal criticism*, as a particular form of critical behaviour, seeks to restore the underlying principles of the community by bringing them back to life.. An essential characteristic of internal criticism is that the norms underlying the form of life, since they are already given, are never questioned. The limit of this criticism is therefore the disadvantage of having a low potential for change and transformation. The norms, in this case, appeal to a pre-constituted order, and to an illusory conception of the homogeneity of social formations (264). They cannot therefore adequately account for the normative nature of genuine forms of life because the relationship between norms and practices does not appear sufficiently complex and transformative. The extreme case is that of the form of life that becomes pure ideology, that is, an ideology impervious to the genuine challenges posed by new experiences that may call it into question. An example of this type is the case of the entrepreneur who supports respect for gender equality in the workplace, but who ends up hiring only men during job interviews without realizing that his actions contradict his principles. What then is that type of crisis in the face of which a form of life functions and can transform and improve while staying alive? Jaeggi's answer is that this happens when the crises that the former must face are immanent, followed further by a *critical behaviour* that corresponds to an *immanent criticism*.

Unlike purely internal or purely external crises, immanent crises, although presenting some traits common to the first two, are placed in an intermediate position.

The crisis generates a problem to be resolved, as an immanent criticism, to the extent that the problem arises from the “contradictions” born in the course of the form of life’s historical development through time (242). Jaeggi observes how immanent crises are oriented more towards the transformation of existing conditions, therefore towards a reformulation of the very norms that regulate them, than towards the observance of norms understood as pre-existing, but not fully updated, as internal criticisms do instead. In particular, immanent criticism targets the contradictions that can arise when the norm produces effects that deny the content of the norms themselves. This happens when the relationship between norms and reality has been reversed (Jaeggi 2021: 285). An example is the (immanent) crises given within the liberal bourgeois society’s form of life as a society mediated by work. As Jaeggi observes, if a society mediated by work is a form of life born in the name of valorising the principles of freedom and equality, against for example a society in which serfdom was in force, it undergoes a reversal when during its history it faces a new phenomenon such as unemployment and exploitation which nullify those principles. This happens because these phenomena, born as effects of the form of life, now deny those principles of freedom and equality, although they were born as subsequent effects of those same principles on which the form of life of work was built.

An important fact is that the driving force of the dynamics characteristic of forms of life is not only given by the challenges posed by the problems that can emerge *within a tradition* or form of life, but also by the conflicts *between different traditions* that coexist. This happens when they compete in giving the correct interpretation of the world and being the sole valid answer to a challenge. At any rate, what allows a crisis to materialize is the recognition of the contradiction.

The task of (immanent) criticism is therefore a *subjective evaluation of the contradictions inherent in a specific social form*. This

entails both the need to decide which contradictions are identified in the process, and a previous critical reconstruction of the shortcomings of that reality.

## **6. Critical thinking and the historical character of rationality: the importance of the transmission of knowledge in education**

What can we say at this point about the rationality that characterizes a genuine form of life? An assumption on which it is based, according to Jaeggi, is undoubtedly the *historical* character of rationality. Since it corresponds to the history of overcoming its crises and its transformations, as an immanent criticism, it cannot be understood as a rationality, as a normative point of reference coming from outside, but as a “learning process” which also includes a reflection by a subject (Jaeggi 2021: 303, 306). It is therefore an inclusive rationality, open to a direct comparison with reality and social practices, as well as aimed at change. However we said that this learning process is successful when it involves answers to problems that do not arise from a “zero point” (327). To understand the dimension of immanent criticism, as immanent critical behaviour, can therefore contribute to providing some answers regarding the way in which we must understand education, as a form of human life. This means understanding the importance of a critical dialogue with the past that can address the issue of authority and its effects, as well as addressing the future, and engaging on issues that address power relations in today’s world (Giroux & Giroux 2006: 28). The question then becomes particularly urgent if we think that forms of life run the risk of degeneration and become malfunctioning, like the form of life “education”.

This fact will help in giving an answer to one question that we left answered before, which was “In what way can economic-instrumental rationality influence education? One way to do this is by a misunderstanding of what rational critical thinking consists of. I said that the

*historical* character of rationality implies the idea that education, as well as critical thinking as part of it, cannot ignore the transmission of knowledge. It cannot build on competences and skills conceived as neutral and objective a-historical mindsets universally applicable, like in many educational fads as for instance Competence Based Education. Thus, I contend that Economic and instrumental rationality, in light of Jaeggi's distinction between malfunctioning forms of life one side, and genuine forms of life on the other, would represent a kind of criticism that would lead to a normative failure of education as a form of life.

## **7. Critical behaviour as critical sensitivity vs. deviant forms of life**

A very frequent cause of degeneration in the educational field today, as Paul Standish observes, is in fact its commodification (see Standish 2024). Standish reports the case of economist Minouche Shafik, who emphasizes how global investment in education has paid off well, and how it is possible to calculate the rate of return on education in economic terms by measuring it in terms of higher wages, minus education costs and dividing by the number of years of education received. Another example of how instrumental rationality can deviate the educational form of life from the conditions from which it originated by distorting it in the direction of its own ends, is the case discussed by K. Stanovich and P. Stanovich (see Stanovich & Stanovich 2010: 195–208). The article by the two scholars examines IQ tests, showing how in this type of test, as in SAT tests, intelligence is understood as separate from rationality. What is understood as “intelligence” in these tests is incorrectly identified as cognitive ability, i.e. speed processing and algorithmic calculation. Stanovich and Stanovich warn against this distorted and partial way of conceiving rationality, since intelligence, unlike an instrumental vision, includes many other aspects that bring difference into play, such as individual experience.

The previous considerations highlight how a further aspect of the degeneration of life forms is the fracture between "reason" and "meaning" induced by the birth of a dominant rationality understood as objective in a society governed by technicians. This fracture is due to a crisis of reason generated by the passage to an abstract symbolism and the formalization of thought. But this happens not because technology is evil or formal and symbolic thought are evils in themselves, but because these are misused and applied to reality in an improper way. This occurs when rationality is understood as formally associated with the idea that it is not just an abstraction applied to an "inexact" world because it is alive, like the life world, but rather as if it were the *real* "structure" of the world.

Differently, forms of life are not independent of their implementation but come from the sphere of practice and the world as norms capable of considering the "other" as a *concrete* other" and not the abstract and generalized "other". The topic is connected to what Jaeggi describes as the *inescapability* of ethical questions (Jaeggi 2007: 44–45). Having to respond to certain functional requirements, the normative nature of forms of life is in fact also "ethical", a question that cannot be considered irrelevant, and which explains why a genuine critical thinking must include, drawing from Medina, what I called an ethical *sensitivity*.

Jaeggi is against the idea that there are on one side purely universally valid and abstract *moral* norms or principles, while on the other mere *ethical* norms that are not relevant to morality. The latter, in this contested view, would in fact only concern local customs and traditions as if they were forms of life that do not affect genuine universal moral principles (*Ib.*). This idea is in fact supported in the name of the *autonomy* of the individual understood as a "neutral" and universal principle, which for Jaeggi is rather the founding feature of neoliberalism. For this principle, as the philosopher observes, is not truly "neutral",

because it is precisely the expression of one form of life among many. In current society it corresponds to the neoliberal ideology of a market-based society, with all the contradictions it entails (Jaeggi 2021: 46)<sup>4</sup>. For Jaeggi, the relationship between morality and ethics, as it is traditionally understood by neoliberalism in its claim to represent objectivity, should instead be conceived as reversed. From Jaeggi's perspective, moral principles are the product of the gradual changes that occur first precisely in those social practices that are part of the forms of life<sup>5</sup>.

## **8. Conclusion: Critical behaviour in forms of life**

Jaeggi highlights the fact that within forms of life ethical questions are unavoidable and "ethical abstention" is not feasible precisely because the boundary between ethics and morality is not drawn. Moral principles do not come before social practices and their respective ethical and customary values, but vice versa. On the contrary, ethical relativism exempts the speaker from responsibility.

Furthermore, forms of life are always politically instituted; what appear as purely free choices of the individual are never such, not even in a neoliberal society. The individual agrees to submit to the norms that regulate the community's forms of life, not as ideal norms never achieved and never questioned, but rather as norms under continuous evaluation. Rationality is therefore an ability to read a situation in its

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*: 46. The market, in liberal societies, is an institution that operates as a neutral means when in reality it has significant effects on forms of life. Jaeggi also reports the words of Hartmut Rosa, who defines the dynamics of the market in liberal society as a "form of life that presents itself as a meta-paradigm hiding the fact that it is itself linked to a horizon of understanding and values".

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Jaeggi points out that ethical questions, such as individual choices, do not actually arise within a purely neutral horizon within which the individual acts fully autonomously, as liberal, and neoliberal positions (erroneously) assume. On the contrary, choices take place within already defined common situations, so individual existence is never, in reality, the result of a free choice. Therefore, the liberal thesis hides the fact that the selection of possible evaluative decisions is always in many respects predetermined by the institutional framework of liberal societies, cf. Jaeggi 2022: 45.

complexity and requires a critical behaviour.

For all these and other reasons, it is necessary to rethink and reformulate what critical behaviour, rational criticism and therefore *rationality* consists of, beyond its currently “dominant” form which is erroneously and generally presented as neutral and impartial.

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