Autism Through the Notion of a Form of Life: A Critical Review

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Abstract: This paper critically reviews prominent Wittgensteinian approaches to autism based on the notion of a "form of life." While all of these approaches offer a powerful alternative to dominant cognitivist views, their specific accounts of autism differ significantly. These contrasting accounts stem not only from different interpretations of what a form of life encompasses but also from related theoretical commitments. The paper begins by analyzing Peter Hobson's view of a given, universal form of life, and argues that it disregards the role of social practices in the exclusion of autistic people. It then addresses Ian Hacking's approach, examining how his pluralistic view allows precisely for an inclusive, shared form of life. Next, the paper examines Robert Chapman's claim that autism is a distinct form of life. It argues that this view is problematically "internalist," and suggests an alternative way to articulate its main insights. Finally, the paper addresses Victoria McGeer's "regulative view of folk-psychology" — akin to the "form of life hypothesis" — as a double-edged sword: it can either reinforce deficit models or, alternatively, illuminate the profound harm caused by ill-fitting social norms. Ultimately, this paper champions views that actively promote the diversity of the human form of life.

Keywords: autism; form of life; neurodiversity; Wittgenstein; regulative view; mindshaping.

1. Introduction

As interest in autism has risen in recent decades, several authors have turned to Wittgenstein's ideas to shed light on its psychological aspects. Wittgenstein's philosophy provides the theoretical grounds for a foundational critique of the cognitivist paradigm that dominates contemporary theories of social cognition — namely, the theory of mind (or "theory-theory") and simulation theory — in light of which autism is usually conceived of. This dominant paradigm is an internalist and individualist framework that builds on a mentalistic view of meaning and regards social understanding as an epistemic challenge of bridging the gap between one's own mind and the inaccessible minds of others. Rather than trying to solve this epistemic puzzle, Wittgensteinian approaches seek to *dissolve* it.

Put simply, if we don't begin by construing minds as being accessible and properly known only from a private, first-person perspective, we lay the groundwork for the dissolution of the problem. Minds are not private objects whose existence must be inferred. We *see* each other's minds — their emotions, intentions, and so on — in their faces, gestures, bodies, and behavior. Because our mental life can be on public display, we can know other minds. However, seeing all of this requires that we be trained in a myriad of complex rule-

governed practices — we have to participate in a shared “form of life,” for it is only within it that meaning and social understanding are embedded. In this approach, neither social understanding nor autism itself can be addressed from an individualist, internalist, cognitivist framework — shared, social practices must be taken into account. The question is thus no longer why autistic individuals cannot infer or simulate others' mental states due to some cognitive deficit, but why they cannot be trained and participate in the form of life in which social understanding is embedded. This is precisely Peter Hobson’s (1991, 1993a, 1993b, 2009, 2013), Ian Hacking’s (2009a, 2009b), Victoria McGeer’s (2010), and more recently, Robert Chapman’s (2019) approach — all of whom have put forward accounts of autism that draw on the Wittgensteinian notion of “form of life.”

My aim in this paper is to critically review these approaches, examining their consistency and implications. While grounded in a similar Wittgensteinian framework, their conceptions of autism diverge. I argue that this stems both from differing interpretations of what a “form of life” encompasses and from related theoretical commitments. These differences, in turn, parallel exegetical tensions among Wittgenstein’s interpreters. I address how the tension between universalist and pluralist, as well as naturalist and culturalist, interpretations of “form of life” shapes views of autism. I also examine related assumptions, such as the status of “the given” and the relationship between language and mind. Without entering into the full exegetical debate, I suggest that practical implications must be considered: the human form of life should be inclusive and diverse.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines key interpretive controversies surrounding “form of life.” Section 3 examines Hobson’s account, arguing that his emphasis on a given, universal human form of life — which has to be accepted and in which autistic people are unable to participate — obscures the possibility that a more inclusive form of life could emerge. Section 4 turns to Hacking’s pluralist, culturalist-leaning approach, which allows for precisely such redefinition or expansion, with his views on language and social ontology playing a key role. Section 5 addresses Chapman’s conception of autism as a different form of life, and argues that this view is, contrary to their intentions, “internalist”: it casts “form of life” as something individuals *have*, rather than something they *participate in*. Nonetheless, it is suggested, this view could be rearticulated through the distinction between “human form of life” and “form of human life.” Section 6 examines McGeer’s “regulative view of folk psychology,” which she likens to the “form of life hypothesis.” It contends that her emphasis on normativity is a double-edged sword: if combined with the assumption that minding-practices allow little divergence, it casts autism in deficit terms, much like Hobson’s approach. Otherwise, her view can illuminate how autistic people are harmed by — and even come to be minded through — ill-fitting linguistic and social practices. This perspective helps address the disabling nature of neurotypical norms and supports Hacking’s call for expanding the human form of life for ethical and sociopolitical reasons. Finally, Section 7 recapitulates the key conclusions drawn throughout the paper.

2. The notion of a form of life

True to his philosophical style, Wittgenstein did not provide a definition of “form of life.” Scholars have offered countless interpretations: more than thirty years ago, Newton Garver (1994) already claimed that the literature on the topic is “too vast for me to have canvassed it

completely” (p. 241). Exegetical debates even concern the very importance of the notion itself. While dominant views hold that one “could hardly place too much stress on the importance of this latter notion in Wittgenstein's thought” (Malcolm, 1962, p. 92), deflationists claim that “form of life” should "suffer the loss of the status it enjoys as a basic concept of Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy" (Majetschak, 2010, p. 79). Moreover, some philosophers equate “form of life” with either “language-games” or “certainties” — while others equate it with “patterns of life,” “ways of living,” or “facts of living” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2015). As these debates are not directly relevant to this paper, which assumes the notion is distinctive and valuable, I will focus on interpretations that treat “form of life” as significant.

While scholars often note the deliberate vagueness of “form of life,” many interpretations converge on a “foundational” understanding. A form of life is the ultimate, ungrounded, bedrock for human language, thought, and understanding (Conway, 1989). “Form of life” is indeed close to “language-games” and “certainties.” “[T]o imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958, § 19). We cannot understand a language — not even imagine it — if we cannot fathom how its speakers live — in what social practices they participate, which physiological needs they have, what their environment is like, and so on. The very meaning of our words is inextricably linked to the shared, rule-governed practices in which they appear, all of which are enabled and constrained by our shared biology and environment.

A form of life has a “stopping” role: it acts as a bedrock where explanations and justifications end. It need not and cannot be justified: “What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could say — *forms of life*” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 226). Forms of life provide the certainties necessary for social practices and knowledge, not because they play a foundational role *à la* Descartes, but because our doubts must simply cease somewhere. For instance, we couldn't speak if we doubted the very meaning of our words, nor could we comfort someone with a hug if we doubted their expression was one of emotional pain. However, this does not mean we are infallible when attributing mental states. It just means that for the practice of attributing mental states to exist at all — just like for language to exist — there must be indubitable cases of agreement, such as agreeing that a father who has just lost his son expresses emotional pain or that the sky is blue. These certainties are part of, or manifestations of, our shared form of life.

Notable differences emerge when determining what a form of life encompasses, or more concretely, what it is that is *given*. Disputes often revolve around the articulation of biological and cultural factors, and the singularity or plurality of the human form of life. Competing “one-dimensional” interpretations can be divided into two camps: “naturalist” and “culturalist” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2015). Naturalist views see the form of life in a singular, universal, and biologically-rooted sense, encompassing the shared, species-typical patterns of behavior, reactions, and capacities common to all humans. They particularly highlight language — or, more generally, the capacity to engage in rule-following activities — as the characteristic feature of the human form of life. Importantly, “naturalism” is not akin to “biologicism”: as both Garver (1994, p. 241) and Malcolm (1986, pp. 237–238) point out by quoting Wittgenstein (1958), “‘Ordering, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” (§ 25; see also Medina, 2004). Culturalist views, conversely, emphasize the plurality of forms of life, understanding each as a culturally and socially embedded system of language-games and other rule-

governed practices specific to a culture or community. For instance, for Baker and Hacker (2005, 2009), there are multiple human forms of life, characteristic of different cultures and epochs, rather than a single, species-characteristic one. Culturalist views do not, however, exclude biological or natural aspects. A form of life “rests upon very general pervasive facts of nature. It includes shared natural and linguistic responses, broad agreement in definitions and judgments, and corresponding behaviour” (Baker & Hacker, 2005, p. 74).

Aside from these "one-dimensional" interpretations, "dual-aspect" or “two-dimensional” readings suggest that Wittgenstein intended both a singular and plural use of the notion. In Stanley Cavell’s (1996) dual-aspect interpretation, there is a “vertical” or “biological” dimension of the human form of life — distinct from other animals’, with language as its key feature — and an “ethnographical” or “horizontal” dimension, pointing to its various cultural manifestations. This distinction does not mean that the human form of life can exist apart from socio-cultural aspects. As Cavell (1996) states, human beings are “irreducibly social and natural, say mental and physical” (p. 333). In a similar vein, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2015), building on Gertrude Conway (1989), distinguishes between the “human form of life” and “forms of human life.” In their view, the human form of life encompasses a shared biology, behavior, and environment, including the capacity for language and culture, and physiological needs (e.g., eating, drinking, sleeping). These are given to all humankind. However, “only for some will it be a given that there is a God, or that sacrifices should be performed, or that the future can be read in the entrails of a chicken” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2015, p. 27) — that is, this is a given only in some forms of human life.

What, then, can the notion of a form of life provide for understanding autism? A key idea is that meaning — including that of psychological concepts, gestures, and facial expressions — is embedded in a form of life. When autism is approached through this notion, the focus shifts from individual cognitive impairments to difficulties participating in a shared form of life or, more concretely, in shared linguistic and social practices. The question is thus no longer why autistic individuals cannot infer or simulate others' mental states, but why they cannot participate in the form of life in which meaning and social understanding are embedded. The approach to this issue depends on both the interpretation of “form of life” and complementary theoretical commitments.

The universality or plurality of the human form of life and the articulation of its biological and cultural aspects are key considerations. If the human form of life is seen as universal and strongly biologically grounded, then autism will be conceived of as a biologically-rooted inability to participate in it. For example, consider the following claims from Garver (1994): “[it] is exceedingly difficult to demonstrate of any *normal* person that there is some language-game which that person could not participate in; that is, could not even learn to participate in” (p. 257, emphasis added). If an individual were unable to participate in one or more language-games, the conclusion would be that their limitation lies with the individual: “our limits are a matter of biography rather than of natural history, pertaining to individual lives rather than to form of life” (p. 257). This would suggest that autism is a disorder — something not “normal.” This idea, when coupled with the claim that a “form of life is a matter of natural history, and thus *not subject to controversy*” (p. 259, emphasis added), becomes particularly pernicious for understanding neurodiversity. It obscures the role of social practices in “individual limitations” and the possibility that — to a certain extent — a form of life could be challenged. This interpretation underpins Peter

Hobson's account of autism, as I will argue below. Furthermore, Victoria McGeer's "regulative view" — which is close to this conception — risks falling into the same problems, though not inevitably.

Conversely, in pluralist views, environmental and sociocultural aspects come to the fore. While acknowledging autism as an inability to participate in the dominant form of life, these views allow for the possibility that with a different environment and practices, autistic and non-autistic people could participate in a shared form of life. I argue that this is what Ian Hacking's account of autism allows. In his account, our shared environment and sociocultural practices play a significant role, and his constitutive view of language is crucial to allowing for a shared form of life. More radically, Robert Chapman also advances a pluralist view, claiming autism is a different form of life altogether. Though suggestive, I argue that Chapman's account does not properly articulate the biological and sociocultural aspects of a form of life. As I will suggest below, their views might fit better within a "two-dimensional" framework where all humans share a common form of life, but only some participate in the autistic form of human life.

I will expand on all of these points in due time. Now, let us begin our analysis by first addressing Peter Hobson.

3. Peter Hobson: Autism as Unrelatedness to the Human Form of Life

Peter Hobson (1991, 1993a, 1993b, 2009, 2013) builds on Wittgenstein's philosophy to challenge traditional views of autism like theory-theory and simulation theory. Hobson claims that these views rely on an overly individualistic and intellectualized approach to social cognition. Following Wittgenstein, Hobson (1991) argues that social understanding is not based on inference or simulation and cannot be explained by focusing on individuals alone. We directly and immediately perceive emotion and other mental states in others' bodies and behavior, and we can do so only by participating in a common form of life where meaning and social understanding are embedded (Hobson, 1993a, 2009, 2013).

According to Hobson, our participation in a common form of life results from a complex social-developmental pathway enabled by biologically-rooted inclinations towards others. Without this innate equipment, one cannot follow a typical developmental pathway and is ultimately unable to (fully) participate in humanity's shared form of life. This is precisely the case with autism. In Hobson's view, autism is not an individual cognitive deficit but an abnormal condition stemming from deficiencies in these biologically-rooted predispositions to interpersonal relatedness (see, for example, Hobson, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 2009, 2013, 2014).

For Hobson, humans gradually acquire a conceptual grasp of the social world and of "minds" through affectively patterned, intersubjectively coordinated relations with others (Hobson, 1993b). To acquire concepts about feelings, intentions, beliefs, and so on, one needs to experience the kinds of relations that exist between oneself and others, which requires coordinated emotional exchanges. From the experience of *persons*, one derives the concept of "mind" and myriad other psychological concepts. Hobson illustrates this with the concept of "friend," which is difficult for autistic people to grasp because it can only be acquired by experiencing what it is like to engage with others in ways fitting for friends (Hobson, 1993b, p. 259; see also Hamlyn, 1974). We cannot understand friendship by merely observing behavior; we must engage in shared practices to grasp its meaning: "One

needs to participate with others in a ‘form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1958) in which one experiences the kinds of interpersonal relatedness and relationship that constitute friendship” (Hobson, 1993a, p. 6). Crucially, however, this experience is grounded in innate human propensities. Children “must be endowed with those dispositions towards people and towards the world that make a common ‘form of life’ possible” (Hobson, 1993a, p. 109).

In his later work, Hobson (2009) specifies that the notion of a form of life “captures exactly what is entailed in the common set of expectations, stances and orientations that constitute the framework for intersubjective co-ordination and agreement among persons” (p. 256). In typical development, humans gradually come to participate in this common set of expectations, stances, and orientations that enable a shared form of life in which social understanding, agreement, and the possibility of error and correction in judgments about reality and mental states are embedded.

> Through [personal] relatedness, we become engaged with embodied other persons. Human social engagement entails self-other connectedness and progressive differentiation. Through relating to and identifying with another persons’ relatedness to the world, children become able to grasp what it means to hold person-anchored perspectives, and so to imagine from those perspectives and to be sensitive to the aspectuality of psychological orientations. It is because there are such preconceptual means to apprehending and relating to the attitudes of other people that children enter a shared form of life and achieve those agreements in judgment that structure language and thought. (Hobson, 2009, p. 256)

According to Hobson, autistic people, however, are unable to (fully) enter this shared form of life for three main reasons. First and most fundamentally, autistic children seem to lack the foundational, biological "natural reactions of persons to persons" that are a precondition for intersubjective engagement (see also Hamlyn, 1974). Second, they might respond to others but fail to internalize their perspective as a potential viewpoint for themselves. This difficulty identifying with others' standpoints makes it hard to understand social correction — which depends on registering shared judgments like agreement or disapproval — and thus to participate adequately in rule-governed practices. Third, they may construe the world utterly differently, having impulses that are nonsensical to others and lacking sensitivity to “universal human inclinations” within a shared environment.

Although Hobson claims that we must understand autism's social-developmental aspects, his writings also stress that he considers the form of life to be biologically-rooted, universal, and “given,” as he repeatedly quotes (e.g., Hobson, 1991, 1993a, 2009, 2013) the aphorism that reads: “What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could *say — forms of life*” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 226). I suggest these three aspects of Hobson’s understanding — its biological roots, universality, and givenness — are mutually linked and lead to a static conception of the human form of life. Despite his intentions, Hobson’s emphasis on these aspects downplays the role of shared social practices in constituting human minds and enabling social understanding. His framework neglects an intriguing possibility: that with more inclusive practices and supportive environments, autistic individuals could better develop and express their inner lives and engage in interpersonal relations. This would change the very conception of the human form of life, but if sociocultural factors are significant, this possibility must be theoretically entertained.

Hobson's framework also obscures the insight that our understanding of so-called "natural inclinations" already occurs within neurotypical practices and concepts. Adults interact with children through "expectations, stances and orientations" dependent on neurotypical norms. We cannot step outside our form of life for a "pure" look at behavior. While children may have "preconceptual means" to enter a shared form of life, an adult's understanding of a child's behavior is not preconceptual. A neurotypical adult's interaction with an autistic child is not a "merely natural" observation but is seen through the adult's available hermeneutical resources. This means that what counts as "personal relatedness," "self-other connectedness," "identifying with," etc., is already grounded in and constrained by neurotypical linguistic and social practices.[1] What is perceived as a "lack," "deficit," or "nonsense" in the autistic child may instead — at least partly — reflect the limits of the adult's hermeneutical resources.

Here, we must avoid problematic readings: accepting a form of life does not mean it cannot be challenged to a certain extent. If the human form of life is seen as universal and strongly rooted in biology, the idea of challenging it is unlikely to gain traction. If we focus on the role of social practices in its constitution, however, our framework becomes more dynamic. If we reframe the central problems of autistic individuals away from a fixed biologically-grounded deficit to participate in a universal, given form of life and move the focus toward the nature of our social practices themselves, the pressing questions become: to what extent can the neurotypical, meaning-grounding social practices change — or expand — so that a different, more encompassing, set of expectations, stances, and orientations come to emerge? How would autistic behavior then be made sense of? Would mutual understanding improve? And, ultimately, to what extent can all humans share a form of life? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the alignment of neurotypical and autistic predispositions, but this is only *part* of the answer. In the next section, I address this possibility through Hacking's views.

4. Ian Hacking: Autism Redefining the Human Form of Life

Like Hobson, Ian Hacking uses the Wittgensteinian framework to move away from cognitivist views, particularly from the idea that we must infer others' mental states by analogy from our own (Hacking, 2009b). For Hacking, understanding others is often an immediate experience rooted in shared ways of living together, rather than a cognitive puzzle to be solved through inference from one's own isolated mind. While resting on innate dispositions, this ability is learned within a community — within a form of life.

According to Hacking (2009b), "autistic people have a great deal of difficulty sharing any form of life with the neurotypical community" (p. 51). This lack of a common form of life is why autistic and neurotypical individuals feel "alien" to each other. However, as Hacking (2009b) notes, "the evocative phrase, 'form of life,' is never more than a pointer; we need to be more specific about what's missing" (p. 51; see also Hacking, 2009a, p. 1468). For Hacking (2009b), forms of life are "ways of living together" (p. 51), with Köhler's phenomena as their bedrock: the ability to immediately grasp each other's intentions, feelings, wants —

1 Interestingly, Hobson himself seems partially aware of this. When arguing against cognitivist frameworks, he states: "we need to question the adequacy of the concepts in terms of which current theories are framed. To think of 'thinking' or 'believing' or 'understanding' or 'finding meaning' or engaging in 'executive planning' without appreciating how far these activities are grounded in affectively configured relations with the social as well as non-social world may be to adopt a seriously skewed view of mental life" (Hobson, 2009, p. 255).

i.e., mental states — without inference. These phenomena are taken for granted in the neurotypical common form of life: "*They are the bedrock of our humanity*" (p. 56). Köhler himself described them as "that kind of understanding which is the common property and practice of mankind" (Köhler, 1929, as cited in Hacking, 2009b, p. 1471). However, Hacking argues, these phenomena are not "the common property and practice" of that part of humankind that is autistic — that is, autistic individuals cannot experience these phenomena, and neither can non-autistic people experience them when interacting with autistic people. This absence drives the "alien" feeling between us and means we cannot share a form of life.

Hacking's understanding of Köhler's phenomena is nuanced. He acknowledges their biological roots but emphasizes the sociocultural aspects of understanding others. Köhler's phenomena are not solely innate but are learned within a community; they seem to both enable and partly depend on the form of life itself. The same applies to autism. While Hacking (2009a) takes "for granted that underneath the spectrum is a family of definite biological conditions, be they neurological or genetic or whatever," he still sees autism as "a 'moving target' that has evolved dramatically" (p. 1467).

Hacking's conception of autism as a "moving target" connects to his work in social ontology and epistemology (Hacking, 1990, 2007). Autism is a moving target because the definitions and hermeneutical resources that target it have been moving for more than a century. This is not merely an epistemological issue: new classifications like "high-functioning autistic" created new ways of being, or new "kinds of people." While such individuals existed before the label, the classification created a new way to be a person — to experience oneself, be recognized, and live in society. For Hacking (2007), thus, autism is not a "transient mental illness" entirely dependent on social factors, like multiple personality disorder. Rather, autism is partly constituted by the classifications and hermeneutical resources that target it. If this is so, the fact that ordinary language and social practices have been built by and for neurotypical people becomes a significant issue. This is why the emergence of autistic autobiographies and virtual communities is crucial for redefining autism and, ultimately, the human form of life.

In keeping with the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind, Hacking (2009a) claims that autobiographies and autism narratives, which can so easily circulate on the Internet and even reach beyond it, do not just describe "a given reality," but are "creating the language in which to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge the concepts in which to think autism" (p. 1467).[2] According to Hacking, this reshaping of language by autistic communities has constitutive force, not only for those who inhabit the spectrum, but also for those who do not: "autobiographies do not so much describe the mental life of their autistic authors, as constitute it by choosing words from ordinary language to be applied in connection with their behaviour" (p. 1472). All of these discourses have the power to "make up people" (Hacking, 1990; see also Dinishak, in press) — thus providing us with more ways of being, and with more ways of understanding ourselves and others.

Interestingly, Hobson also draws on autism narratives, but his method and aim, however, contrast with Hacking's. Hobson (1993a, Chapter 2) turns to them to convey how

2 The importance of abandoning a descriptivist approach in mental health — particularly, in ability ascriptions — is a topic that continues to be explored under the Wittgensteinian-Rylean tradition, where neurodiversity advocates claim that "Insisting on objectivism seems to lead to the counterintuitive idea that minds [that are] victims of the hermeneutical hegemony of the pathology paradigm are, ironically, objectively pathological" (Fernández-Castro & Núñez de Prado-Gordillo, in press).

autistic people experience the lack of the “natural reactions” he sees as core to the disorder. In his words, the self-descriptions he builds on belong to “a very small number of unusually able and articulate autistic individuals” and “might hardly apply at all to more retarded autistic children” (p. 29). While I do not want to disregard the significant differences among individuals within the spectrum, it is worth contrasting Hobson’s approach to self-descriptions with Hacking’s, which is directly linked with the constitutive role he gives language.

> If the autobiographies are straight descriptions, true or false according to the existing criteria, then it is a plain matter of fact whether those descriptions apply to less high-functioning people. But if we think of the descriptions as constituting autistic experience, it is less a question of fact than of the ways in which we will come to understand the less able. (Hacking, 2009a, p. 1472)

Autism narratives not only enable communication among autistic people but also bridge a gap in neurotypical understanding by suggesting what to infer in the absence of Köhler’s phenomena, even for those with severe difficulties. They shift the perception of autistic people from having “thin” inner lives to ones that are “thick, dense or rich, whatever adjectives you please” (Hacking, 2009a, p. 1467). The constitutive role Hacking gives to language, I argue, allows for the possibility Hobson disregarded: that the form of life could become more inclusive, enabling a richer development and understanding of autistic inner life. In other words, our language and practices could change enough to make new ways of living together possible. Online autistic communities play a key role in this.[3]

Ordinary language has been created by the dominant neurotypical community, primarily for face-to-face communication, relying on Köhler’s phenomena. This language is ill-suited for mutual understanding between autistic and non-autistic people, or even among autistic people themselves, contributing to the feeling of alienation. For Hacking, the global emergence of the Internet not only has the power to substantially change our language, but also to radically alter the way of being autistic — and, ultimately, the very human form of life.

> Neurotypicals and severely autistic people do not initially share a form of life because the bedrock is lacking, and so an artificial platform must be constructed. That is one way to describe what is going on right now. In retrospect, we shall almost certainly see today's Internet as making possible a form of life in which autistic people can thrive. It is precisely the medium for human communication that does not depend on body language or eye contact — in short, it does not need Köhler's phenomena. (Hacking, 2009b, p. 56)

Hacking seems to suggest that while neurotypicals and severely autistic people do not *initially* share a form of life, an artificial platform can help them *eventually* share one. This platform acts as a two-way bridge: autistic people are being taught to infer from non-autistic behavior, while autistic narratives transform language and create new, intelligible ways of being. Although we cannot articulate a shared form of life which relies on Köhler’s phenomena, with the help of artificial bridges it becomes possible to share some ways of living together — that is, sharing a common form of life, and not being so alien to each other.

3 Beyond language and social practices, a form of life also encompasses the environment, as pointed out by some interpreters of Wittgenstein. Since human environments built by neurotypical people often prove disabling for neurodivergent people (Strijbos & de Bruin, 2025), making the human form of life inclusive requires taking environmental conditions into account.

As these bridges are built and mutual understanding expands, the human form of life will become more inclusive.

> We tend to be exclusive. Anthropology and sociology teach that human groups hang together partly because of who they include and partly because of who they exclude. Our instinct has always been to exclude aliens, first the terrestrial ones and then the extraterrestrial … Neurotypical society has certainly excluded severely autistic people … But now there are remarkable endeavors afoot that aim at integrating autistic individuals into a larger social world. (Hacking, 2009b, p. 57)

In my view, Hacking's claims suggest not two different forms of life — as Robert Chapman will claim — but a single, inclusive one, transformed by the Internet and reliant on artificial bridges in the absence of Köhler's phenomena. But one might wonder: regardless of Hacking's views, could one argue that autism is altogether a different form of life? The next section explores this idea.

5. Robert Chapman: Autism as a Form of Life

Robert Chapman's (2019) Wittgensteinian approach is particularly concerned with framing autism not as a "deficit" but as a "distinct form of life," challenging both neuro-cognitivist approaches and Hobson's view. The former characterizes autistic thinking by focusing on hypo-empathizing and hyper-systemizing, while the latter emphasizes an inability to attune to humanity's shared form of life. Both, however, treat autism as a deficit compared to the neurotypical norm, rather than considering that autistic individuals might simply be different.[4] Against this, Chapman (2019) argues that autism is "a different way of thinking, understanding, and relating to the world, not merely … a cluster of behaviours deemed dysfunctional with respect to psychiatric norms" (p. 421).

A crucial piece of evidence for Chapman's argument is the double empathy problem, which highlights that non-autistic people struggle to interact with autistic people just as autistic people struggle to navigate the neurotypical world. Furthermore, autistic individuals often become better at understanding neurotypicals than the reverse, challenging the assumption that neurotypical individuals are inherently capable of empathetic cognition, while autistic individuals are not. Autistic people also attune to one another, as seen in online communities with their own rules and vocabulary, and in person, where they report effortless connection with others "of their kind." A neurotypical entering such an autistic space would likely feel disoriented, unable to see the social cues.

According to Chapman, this suggests that autistic challenges are not intrinsic to their cognitive functioning, but stem from a *mismatch* between the individual and the neurotypical community — a mismatch they frame as two distinct forms of life. In Chapman's view, there are (at least) two forms of life, neurotypical and autistic, in which "members of each kind [are] more able to attune to other members of their own kind, and yet remain less able to attune to members of the other" (p. 428). It is important to note, however, that Chapman entertains the possibility that, instead of autism and neurotypicality being two human forms of life, there might only be one, complex enough to have several subsets. Chapman states that choosing between one option or the other is "arbitrary," depending on a debate about

4 See also Chapman's (2021) paper, where they argue for an ecological view of mental functions that seeks to reframe neurocognitive diversity as a normal and healthy manifestation of biodiversity.

the “form of life” which they prefer not to enter. While I don’t wish to enter this debate either, I disagree that the choice is arbitrary, as it has significant theoretical and practical consequences. I will return to this issue at the end of this section.

To articulate this view of "autistic thinking as arising from a different, but not deficient, form of life" (p. 422), Chapman builds on a Wittgensteinian framework. Firstly, they explain the double empathy problem through aspect-blindness, which occurs "whenever someone has some level of understanding but nonetheless misses certain aspects" (p. 429) such as being blind to irony or to aspects of facial expressions. Crucially, autistic individuals are as aspect-blind when perceiving neurotypicals as neurotypicals are when perceiving autistic people. Drawing on McGeer’s (2010) conception of social understanding as "a species of skilled perception that arises in conjunction with skilled performance in any norm-governed shared practice, or form of life" (p. 286), Chapman (2019) concludes:

> if one individual is not sufficiently attuned to the shared world, or part of the form of life, of another individual he is communicating with, then it is precisely in the absence of this guiding context that each will be aspect-blind when trying to understand the other. (p. 430)

Secondly, Chapman challenges the idea that hyper-systemizing is an essential autistic trait. They argue that not being "anchored fully within a shared form of life with neurotypical people" (p. 432) prevents autistic people from possessing common neurotypical certainties. This absence drives a search for patterns and generalities — a hyper-systemizing process that alleviates the epistemic angst. Hyper-systemizing is thus a human response to uncertainty, not an inherently autistic trait; neurotypicals do it too when facing the unfamiliar and must make inferences to decipher others.

While suggestive, Chapman’s use of “form of life” is, I argue, problematic. Framing neurotypicality and autism as two "clashing forms of life" overemphasizes internal aspects. To illustrate my point, consider Chapman’s (2019) argument that someone developing in an “alien form of life” would lack pre-epistemic certainties:

> on this account, access to spontaneous pre-epistemic surety … is not so much a matter of accurate processing as of processing against the background of the shared world that we become part of as we grow and interact with *other members of our form of life.* By contrast, however, when we consider the case of *someone who develops within an alien form of life*, as it were, then we would precisely expect her to lack both certain aspects of intuitive knowledge and pre-epistemic trust. (p. 431, emphasis added)

How should we interpret this idea that autistic people develop within an "alien" form of life? The way Chapman presents the issue suggests an “internalist” approach. This is not to reduce autism to neurobiology, but to understand “form of life” as something an individual *has,* rather than *participates in*. If a form of life involves shared social practices for meaning and understanding to be embedded — which is something even naturalist interpretations accept (e.g., Garver, 1994; Malcolm, 1986; Medina, 2004) — a clash between forms of life requires two conflicting sets of such practices. Given that there is no such set of “autistic common social practices” into which autistic children develop — for they develop within neurotypical communities — the mismatch must be internal.

One could counter that, even if autistic individuals do not *develop* in autistic communities, autistic communities have been forming thanks to the Internet, as seen with Hacking. This is, indeed, a point Chapman makes. Crediting it as a hypothesis put forward both by McGeer and Hacking, Chapman claims that autism is "a different form of life, which, due to complex social-historical circumstances, is only just beginning to emerge as having its own culture and language" (p. 428). As I have argued, this is hardly Hacking's view, nor, as I will argue, is it McGeer's. More importantly, the claim is problematic for at least three reasons.

First, if autism as a form of life is only just beginning to emerge with its own culture and language, what united autistic individuals into a distinct form of life until now? This reinforces the idea that autism as a form of life is something individuals possess internally, and only now are contingently developing shared linguistic and sociocultural practices around.

Second, insofar as belonging to a form of life involves participating in shared, rule-following practices — as well as shared certainties and a language — how can we account for all the people who are autistic, yet do not belong to any autistic community?

Third, one can question whether a human form of life can exist apart from language and culture. Culture is internally related to the human animal (Moyal-Sharrock, 2015). By being socialized or acculturated in shared linguistic practices structured by norms, we acquire what could even be conceived of as a "second nature" (Medina, 2004). This does not mean every form of life requires culture (e.g., non-human animals), nor that the human form of life began with language. It does mean, however, that individuals cannot have a latent form of life awaiting linguistic and cultural articulation. This "internalist" interpretation thus seems to fail, and risks undermining Chapman's project. For it gets too close to the dualism that Chapman actively rejects, where culture is merely layered on top of biological machinery. If a human form of life embeds linguistic meaning and social understanding — as Chapman agrees — it is hard to see how it can pre-exist its own culture and language.

Despite these problems, Chapman's points are suggestive. When the most problematic claims are dropped, it invites us to see autism not as a deficit, but as a different set of orientations and behavioral patterns which could make it possible to participate in a shared form of life, given a supportive sociocultural environment. In order to articulate this, the distinction introduced above between the "human form of life" and "forms of human life" might be helpful. I suggest that, insofar as autistic communities thrive on the Internet and develop their own meaning and practices, it could be said that there has emerged an autistic form of human life.[5] This, in turn, challenges the assumption that the human form of life is universal, highlighting its diversity. Thus, there would be an autistic form of human life — among other forms of human life — but a single, *diverse* human form of life. The human form of life is diverse because human beings are diversely minded, depending on their biologically-rooted orientations and the different forms of human life in which they participate.

The idea that there might be a single, diverse human form of life and several different forms of human life parallels the dilemma Chapman disregarded as arbitrary: whether autism and neurotypicality are two distinct forms of life or subsets of one.[6] I argue this choice is not

5 Note that this formulation deliberately avoids framing autism itself as a form of life — for all of the above reasons — and instead proposes the "autistic form of life."

6 The notion of "subset," however, is not a good choice, as it involves the idea of clearly demarcated forms of life, which is arguably contrary to Wittgenstein's thought.

“arbitrary”: claiming that autism and neurotypicality are two distinct human forms of life points to seemingly insurmountable, fundamental differences; while claiming that there are autistic and neurotypical forms of human life stresses a certain continuity in the ways in which human beings can live together, without erasing difference. Notably, Chapman themself resorts to stressing human commonalities when arguing that hyper-systemizing is a natural, human response to uncertainty. Moreover, Chapman’s very conception of autism as a different form of life crucially involves the idea that autistic individuals are indeed able to follow rules (see also Fernández-Castro & Núñez de Prado-Gordillo, in press) — which, as Malcolm (1986) acknowledges, “is an aspect of the form of life of human beings. It is our nature.” (p. 181). Furthermore, this framing also supports the view that neurotypicality itself is neither homogeneous — as the neurodiversity movement and disability studies claim (e.g., Chapman, 2023; Murray, 2020; Runswick-Cole, 2014). Therefore, it is not only that “the acquisition of cartography, or of algebra, or of parliamentary elections attaches only to some of the various forms of human life” (Moyal-Sharrock, 2015, p. 27). The fact that different forms of human life involve different mind-making practices and diversely minded human beings should also be acknowledged in the human form of life.

6. Victoria McGeer: The “Form of Life Hypothesis”

Victoria McGeer’s approach to social understanding and autism draws on a Wittgensteinian (1958) and Rylean framework (1949). Although “form of life” is not pivotal to her thought, she addresses it in dialogue with Hacking, contrasting the traditional view of autism as a theory-of-mind deficit with the “form of life hypothesis.” She attributes this hypothesis to Hacking and notes she defended it herself as the “psycho-praxis hypothesis” (McGeer, 2010, p. 286). McGeer (2015) later refined this into the “regulative view,” where folk psychology is understood as a “mind-making” practice — a primary capacity for forming and regulating our mental states according to socially shared and maintained norms.[7] Autism is thus an inability to participate in these shared, norm-governed practices — a consequence potentially stemming from deep sensory-perceptual abnormalities that disrupt early regulative interactions (McGeer, 2001).

In McGeer’s view, as Chapman rightly pointed out, social understanding is not the work of a static cognitive module but "a species of skilled perception that arises in conjunction with skilled performance in any norm-governed shared practice, or form of life"(McGeer, 2010, p. 286). In this view, performative and perceptual skills co-evolve through immersion in social practices (McGeer, 2001, 2007, 2009, 2015, 2021). She illustrates this with chess (McGeer, 2010, 2015), where becoming a skilled player means moving beyond merely having propositional knowledge about the rules to developing embodied "know-how." While a novice can be told the constitutive rules of chess, learning to think and act strategically requires practice and corrective feedback to shape or regulate one's own thought and action. This expertise brings a “practice-dependent epistemic gain”: the acquired ability to “understand and even predict what other chess-players are up to in a way that simply escapes the unskilled player” (McGeer, 2015, p. 262), by directly perceiving their intentions in their moves without inference. This understanding is reciprocal, as players become mutually intelligible by conforming to shared strategies. It is also vulnerable to non-

7 Furthermore, as McGeer (2021) notes: “this approach has consequently garnered a much sexier name than ever I gave it — namely, the ‘mindshaping’ view of social cognition” (p. 1042; see also Mameli, 2001; Zawidzki, 2008, 2013).

conforming moves, a difficulty overcome by a disposition for *corrigibility* — the assumption that an unintelligible move signals a failure to follow shared rules, which requires correction through negotiation.

Three lessons from the chess analogy apply to folk psychology (McGeer 2015): (I) the regulative lesson: skill develops primarily through self-regulation; (ii) the corrigibility lesson: skilled practice requires openness to giving and receiving corrective feedback; and (iii) the social infrastructure lesson: mutual interventions are always needed to maintain and improve skill. As in chess, humans become skilled folk-psychological agents by learning to regulate their thought and action according to shared norms. Insofar as one's thought and action are regulated by these norms, one can understand, explain, and predict others who do likewise.

While McGeer does not extensively engage with the notion of a form of life, it fits into her regulative view: one only becomes skilled in folk-psychology "in the myriad practices that constitute our shared form of life" (McGeer, 2010, p. 287). As she also states, "basic normative structures must be in place in all these varied practices if we are to make sense of one another's actions and expressions; if we're to share a form of life" (McGeer, 2010, p. 287). Her recent work reinforces this, describing folk psychology as a case where "our folk-psychological expertise is a special case of extended and enculturated cognition where we learn to regulate both our own and others' thought and action in accord with a wide array of culturally shaped folk-psychological norms" (McGeer, 2021, p. 1039).

When wondering if folk psychology's norms are merely cultural, McGeer answers "yes — and no." Many norms are specific to cultures, groups, or even activities (e.g., expressions of anger, greetings). Yet, she argues, humans remain mutually recognizable because we instantiate survival-based constraints of a rational or intentional agent — an idea she takes from Daniel Dennett's (1998) *intentional stance*. These constraints are not uniquely human or simply a result of enculturation; any creature seeking survival must conform to them.[8] Still, something is characteristically human:

> we have the capacity to articulate the constraints on what it is to be a rational agent; and in so articulating them, we structure them as norms to be followed, thereby lifting ourselves (all going well) into a more robust condition of shaping our thought and action to conform with such constraints (e.g. by explicitly following valid rules of inference). We become, in a word, 'reasoners'. (McGeer, 2021, p. 1051)

Such reasonableness, which depends on both biological adaptations for "scaffolded" learning and a lifelong process of social enculturation, could be regarded as characteristic of the human form of life. This framework seems to fit well with those interpretations of "form of life" that conceive of it as having two dimensions or aspects, such as Cavell's reading in terms of biological and ethnographical aspects, or Conway's and Moyal-Sharrock's distinction between the human form of life and forms of human life.

8 This claim might contrast with Wittgenstein's famous aphorism: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 225). While its exegesis fueled a long-standing debate, it seems unlikely Wittgenstein meant understanding is utterly impossible. After all, he notes we can see animals' intentions ("What is the natural expression of an intention?—Look at a cat when it stalks a bird; or a beast when it wants to escape" (Wittgenstein, 1958, § 647)) and imagine their feelings ("One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 174)). He does, however, limit more complex phenomena like hope to humans, as "the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 174).

All this being said, where does this leave autistic individuals? McGeer (2010) argues that, according to the form of life hypothesis, they are simply not skilled in the practices of our shared folk-psychology due to a developmental pathway where endogenous and exogenous factors prevent their minds from being shaped by this regulative scaffolding. Though autistic people “are substantially lacking in any native folk-psychological competence,” she notes that neurotypicals “have just as much trouble making sense of the thought and action of individuals with autism” (McGeer, 2015, p. 265). The regulative view explains this: because autistic people are impaired in their regulative and corrective capacities, they “are not in our game” (p. 265) and have not been shaped by its norms.

McGeer’s claims suggest that, contrary to Chapman's (2019) interpretation, she does not hypothesize “that autism is a different form of life, which, due to complex social-historical circumstances, is only just beginning to emerge as having its own culture and language” (p. 428). Indeed, this is hard to reconcile with her views on enculturation. In addition, this interpretation is problematic for two further reasons.

First, the hypothesis that Chapman attributes to McGeer is not found in the cited paper (McGeer, 2010) or in many of her other works (2001, 2007, 2009, 2015, 2021). More importantly, Chapman’s interpretation also seems implausible given McGeer's open skepticism about “Hacking’s transformative thesis” — the view that autistic self-narration could transform the constitution of autism, “to create a framework, or ‘form of life,’ in terms of which their individual lives will be experienced — differently, as it may be, from how they would be experienced if this framework were not in place” (McGeer, 2010, p. 282). For this thesis to hold, McGeer argues, autistic people must relate to norms as neurotypicals do. She notes that neurotypicals regulate their behavior according to social norms, which is how they develop minds at all. However, it is unclear if the same applies to autistic individuals, who have become minded in sophisticated ways without becoming “co-minded” in the neurotypical sense. While not taking a strong stance, McGeer (2010) suspects that autistic people's relationship with language “will never be quite what it is for neurotypicals” (p. 291). The pressing question is how they would relate to norms emerging from their own communities: “In short, will they ever become co-minded with one another, or will they just remain differently minded?” (p. 291). She concludes, “if I am right, *neurotypical* minds are more likely to constitute a species of mind; autistic minds are more likely to remain exceptionally multiple and idiosyncratic” (p. 291) — an idea contrary to a unified autistic form of life. Moreover, since she claims autistic people are impaired in the regulative and corrective capacities needed for folk-psychological practices, it is hard to see how autism could constitute a different form of life.

Second, a significant tension arises when McGeer’s regulative view is used to account for the mutual, direct social understanding that autistic individuals seem to have among themselves. Chapman uses this mutual understanding as evidence that autism is a different form of life and that their impairments are due to being forced to develop in an “alien” form of life. However, if social understanding is a skill, as both claim, then this capacity for mutual understanding must have been acquired through training within corresponding norm-governed practices and, more generally, within a form of life. The problem, once again, is that the vast majority of autistic individuals develop not in an autistic “norm-governed shared practice, or form of life” but within the pervasive context of the dominant neurotypical form of life. If autistic individuals acquire the skill to immediately

perceive and understand one another, they must have acquired it *within* this neurotypical form of life. This puts pressure on the idea that they develop in an alien form of life *while belonging* to another.

Autistic traits — and Chapman is right about this — are arguably not the result of an isolated, dysfunctional mind. Hyper-systemizing is not an essential, solely internally driven trait. But the same goes for the immediate understanding among autistic people. If this mutual understanding is a skill, it must have been learned within the context of a neurotypical form of life. *To some extent*, the neurotypical form of life provides the developmental background that enables this mutual understanding. This does *not* deny that the neurotypical form of life is also profoundly disabling for autistic individuals. On the contrary, the disabling nature of neurotypical practices might also partly explain this connection, as it could rest upon perceiving shared patterns of navigating ill-fitting linguistic and social norms — along with some other biologically-rooted autistic orientations. Autistic people might see in each other the same adaptive strategies born from their shared difficulties. In fact, adopting this perspective reveals the pervasive negative effects that trying to conform to ill-suited practices has on autistic psychology and mental health.

McGeer's regulative view — and, more generally, the mindshaping view of social cognition — is a double-edged sword (Strijbos & de Bruin, 2025; Fernández-Castro & Núñez de Prado-Gordillo, in press). When demands for norm-conformity are high and too much emphasis is put on the idea that there is *one* way to become a "well-behaved psychological agent" — a view that resonates with Hobson's emphasis on the acceptance of the human form of life as a given — it is difficult not to conceive of autism, or more generally neurodivergence, as deficitarian relative to neurotypical norms. If we are more flexible, however, these very same views can help us to account for the pervasive harms that "mind-molding" can have on divergent populations, as well as to construct a society "in which a multitude of socio-cognitive 'shapes' is available that also suits the social needs and interests of neurodivergent minorities" (Strijbos & de Bruin, 2025, p. 468). After all, if humans are "reasoners" who can make norms explicit, as McGeer claims, they can also challenge them.

7. Conclusions

Wittgenstein's philosophy and notion of a "form of life" are valuable tools for addressing social cognition and autism. Wittgensteinian approaches are compelling alternatives to the dominant neuro-cognitivist paradigm but differ in their conception of autism. In this paper, I presented and contrasted the Wittgensteinian views of Hobson, Hacking, Chapman, and McGeer.

First, I examined Hobson's account of autism as a biologically-grounded inability to relate to a given, universal human form of life. I argued that his emphasis on the universality and givenness of the human form of life, along with the idea that it must be "accepted," fail to properly account for the role of language, environment, and social practices in mind-making, ultimately obscuring the possibility of a more inclusive and less disabling human form of life. In contrast, Hacking's account allows for a modification or expansion of the human form of life. This change is driven by new meanings and social practices, enabled by autism narratives and the Internet. I argued that this possibility is directly linked to Hacking's constitutive views on language and social ontology.

I then examined Chapman's account of autism as a different form of life. I challenged their interpretations of Hacking and McGeer, as well as their claim that autism is a different form of life that is just emerging as having its own language and culture. I argued that Chapman's view is “internalist”: something individuals *have,* rather than something they *participate in*. Building on the distinction between the “human form of life” and “forms of human life,” I suggested it better serves neurodiversity's aims to conceive of autism as a different form of human life, while aiming for a single, overarching human form of life encompassing diverse mind-making practices and minded individuals — an account whose full development, while a promising future direction, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, I addressed McGeer’s “regulative view” of folk psychology. Though “form of life” is not pivotal to her thought, it is relevant insofar as she discusses Hacking’s “form of life hypothesis” and claims that it is akin to the view she has herself defended. Against Chapman, I argued that McGeer shows herself to be skeptical that autism can be a different form of life — an issue that ultimately hinges on the very relation of autistic individuals to norms. McGeer’s approach to normativity is a double-edged sword: if it implies only one way to be a competent folk-psychologist and minding-practices allow for little divergence, then it casts autism in deficit terms, much like in Hobson's approach. However, her view could also illuminate how autistic people are harmed by and even become minded through ill-fitting linguistic and social practices. This perspective helps address the disabling nature of neurotypical norms and supports Hacking’s call for an expansion of the human form of life for ethical and sociopolitical reasons.

To conclude, I return to Hacking’s claim that “form of life” is “never more than a pointer.” While its precise interpretation is contested, the phrase effectively points to a particular perspective on meaning and social understanding. It allows for various views on autism and neurotypicality, depending not only on the interpretation of the notion itself, but also on complementary assumptions. When conceiving of autism through the notion of a form of life, we should be concerned with its practical implications. It is our task to ponder which interpretation best serves the purposes of inclusion. Precisely because a “form of life” is “the given” — that which embeds meaning and social understanding, and also self-understanding — we should explore its limits and transformational possibilities, with the aim of finding ways to live together.

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