

# Forms of Life, Honesty and Conditioned Responsibility

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**Abstract:** Individual responsibility is usually articulated either in terms of an individual's intentions or in terms of the consequences of her actions. However, many of the situations we encounter on a regular basis are structured in such a way as to render the attribution of individual responsibility unintelligible in intentional or consequential terms. Situations of this type require a different understanding of individual responsibility, which I call conditioned responsibility. The conditioned responsibility model advances that, in such situations, responsibility arises directly out of the conditions in which the individual finds herself, irrespective of her intentions or of the consequences of her actions. This model gives rise to a series of challenges, some of which, I propose, can be addressed by drawing on Wittgenstein's later notion of *form of life*, together with the notion of honesty implicit in his early approach to ethics.

**Keywords:** form of life; individual responsibility; Wittgenstein; hermeneutical injustice; conceptual engineering; *Philosophical Investigations*; *Tractatus*

## 1. Introduction

Wittgenstein's notion of *form of life* captures the cluster of conditions against, and in the midst of, which we render our practices intelligible<sup>1</sup>. These clusters of conditions—the forms of life—do not justify or determine our practices, but it is only in light of them that we can render our practices understandable to ourselves and others (OC 58–59)<sup>2</sup>. The practices in question include both actual and possible linguistic and thinking ones, and also, more broadly, actual and possible ways of behaving, ways of living<sup>3</sup>. Forms of life therefore constitute a *space of possibility* for expression and intelligibility: a space that includes the possibility of speaking, thinking, and living as we do, but also, crucially, the possibility of doing so *differently*<sup>4</sup>. In this respect, Wittgenstein's use of the expression “form of life” should be regarded as distinct from, but *continuous with* his uses of “logical space” and “form” in the *Tractatus*<sup>5</sup>.

In this paper, I argue that Wittgenstein's notion of form of life sheds important light on the problem of conditioned responsibility. This problem arises in situations structured in such a way as to render the attribution of individual responsibility unintelligible in intentional or consequential terms. For reasons that will soon be clear, I will be calling these *agency-stultifying situations*. Examples of agency-stultifying situations abound. They range from the purchasing and selling of goods in ill-regulated markets that yield extreme inequality and poverty all the way to the case of human generated climate change. In my view, situations of this type call for a new understanding of individual responsibility, which I call *conditioned responsibility*. This understanding of responsibility gives rise to a series of challenges, some of which, I propose, can be addressed by drawing on Wittgenstein's later notion of form of life, together with the notion of honesty implicit in his early approach to ethics.

In the next section of this paper, I present the problem of individual responsibility in agency-stultifying situations. In the following section, I introduce the conditioned responsibility view and show how the Wittgensteinian approach serves to illuminate it.

**Citation:** Tejedor, C. Forms of Life, Honesty and Conditioned Responsibility. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, x. <https://doi.org/10.3390/xxxxx>

Academic Editors: Juliet Floyd and Sandra Laugier

Received: 22 May 2023

Revised: 12 June 2023

Accepted: 12 June 2023

Published: date



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## 2. Individual Responsibility in Agency-Stultifying Situations

### 2.1. Agency-Stultifying Situations

The problem I wish to focus on emerges in situations satisfying the following four conditions:

- (a) The combined behaviour of numerous individuals causes significant cumulative harm.
- (b) The behaviour of any one individual, in and of itself, does not cause this cumulative harm, nor can it have a significant impact on it.
- (c) Individuals do not intend the cumulative harm, even though they understand and expect it to result from the combined behaviour of numerous individuals – behaviour such as their own.
- (d) Abstaining from behaving in this way is costly for the individual.

Situations satisfying (a) to (d) are problematic in that they rule out the possibility of appealing to either consequences or intentions in the attribution of individual responsibility. Consider the following question: how does one *know* what an individual (including oneself) is responsible for? Let us call this the Epistemic Question. Answering this question usually involves examining either the consequences of the individual's behaviour and/or her intentions: typically, one *knows* the extent of an individual's responsibility by attending to the consequences of her individual actions and/or by attending to her intentions. These options are not available in situations meeting criteria (a) to (d), however, since, there, the *consequences* of an individual's actions are insignificant with respect to the cumulative harm, as per (b), and the individual does not *intend* the cumulative harm, as per (c).

One upshot of this is that situations meeting criteria (a) to (d) cripple our capacity to articulate the conceptual resources by virtue of which we might determine what sort of individual responses, and responsibilities, are appropriate in them. This, in turn, hampers any potential behavioural change at the individual level: since individual intentions are not obviously problematic, as per (c), and individual behaviour has no significant impact on the problem, as per (b), one is left, from the perspective of the individual, epistemically unable to access and articulate clear reasons for changing one's behaviour. This, together with the fact that behavioural change is costly, as per (d), results in lack of change. Situations meeting criteria (a) to (d) thus have a stultifying or paralysing effect on our agency: they leave us bereft of a clear sense of agency at the individual level with respect to them. To capture this idea, let us call any situation meeting criteria (a) to (d) an *agency-stultifying situation*.

Agency-stultifying situations are overwhelmingly familiar to us in this age of interconnectedness and globalisation. Examples include: the purchasing and selling of goods in ill-regulated markets that push part of the population into extreme poverty <sup>6</sup>; human-generated climate change<sup>7</sup>; participating in bureaucratic mechanisms that produce profound harm, such as in the case of the Holocaust [9,10]; responding with passivity and silence to community and political terror (for instance, with respect to the Mafia or in totalitarian regimes) [11]; failing to vote as part of electoral processes where mass abstention leads to harmful political results; etc. As we can see from this list, agency-stultifying situations meeting criteria (a) to (d) are extraordinarily numerous and varied in their details. In fact, I would go as far as to suggest that they are *the most common type of ethical situation we ever find ourselves in, as individuals*. Articulating a workable account of individual responsibility in such situations is therefore a matter of some urgency.

Two important points are worth considering before we continue [12]. Firstly, agency-stultifying situations do not include individuals whose decisions and actions can have a significant impact upon the cumulative harm in question, since they do not satisfy (b). Let us call these *high impact individuals*. High impact individuals include, for instance, powerful political and industry leaders whose individual actions can, in and of themselves, produce substantial effects on the cumulative harm. Secondly, agency-stultifying situations

also exclude those who act out of malevolent intentions, since individuals who act with the deliberate (irrational as it may be) intention to produce the cumulative harm in question do not satisfy (c).

Drawing on the Wittgensteinian and Cavellian notions of the *ordinary*, I will use the expression “ordinary individuals” to refer to individuals who satisfy criteria (a) to (d) and who are therefore neither high impact nor malevolent. Our focus in the remainder of this paper will primarily be on ordinary individuals. The responsibility of a high impact or malevolent individuals, unlike that of an ordinary individual, can be accounted for in more familiar manners by appealing to, respectively, the consequences of individual behaviour or individual malevolent intentions. Our discussion of ordinary individuals in agency-stultifying situations is not intended to replace or override these more familiar or standard approaches to individual responsibility. They remain of course applicable when dealing with high impact and malevolent individuals, whose responsibility *can* be accounted for in terms of individual consequences or intentions. Indeed, it is important that they should remain applicable in this way. After all, responsibility with respect to the phenomena under consideration (e.g., ill-regulated markets, human generated climate change, etc.) clearly comes in degrees: the responsibility of a high impact individual with respect to them will be far greater than that of an ordinary individual, precisely because the former can have significant consequential impact on the problem, whereas the latter cannot.

## 2.2. Two Epistemic Gaps

Although it seems relatively clear that ordinary individuals bear some (to be specified) responsibility in agency-stultifying situations, addressing the Epistemic Question in this context faces serious challenges. The reason for this has to do with the fact that knowledge of responsibility—both in the minimally theoretical context of our everyday deliberations and in the theoretical, philosophical context of normative ethics—is typically achieved by tracing the individual’s intentions and/or the consequences of her actions<sup>7</sup>. In agency-stultifying situations, however, neither of these two options is available, since, as noted above, whatever individual responsibility there is must arise independently of individual intentions, as per (c), or of the consequences of individual actions, as per (b).

This, I contend, leaves us with two closely interconnected epistemic gaps [12]. In the first place, we face a cultural gap in our everyday deliberations on responsibility: culturally, we simply lack the conceptual and deliberative resources for rendering intelligible, to ourselves and to others, the responsibility of ordinary individuals in agency-stultifying situations. Faced with the unrelenting sense that we, as individuals, bear *some* responsibility in said situations, our inability to appeal to consequential and intention-based forms of ethical deliberation (the forms most familiar to us in Anglophone and European cultures) renders us conceptually and agentially paralysed, and epistemically unable to make sense of our experience. Let us call this the *everyday epistemic gap*.

In addition, we also face a second (separate, though related) epistemic gap: a gap in our moral philosophy, in our theoretical normative ethics. Let us briefly examine this second theoretical gap by considering two main potential candidates for countering it: consequentialism and Kantianism.

Situations satisfying (a) to (d) pose a clear challenge to consequentialism. In consequentialism, knowledge of individual responsibility is achieved by attending to the (actual or expected) consequences of the individual’s behaviour. However, in agency-stultifying situations, individual behaviour does not, in and of itself, produce harmful consequences, as per (b). Nor would it be reasonable for an ordinary individual to expect the consequences of her actions to produce the relevant harm. Consequentialism therefore faces major challenges when trying to account for individual responsibility in agency-stultifying situations. Whilst some consequentialists are happy to bite this bullet and conclude that individuals bear no genuine responsibility in said situations [16] (pp. 187–193), this conclusion seems for the most part unsatisfactory. Concerns over this issue have come to

occupy the forefront of the consequentialist literature in recent years, but the problem remains intractable from the consequentialist perspective [17,18,19,20].

Kantian conceptions also face a problem with respect to agency-stultifying situations. In this case, the difficulty resides in the Kantian approach to the subject of responsibility, together with the Kantian emphasis on universalisation. The Kantian universalisation test seems *ab initio* more promising than consequentialist principles in the context of agency-stultifying situations. After all, by pressing the question “what if all ordinary individuals behaved in this way?”, Kantianism could be seen to deliver the required link between the behaviour of an individual and the cumulatively harmful combined behaviour of many individuals. In fact, however, this approach is problematic. Note indeed that Kantian universalisation is effectively designed to deliver binary results: either one is responsible or one is not. This, however, prevents it from yielding the graded and aspectual considerations needed in order to render fully intelligible the differing degrees and types of responsibility of individuals ranging from high impact to ordinary. This is a serious worry. For any suggestion that ordinary individuals are *just as responsible as* high impact individuals would of course be deeply flawed.

Kantian approaches may attempt to overcome these concerns by including in their versions of the universalisation test an antecedent clause covering features specifically designed to distinguish between the case of ordinary and that of high impact individuals. However, this seriously risks prejudging the very conclusions that the test is intended to deliver: it would seem that, in order to decide which clauses to include, one would need to know the moral worthiness of actions in advance of putting them through the universalisation test. Furthermore, within the Kantian framework, this strategy will typically involve treating character traits and other personal circumstances as set, unchangeable facts about the individual, rather than as aspects liable to be shaped and transformed by the process of deliberating about the situation in question. In other words, Kantian conceptions only take into account the details concerning the particular character and circumstances of individuals by sacrificing a crucial dimension: that such details are not set, but are liable to be transformed by the process of deliberation; that this liability to be transformed is in fact *constitutive* of (and not merely incidental to) what counts as human agency [21] (pp. 156–157), [22].

It does not seem possible to render the responsibility of an ordinary individual adequately intelligible in agency-stultifying situations by appealing to intentional, consequentialist, or Kantian considerations<sup>8</sup>. Restricting ourselves to these approaches would condemn us to the double epistemic gap described above: the cultural gap in our everyday deliberations and the theoretical gap in our normative ethics.

### 3. The Problem of Conditioned Responsibility

#### 3.1. Conditioned Responsibility

In the light of the previous discussion, it seems important to develop an alternative way of approaching the double epistemic gap posed by agency-stultifying situations. The *conditioned responsibility* model proposes precisely such an alternative. The conditioned responsibility model advances that some individual responsibilities (what one owes others) and some individual dues (what others owe one) arise *directly in response to the conditions in which one finds oneself operating, independently of one's intentions or of the consequences of one's individual behaviour* [12].

As we saw above, in this context, individual responsibility seems, crucially, a gradual and qualitative matter. The conditions in question include (but are not exhausted by) the extent to which the individual has benefitted from or been harmed by the structures or mechanisms that produce the cumulative harm. Insofar as the individual has for the most part benefitted from the structures that produce this harm, she accrues responsibilities with respect to it; insofar as she has mostly been harmed by said structures, she accrues dues. For instance, an ordinary individual buying and selling goods in ill-regulated

markets would accrue responsibilities with respect to the resulting extreme poverty *insofar as* she had mostly *benefitted* from the markets functioning in this way. In turn, she would accrue compensatory dues *insofar as* she had been mostly *harmed by these market structures* (for instance, because she has been systematically discriminated out of benefitting from them or because the markets have destroyed her neighbourhood, her community, etc.). The crucial idea here is that, in agency-stultifying situations, an ordinary individual is *connected to the cumulative harm* under consideration (in a manner that gives rise to responsibilities or to dues), *not* through her intentions or through the consequences of her individual behaviour, but rather *by virtue of her relation to the structures and mechanisms that produce the cumulative harm*.

Attributing individual responsibilities and dues in agency-stultifying situations therefore involves attending not only to the broad conditions in which the individual finds herself, but also to the way in which she relates and is *related* to those conditions. Assessing an individual's relation to her circumstances involves considering whether she has mostly benefitted or been harmed by them, which in turn involves attending to her particular characteristics as an individual (her biography, relationships to others, intersectional markers, etc.). In what follows, I will be using the term “condition” to capture this idea of an individual's relation to her circumstances; my use of the term “condition” will therefore be inherently relational here.

### 3.2. The Problem

Whilst the notion of conditioned responsibility offers a way forward when it comes to articulating individual responsibilities and dues in agency-stultifying situations, it faces a central challenge. For it could be objected that it does not actually solve our original problem, but merely pushes it further down the line. For instance, it might simply be unclear why benefitting from certain structures should give rise to responsibilities in an individual. An ordinary individual who has mostly benefitted from buying goods in ill-regulated markets might ask why *she* should accrue responsibilities with respect to the cumulative harm caused by these markets *just because* she benefits from their existence. Since she cannot, as an individual, prevent this cumulative harm, as per (b), and since her intention, when buying the goods, is not to produce this harm either, why should the *mere* fact that she benefits give rise to responsibilities on her part?

In the face of such an objection, we may feel like we are back to square one. For we seem to face once again a gap in our conceptual resources: it seems as if we are unable to render intelligible that individual responsibility arises directly out of the conditions in which the individual finds herself. Since the problem seems to be the lack of conceptual resources, perhaps we should, at this point, consider some of the strategies for the generation of new concepts recently explored in the literature. Of these, two in particular spring to mind: Miranda Fricker's work on hermeneutical injustice [25] (pp. 147–175) and Sally Haslanger's work on conceptual engineering [26,27].

As we know, Fricker discusses epistemic gaps and missing conceptual resources in the form of “hermeneutical lacunae”. She suggests that hermeneutical lacunae result from the unjust epistemic marginalisation of certain groups due to structural identity prejudice. These lacunae, in turn, result in the obscuring of key social experiences of the members of the marginalised groups, who find themselves unable to render their experiences intelligible to themselves and others. For Fricker, hermeneutical lacunae are the result of structural epistemic injustice and need to be addressed through corrective virtues of hermeneutical justice [25] (pp. 147–175).

Whilst there are some affinities between Fricker's notion of hermeneutical lacuna and the (cultural and theoretical) epistemic gaps that arise in agency-stultifying situations, there are also some important disanalogies between the two. In particular, it does not seem to be the case that the epistemic (cultural and theoretical) gaps at the heart of agency-stultifying situations are systematically produced by hermeneutical marginalisation resulting from group identity prejudice [25] (pp. 147–168). Since the solutions offered by

Fricker center around corrective virtues aimed at countering unjust marginalisation, her approach is going to be of limited applicability when it comes to addressing the broader problem posed by agency-stultifying situations [25] (pp. 169–175).

Sally Haslanger's conceptual engineering approach is quite different from Fricker's. Haslanger's ameliorative (or analytical) project begins by asking what legitimate purpose we want a particular concept to fulfil and moves on to designing the (target) concept best suited to fulfilling that purpose [27] (pp. 366–380). For instance, part of such an ameliorative project and with the purpose of generating effective political coordination in the fight against sexism, Haslanger proposes the following "target concept" for *woman* [27] (p. 234):

*S is a woman iff:*

- (i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position);
- (iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S's systematic subordination, that is, *along some dimension*, S's social position is oppressive, and S's satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.

This ameliorative target concept of woman is of course very different from what we ordinarily take the concept of woman to be or from the "manifest concept" that might be yielded by a more standard, conceptual form of theoretical, philosophical enquiry [27] (p. 376). However, this, according to Haslanger, is precisely the strength of her proposal: for her aim is not to reproduce or refine concepts that perpetuate the political *status quo*, but to generate new (target) concepts that can better serve the purposes of social transformation.

Whilst Haslanger's strategy might well be effective in the contexts she discusses, I am not convinced of its plausibility in the case of agency-stultifying situations. It would certainly suit a *legitimate purpose* (e.g., the purpose of countering the cumulative harm produced by ill-regulated markets or the purpose of fighting climate change) to be able to rely on the concept of individual conditioned responsibility in agency-stultifying situations. However, simply *prescribing* this as our new target concept of individual responsibility, on the grounds that having it would suit such a legitimate purpose, does not genuinely help to address the problem we are confronting. For it does not address the fact that we face two epistemic gaps which actively *impede* behavioural change at the individual level, and thereby actively impede social transformation. What we need, in order to address the problem posed by agency-stultifying situations, is to find some *epistemic route* capable of enabling us to articulate why conditioned responsibility arises in agency-stultifying situations. What is more, given the cultural gap in our everyday, minimally theoretical deliberations on individual responsibility, such an epistemic route needs to be sufficiently accessible to ordinary individuals to act as an effective facilitator of change. Highly complex or abstract theoretical concepts will not lend themselves happily to this task <sup>9</sup>.

This leads us to another difficulty with the approaches defended by Fricker and Haslanger. For, in both of their views, social transformation requires the generation of *new* concepts, ones that had hitherto been *absent*, but which, once generated, transform the relevant situation either in ethico-epistemic terms (in Fricker's view) or in politico-pragmatic terms (in Haslanger's view). This poses two difficulties. Firstly, their treatment of concepts is somewhat cerebral: it makes the connection between concepts and behaviour appear contingent or accidental <sup>10</sup>. This, in turn, obscures the way in which the availability of a concept can *normatively require* (on ethical or justice grounds) behavioural change. I suggest that it would be preferable, both for their purposes and for the purpose of addressing the problem of conditioned responsibility, to work within a framework that emphasises the *internal relations* that exist between concepts, practices and behaviour. As we will see in Section 4, the Wittgensteinian approach provides precisely such a framework.

The second difficulty with the approaches defended by Fricker and Haslanger results from their characterization of what is involved in *generating a new concept*: in both of their views, social transformation results from the generation of a concept that was hitherto *absent* or *inexistent*. This, however, does not fit the phenomenology of agency-stultifying situations. For, in such situations, the concept of responsibility is already present: we already have, as ordinary individuals, the unremitting sense that we are *in some respect or other* responsible in the situations described above. It is not so much that the concept of individual responsibility is non-existent or altogether absent in these situations, but rather that we are unable to articulate it with sufficient clarity. As an ordinary individual, I end up caught in a vicious, paralysing circle of ethical deliberation: I *suspect* that I am individually responsible, but, since my intentions are not problematic, as per (c), and the consequences of my behaviour are insignificant, as per (b), I cannot make genuine sense of this suspicion; given this and the cost involved in changing my behaviour, as per (d), I continue behaving as before; and yet the feeling persists, I *suspect* I am responsible, etc. This vicious circle only generates unproductive guilt and paralysing self-hatred, a dangerous psychological (and social) cocktail by any standards. As we will see in the next section, what is needed, in this context, is not the generation of a *new* concept, but rather the reappropriation of a concept that is already present in both our everyday culture and our normative ethics, but whose relevance to agency-stultifying situations has hitherto been obscured: that of *honesty*.

#### 4. A Wittgensteinian Approach

##### 4.1. Tractarian Honesty

The question before us is: why does individual responsibility arise directly out of conditions, irrespective of individual intentions and consequences? Or, more specifically: why does benefitting from certain circumstances give rise to responsibilities in an individual? I suggest that acknowledging one's conditions amounts to a form of *honesty with respect to one's place in the world*.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, refusing to acknowledge one's conditions is a form of dishonesty: it is, in important respects, analogous to *deceiving* others and/or oneself about the meaning of the practices in which one is engaged and about one's place in the world.

This idea of honesty in one's place in the world draws in part on the *Tractatus*' notion of ethical attitude. As I have argued elsewhere, the aim of the *Tractatus* is to effect an ethical transformation in its reader through a form of internal dialogue or dialectic struggle [6,30]. When successful, this process yields an ethical transformation: it changes one's dispositional attitudes, and, thereby, one's *practical understanding of the place one occupies in the world*. This is illustrated by Wittgenstein's discussion of restrictive solipsism in the TLP 5.6ff and his discussion of causal necessity in TLP 5.133–5.1362. As I have argued elsewhere, the aim of these sections of the *Tractatus* is to dissolve, respectively, restrictive solipsism and the notion of causation as involving necessary connections. The dissolution of these views has an important ethical dimension for Wittgenstein, in that it transforms one's understanding of the place one occupies in the world. Abandoning the solipsist illusion brings to the fore that I do not occupy a privileged metaphysical place in the world: far from being a transcendental condition of the world, I am a mere fact, amongst others, in the world. Similarly, abandoning the causal necessity view brings to the fore that I have no absolute (i.e., necessitating) causal control over any of the facts of the world. For this idea of absolute causal control rests on a non-analytic understanding of necessity that is self-subvertingly nonsensical. With the dissolution of solipsism and of the causal necessity view, the temptation to produce self-aggrandising metaphysical nonsense evaporates: one comes to "see the world aright" (TLP 6.54)<sup>12</sup>. It is in this particular respect that the purpose of *Tractatus* is ethical for Wittgenstein [31,6]. Tractarian ethics do not involve attempting to convey ethical insights by means of illuminatingly nonsensical propositions [32].

Instead, they involve reaching a dispositional form of clarity that frees us from the metaphysical urge [33,30].

For Wittgenstein, this dispositional clarity is ethical in that it amounts to a form of honesty with respect to one's place in the world. The honesty in question involves acknowledging the conditions in which I find myself operating: I am not the transcendental subject on which the possibility of the world turns; my actions are not capable of causally necessitating any changes in reality. This ethical dispositional attitude can come in degrees: one can be more or less tempted by metaphysical commitments, or tempted by some of them, but not by others. I may find myself shedding my metaphysical tendencies gradually over time until my attitude—the collection of dispositions that expresses the way in which I understand my place in the world—achieves full ethical clarity.

#### 4.2. Honesty in Acknowledgement

I propose that this Tractarian notion of ethical attitude provides us with one of the keys for addressing the problem of conditioned responsibility in agency-stultifying situations. For, acknowledging the conditions in which one finds oneself amounts, precisely, to a form of *honesty with respect to one's place in the world*. Conversely, refusing to acknowledge them amounts to a form of dishonesty, analogous, in some crucial respects, to *deceiving* others and/or oneself.

In order to shed light on this idea, consider the following example. Let us imagine two ordinary individuals, B. (for Benefit) and H. (for Harm), who fulfil criteria (a) to (d) with respect to the cumulative harm resulting from ill-regulated markets pushing part of the population into extreme poverty<sup>13</sup>. As an ordinary individual, B. has *benefitted* overall from these market structures: her family is socially privileged; her parents accumulated a significant amount of wealth through buying and selling goods in these markets, taking advantage of their ill-designed regulatory framework, which favoured them. In contrast, H. has been mostly *harmed* by these circumstances: she belongs to a group whose physical and cultural environment has been destroyed by the functioning of the markets, a process that has torn her network of friends and family apart, leaving her socially isolated and poor. Let us now imagine that, straight after finishing university, B. and H. apply for the same job, for which both have equally outstanding CVs. On the day of the interview, H. severely underperforms because, as a result of her situation, she has had to go without a proper meal for weeks and is simply too hungry to concentrate. The job is thus offered to B., who accepts it. Having missed this first potential job opportunity, H. continues applying for positions until, a couple of years later, she finally succeeds, through much perseverance, in securing a similarly good post. Let us imagine that, by some coincidence, around this time, both B. and H. become aware of these key facts about each other: their biographies, their CVs, their personal situations in the run up to their first job interview, etc. If, knowing all this, B. spoke and behaved as if she had secured her job through the superiority of her CV, this would clearly amount to a form of dishonesty on B.'s part: B. would be presenting herself, and the place she occupies in the world (in particular: with respect to her professional life), in a deceitful manner, since she would not be adequately acknowledging the conditions in the midst of which she and H. attended the crucial job interview. B. would clearly have the responsibility to (at the very least) avoid speaking and behaving in this dishonest manner. Indeed, if H. and B. happened to speak to each other about that first job interview, H. would be *entitled* to some form of acknowledgement on B.'s part with respect to this: H. would have accrued this *due*. Even though in this example B. and H. are ordinary individuals meeting criteria (a) to (d) with respect to the cumulative harm caused by the ill-regulated markets, they accrue (respectively) responsibilities and dues that arise out of the very conditions in which they are operating, given the differing relations (of, respectively, benefit and harm) in which they stand to the markets.

This example sheds light on a number of important issues. Firstly, it highlights that the concept of honesty under consideration is inherently practical, insofar as it is internally

or constitutively related to certain forms of behaviour (including speech-acts). If B. had the thoughts and emotions typically associated with acknowledging H.'s situation, but her behaviour did not reflect such an acknowledgment, she would not count as *honest*, no matter what she felt and thought. Counting as honest involves *behaving* in certain ways. This is constitutive, quite generally, of our most basic, ordinary understanding of *honesty*: the honest shopkeeper is one who *actually* returns the right change, not one who merely thinks she should do so, but does not act accordingly. Secondly, the example shows that this notion of honesty draws a normative boundary between possible behaviours: in the light of the conditions in which B. and H. are operating, there is a range of possible behaviours that would count as honest and range of possible behaviours that would count as dishonest. What is more, both of these ranges are open-ended, since there is an indefinite number of behaviours (including speech-acts) that would count as honest (or, indeed, dishonest). The behaviours that would count as dishonest in the above example, for instance, include B. acting as if she had secured the job due to her superior CV, but also acting as if she had secured it through her superior intelligence, through her superior genetic bloodline, etc. The range of possible dishonest behaviours is open-ended. The fact that it is open-ended does not detract, however, from the fact that there is a crucial difference between honest and dishonest behaviour here—a difference that reveals itself with clarity as soon as one becomes aware of the conditions in which B. and H. are operating.

All of this is, of course, familiar territory to anyone with Wittgensteinian training. For saying that there is an indefinite number of behaviours (including speech-acts) that count as honest and dishonest is simply saying that the concept of *honesty in one's place in the world* is a family-resemblance concept (cf. *PI* 67). This, in turn, gives us an important clue as to the relation between conditions and the responsibilities and dues arising from such conditions in agency-stultifying situations. For these conditions do not determine, justify or single out *one specific* action as being the correct one: they do not prescribe that we should say or do *one particular thing*. There is, after all, an *indefinite* number of ways of being honest in this context: an indefinite number of relevant possible behaviours. The role played by conditions here is not that of determining or justifying the one particular course of action that should count as honest. Instead, it is *in the light of such conditions* (i.e., through one's awareness of them) that some (i.e., an open-ended cluster of) behaviours are revealed as honest or dishonest. Conditions, in this context, *delimit a space of possibilities* within which honesty and dishonesty become intelligible: they provide the light by which we render some of our behaviours understandable to ourselves and others *as being honest or dishonest*.

This, however, amounts to saying that conditions play the role of *form of life* with respect to making intelligible the responsibility of ordinary individuals in agency-stultifying situations: conditions demarcate *a space of possibility* for the expression and intelligibility of *honesty in one's place in the world*. This notion of honesty, in turn, enables us to make sense of the responsibility of ordinary individuals in agency-stultifying situations.

#### 4.3. Conditions as Form of Life

The conditions—the forms of life—in which we operate in agency-stultifying situations do not justify or determine the (honest or dishonest) meaning of our practices and ways of living. However, it is in light of them that we can render these practices and ways of living understandable to ourselves and others (cf. *OC* 58–59). As we noted at the start, the practices in question include both actual and possible ones. Forms of life thus constitute a *space of possibility* that includes the possibility of living as we do, but also—crucially—the possibility of doing living *differently* [4] (p. 42), [Error! Reference source not found.] (p. 73), [Error! Reference source not found.] (p. 55).

The conditions in question—the forms of life—bring together a variety of elements, some biological, others cultural. This, I suggest, is fully in line with Wittgenstein's understanding of forms of life. As we know, the secondary literature on forms of life is divided into univocal and non-univocal interpreters. Univocal readers argue that Wittgenstein

uses the expression “form of life” consistently to capture one set of characteristics. For some, this is a uniquely biological notion: the biologically human form of life (as opposed to the forms of life of biologically non-human animals). For others, this is a cultural, rather than a biological, notion: the notion of differently enculturated forms of human life. The former of these views prioritises the idea of a universally human life (in the singular) over that of a variety of human lives (in the plural) and the biological over the cultural; the latter prioritises the converse<sup>14</sup>. According to both, however, the expression “form of life” is used univocally to pick one or other of these notions: the biological or the cultural.

Non-univocal interpreters, in contrast, argue that Wittgenstein does not use “form of life” to capture one single notion. Instead, he uses this expression in a variety of different ways, sometimes to highlight a cluster of biological notions and sometimes a cluster of cultural ones<sup>15</sup>. What is more, the decision not to use the expression “form of life” in a univocal manner is not mere stylistic accident or terminological sloppiness on Wittgenstein’s part, but rather the expression of a central underlying commitment: the commitment to resisting sharp *a priori* theoretical divides between the biological and the cultural, divides that Wittgenstein views as resulting from a profound but misguided urge towards self-subverting metaphysics.

In my view, considering Wittgenstein’s later remarks on *form(s) of life* from the perspective of the *Tractatus*’ treatment of metaphysics strongly supports the non-univocal reading<sup>16</sup>. For, as we saw above, Wittgenstein suggests that the *Tractatus* aims to dissolve our urge towards traditional metaphysics, a process that has an important ethical dimension, in his view. The *Tractatus*’ mission to dissolve metaphysics emerges not only in the discussions of solipsism and causal necessity, mentioned earlier, but also in his discussion of language, thought, and pictures. In TLP 4.002, Wittgenstein tells us that everyday language, with its “tacit conventions” are “a part of the human organism”:

*Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it.*  
(...)

*The tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated. (TLP 4.002 — my italics).*

This Tractarian notion of the human organism is more important to our purposes than might at first appear. Note that, in TLP 4.002, Wittgenstein actively resists the temptation to draw metaphysically charged, *a priori* divisions between different aspects of human life: culture (e.g., the conventional aspects of representation), psychology, our biology as human animals, our physical environment, etc. Indeed, TLP 4.002 suggests that the cultural aspects of representation are subsumed, alongside the others, under one and the same notion, that of “human organism”: “everyday language (with its cultural, ‘tacit conventions’) is a part of the human organism” (my italics).

This Tractarian notion of the human organism, with its equalising treatment of the different aspects of human life, echoes some of Wittgenstein’s [39] earlier remarks from the *Notebooks*<sup>17</sup>:

*The human body, however, my body in particular, is a part of the world among others, among beasts, plants, stones etc., etc.*

*Whoever realises this will not want to procure a pre-eminent place for his own body or for the human body.*

*He will regard humans and beasts quite naïvely as objects which are similar and which belong together. (NB 2.9.16)*

Instead of dividing up the world *a priori* into supposedly metaphysically significant domains (culture v. biology, representation v. the world, the mental v. the physical, etc.), Wittgenstein repeatedly and very deliberately emphasises *oneness* in the *Tractatus*. His resistance to imposing an “*a priori* order of things” (TLP 5.634) is implicit from the start in his discussion of the pictoriality of propositions and thoughts (TLP 2.1–3.34). Indeed, the book begins with the notion of one reality: the world as totality of facts (TLP 1, TLP 1.1)

and then indicates that representations, thoughts, propositions, and propositional signs are all themselves facts (cf. *TLP* 2.141, *TLP* 3; *TLP* 3.14, *TLP* 3.142; *TLP* 4). For Wittgenstein, therefore, reality and representation are not two separate domains, where one is logically prior to and *a priori* determines the other (as in the metaphysical, realism–idealism debates). Rather, reality *encompasses* representation: both representing and represented facts are subsumed under this one unique (*NB* 15.10.16) reality, under the world as “the totality of facts” (*TLP* 1).

This is no quirk or mere terminological matter. On the contrary, Wittgenstein’s emphasis on *one* world (here one reality including both represented and representing facts) is intended to convey that there is no philosophically or metaphysically significant *a priori* distinction to be drawn between representing and represented facts. This is echoed again in the following entry:

*A gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes, and the sound-waves, all stand to one another in the same internal relation of depicting that holds between language and the world.*

*They are all constructed according to a common logical pattern.*

*(Like the two youths in the fairy-tale, their two horses, and their lilies. They are all in a certain sense one.) (TLP 4.014—my italics).*

In the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) 23, Wittgenstein [40,41] writes:

*It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.) [42]*

This reference to the *Tractatus* in PI 23 is often read as suggesting a straightforward disanalogy between Wittgenstein’s earlier and later approaches to language: in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein would have been blind to the “multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence”; in the *Philosophical Investigations*, by contrast, he would have embraced linguistic multiplicity<sup>18</sup>. In my view, this distorts Wittgenstein’s position. For a careful examination of the *Tractatus*’ discussion of *form* reveals that Wittgenstein is already, in that early text, working non-univocally, with *multiple and internally related*, understandings of form: the term “form” is sometimes used to capture the essential aspects of representation (as in “logical form” or logical analysability) and sometimes to capture a multiplicity of optional representational systems (as in the conventional, representational forms of pictures—*TLP* 2.174—or the optional forms of scientific systems—*TLP* 6.32–6.3611, etc.) [6,46].

The main difference between Wittgenstein’s earlier and later approaches does not lie in its position with regards to linguistic pluralism or multiplicity. Instead, it turns on the fact that, in moving to his later philosophy, Wittgenstein loses a key piece in his Tractarian arsenal: his commitment to logical analysability—*logical form*. With the dissolution of logical form, Wittgenstein is left with two notions already present, though comparatively less salient, in the *Tractatus*: the idea of a multiplicity of optional, representational systems (representational and scientific forms) and the idea of the ‘human organism’, that is, the cluster of (cultural or conventional, biological, environmental, psychological, representational) conditions that characterise human life and in the light of which we come to adopt certain systems of representation over others. The former idea evolves into the later notion of a multiplicity of forms of human life (in the plural) and into the idea of a multiplicity of language-games; the latter into the idea of a single, unified form of human life [Error! Reference source not found.].

## 5. Conclusions: Conditioned Responsibility and Forms of Life.

Wittgenstein’s notion of form of life is crucial to tracing the precise way in which conditions give rise to responsibilities and dues in agency-stultifying situations. The conditioned responsibility view suggests that, in agency-stultifying situations, ordinary

individuals accrue responsibilities and dues, irrespective of their intentions and of the consequences of their individual behaviour, by virtue of the conditions in which they find themselves. Shedding light on these conditions will often include attending to matters of benefit and harm. For instance, an ordinary individual may accrue responsibilities with respect to a cumulative harm *insofar as* she has *benefitted* from the structures that cause this cumulative harm, whereas she may accrue compensatory dues *insofar as* she has been *harmed* by said structures. Acknowledging one's conditions is a matter of honesty with respect to one's place in the world. Although it is useful to speak of benefits and harms here, it is important to emphasise that the proposal is not that we carry out individual cost-benefit calculations. Instead, the proposal is that each of us engages in an honest *evaluative appraisal* of one's conditions – an appraisal that will typically include attending to whether the structures that produce the cumulative harm have mostly enhanced or mostly undermined one's life.

Forms of life are the interrelated (biological and cultural, etc.) clusters of conditions in which our practices acquire meaning. It is in the light of such conditions that some of our experiences and behaviours become intelligible. However, these very conditions also have the capacity of *clouding* intelligibility. This helps to account, in part, for the phenomenology of agency-stultifying situations: it accounts for our collective experience of there being, at least initially, a conceptual gap that renders individual responsibility impossible to articulate. For there is a clear tension at the very heart of our bio-cultural form of life, certainly in the Anglo-European world. On the one hand, we are aware of our complete dependence on the work and care of other human beings, our dependence on the planet, on non-human animals, etc.. On the other hand, certain aspects of our capitalist growth culture condition us to ignore such dependence, encouraging us to consider ourselves as self-made people, independent from our physical and cultural environments, from other human beings and from other, non-human animals. This combination of elements in our form of life accounts *both* for the fact that the conceptual gaps arising in agency-stultifying situations appear initially intractable *and* for the fact that, in the end, the concept that fills those gaps is one that is already highly familiar to us: the inherently practical, minimally theoretical concept of *honesty*. For, in the end, as Wittgenstein aptly reminds us in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “nothing is hidden” (PI 435).

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1. Piergiorgio Donatelli draws a distinction between considering forms of life as the background *against which* we operate and considering them as part of the “bustle of life” *in the midst of which* we find ourselves immersed—see [Error! Reference source not found.] (p. 55).
2. Sandra Laugier defends the role of the first-person as a source of the validity of these practices in [Error! Reference source not found.] (pp. 70–73). For the importance of the first-person plural in Wittgenstein's later writings, see [3].
3. Juliet Floyd captures this idea with the wonderful expression “possibilities of life-structuring in life” —[4] (p. 42).
4. This is highlighted in the works of Floyd, Laugier and Donatelli. Floyd plots the evolution of Wittgenstein's notion of “form of life” by connecting it to the Tractarian understandings of possibility and “form” [4]. Laugier emphasises, amongst other related ideas, that “the possibility of disagreement is inherent even to the idea of agreement” [Error! Reference source not found.] (p. 73). Donatelli discusses the connection between the notion of form of life and that “of living with different concepts” in [Error! Reference source not found.] (p. 55).
5. On the continuities between the Tractarian notion of form and Wittgenstein's later notion of form of life, see [Error! Reference source not found.], [6] (pp. 163–166), [7].
6. See notably Iris Marion Young's example of Sandy [8] (pp. 43–52).

7. This approach to responsibility remains central in contemporary debates [13] (pp. 48–49), [14], [15].
8. Nor do standard virtue ethics work here, insofar as their articulation of the relevant virtues and vices turns, ultimately, on appeals to individual consequences and/or intentions—appeals that are ruled out in the case of agency-stultifying situations. Cf. [23,24].
9. In my view, the Kantian and consequentialist proposals share this problem too.
10. This is especially problematic in Haslanger’s framework. Insofar as target concepts are introduced instrumentally so as to serve particular pragmatic purposes, they may help to support changes in behaviour amongst those who already agree with or are committed to those purposes. However, the generation of a target concept does not seem internally or constitutively related to the emergence of responsibilities or obligations more broadly, including amongst those who do not share the particular purpose in question: since the value of the concept is instrumental or means-end, the concept will only generate value to those who already share the end in question; for the rest, it will simply be of no value or no use.
11. I am drawing this notion of *acknowledgement* from Stanley Cavell, see [28] (pp. 263–266). I am indebted to Josep Corbí for this use of the word “place”—see [10] (p. 150), [29].
12. This expression from the *Tractatus* can itself be used in a number of ways, of course. When used in an attempt to express a transcendental insight, it produces nonsense. However, the sentence can also be used as an instruction with a view to reminding us of the know-how we already possess (given our mastery of senseful language and thought) and of the need to avoid self-subverting nonsense.
13. Similar examples are discussed in [8] (pp. 7–20, 43–52).
14. The former is defended [34]; the latter in [35].
15. Different versions of this are defended in [36,37,38].
16. For a detailed discussion of the evolution of Wittgenstein’s remarks on “forms of life”, see [4].
17. This *Notebooks* entry, like *TLP* 5.641, also mentions the philosophical *I* or metaphysical subject, which I interpret, not as the substantive subject of Schopenhauerian transcendental idealism, but in a deflationary manner: the metaphysical subject of *TLP* 5.641 is, in my view, a modified version of Mach’s ego, it simply stands for the totality of possible (i.e., senseful) thoughts. For a defence of this, see [6] (pp. 46–72 and 73–90).
18. This is defended notably by Ian Proops [43] (p. 384). In contrast, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock also emphasises the continuities between Wittgenstein’s early notion of form and his later notion of form of life, although some of our conclusions differ [**Error! Reference source not found.**,45].

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