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WHERE DOES OUR UNDERSTANDING  
OF LIFE COME FROM?  
THE RIDDLE ABOUT RECOGNIZING  
LIVING THINGS

BY  
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# Where Does Our Understanding of Life Come From? The Riddle About Recognizing Living Things

Paolo Costa

**L***ife and Action* is, by general agreement, a dense and difficult book. It is so, no doubt, because of its originality, which sometimes borders on idiosyncrasy.<sup>1</sup> A naive reader is likely to be struck, first of all, by its original combination of philosophical radicalism and defense of common sense. Thompson (10) himself describes his “investigations” as “a kind of exposition of certain aspects of the ‘manifest image’, which Wilfrid Sellars familiarly contrasted with the ‘scientific image’.” Still, he hastens to clarify that “the expression ‘image’ is inept”, because Sellars is actually “contrasting certain systems of concepts” (10).<sup>2</sup>

In the first part of the book—the section on which I will focus henceforth—what the reader gets in return for her efforts, then, is not at first glance a reflection based on the empirical experience of living things, but an inquiry into the *concept* of ‘life’ and its peculiarity. This, however, is further complicated by the fact that,

<sup>1</sup> M. Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2008). Page numbers in the text are to this book.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25, fn. 5, where “imagination” is bluntly opposed to “conception.”

as a result of Thompson’s “analytical or Fregean Aristotelianism” (13), the investigation does not focus on the isolated concept and its contents (“the *things that are thought of* under [its] heading”), but on a “wider context” which primarily means the sort of judgment in which what counts as a living thing (cells, organisms, plants, animals, human beings, species) is placed and described. In this sense, the distinctiveness of the concept of life or, better, life-form turns out to be “fundamentally logical in character” (14). Thus, the point of the argument does not reside in working out an unexceptionable definition of life, but in elucidating what lies behind our way of thinking about or *representing* living things.

This, in a few words, is the problem to solve. No easy knot to unravel, at least for those who, like me, harbor a strong realistic intuition about the phenomenon of life and a lack of confidence in the possibility of merging without remnants the logical and categorical domains, forms of thought and forms of being, grammatical usage and ontology. Personally, leaving Hegel’s aside, I know only another attempt to conceive of life against a logical background: Helmuth Plessner’s theory of organic modals.<sup>3</sup> In a book even denser than the one discussed here, Plessner understands life’s phenomenal manifestations as instantiations of “types” or “styles” of being alive, i.e. forms of organization of the organic models: those basic qualitative elements, or “non decomposable (*unauflösbar*) and irreducible” properties, that make up the subject matter of the philosophical biology developed by him in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Plessner’s theoretical bet was essentially played on the claim that an inquiry into the essence (no matter if real or nominal) of a natural event does not involve a mere stipulative

<sup>3</sup> H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften IV: Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1981). See also M. Grene, *Approaches to a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Basic Books 1968), Ch. 2.

<sup>4</sup> H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p. 159.

definition of what we mean by it, but a better understanding of its immanent sense, that is of its intelligibility conditions or, to use an outmoded Aristotelian jargon, of its “formal cause.”

The outcome of this theoretical approach is a structurally open conceptual exploration, which has the obvious flaw (for those who consider it such) that it cannot be neither directly confirmed nor disproved by empirical knowledge, because it stands behind the field researcher as an ordering principle or a background of meaning that, to quote Plessner’s idiosyncratic idiom, can only be intuited, but never explained or demonstrated as such.

Plessner’s trust in this kind of intellectual exercises is based on the belief that a positive knowledge of nature can be produced apart from the method of natural science and that “only when one believes that the exact method is the only way to know nature, one ends up with denying in the object whatever cannot be explained by this method”, while “there is much more in the world than what can be verified (*feststellbar*) therein.”<sup>5</sup> In his view, therefore, admitting that the categories employed to understand the deeper meaning of the realm of life do not coincide with any empirical filling, that they do not perfectly overlap with the continuum of organic forms which are found in nature, is not a fatal theoretical flaw.<sup>6</sup>

Thompson claims something along the same lines when he argues in his book that the concepts of life, action and practice “are not empirical concepts” and ought to be seen “as something arising in any given subject from reflection on the pure logical forms of the thoughts or judgments she is capable of grasping” (19). The same holds for the not perfect overlap between the

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 134, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

concept of life-form and the biological species concept (199). Accordingly, quoting Thompson again, “the division of ‘categories’ will thus be resistant to the sort of empirical criticism that might be raised against a taxonomy of fundamental particles or of terrestrial organisms; opposition to the division, like elucidation of it, must take place entirely within philosophy” (19).

In order to make better sense of Thompson’s logical treatment of life, I shall start from a slightly different way of tackling the issue of life’s seeming indefinability. Some years ago, while contributing to a debate on the controversial idea of the “sanctity of life”, I was also led to think about the both inescapable and elusive concept of life.<sup>7</sup> At the time, like Thompson, I was mostly impressed by how the notion plays no essential role in any established scientific field, paradoxically not even in biology. This is a fate shared by two other crucial categories of the age-old meditation on the biosphere: form and purpose. This goes so far that there are people today who, in spite of the proliferation of all that is “organic” or “bio” in our societies, do not hesitate to endorse the idea (which has constantly cropped up since the beginnings of modern philosophy) that it is time to get rid remorselessly of all this empty talk about life, since it is based on an incurable conceptual weakness.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> P. Costa, “Il fenomeno della vita. Che cosa significa che ‘la vita può essere conosciuta solo dalla vita?’”, *Fenomenologia e società* Vol. 31, N. 4 (2008), pp. 66-77.

<sup>8</sup> F. Jabr, “Why Life Does Not Really Exist,” *Scientific American* (2 December 2013), available at: <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/brainwaves/2013/12/02/why-life-does-not-really-exist/>

F. Jabr, “Why Nothing Is Truly Alive,” *The New York Times* (12 March 2014), available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/opinion/why-nothing-is-truly-alive.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/opinion/why-nothing-is-truly-alive.html?_r=0)

I summarize now my take on the issue. I will rely on it later as a litmus test to shed light on the fruitfulness, scope and problematic nature of Thompson’s approach.

## I

### The Uses of Life

The first thing that stands out as we think about the different uses of the concept of life, not just in the context of the heated debates on the supposed sanctity of life, but also within the precincts of relatively young disciplines such as bioethics, biopolitics or biolaw, is the wavering between two intuitive understandings of the phenomenon of life. On the one hand, when life in general (*überhaupt*) is concerned, it is usually conceived of as an enigmatic metaphysical power, property or principle, whose oddness evokes the very mystery of the universe or God (“can you believe it? There is life!”). Accordingly, life may appear as a mystical “*élan*” or as the motor of Becoming or as a gift of an alien Higher Intelligence or as the Source of all values. It is seen as something so extraordinary, complex and powerful that greatly exceeds the human powers. Once, on the other hand, a recognizable face is given to such an impersonal force by means of an adjective—often, not by accident, the adjective “human”—, the notion tends rather to evoke both a sense of familiarity and of primary attachment. And, in actual fact, life is something which evokes a feeling of proximity because we are living beings and are good at and probably even “designed” by evolution to recognize other life-forms, in particular those other “self-movers” who are closer to us and with whom it is easier for us to sympathize with.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> V. Girotto, T. Pievani, and G. Vallortigara, “Supernatural Beliefs: Adaptations for Social Life or Byproducts of Cognitive Adaptations?”,

After all, life is covered by an aura of sanctity primarily because it is our innermost possession. Life is the one and only “Ding an sich” and, revealingly, Husserl’s call to get back “zu den Sachen selbst” ringed to the German students of his time as an invitation to turn away from a bookish universe to draw on the *lived* experience (*Erlebnis*) in doing philosophy. Merleau-Ponty (2012: 162) played on the same semantic ambivalence in a passage of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, when he claimed that “‘living’ (*leben*) [is] a primordial operation from which it becomes possible to ‘live’ (*erleben*) such and such a world” (“‘Vivre’ (*leben*) est une opération primordiale à partir de laquelle il devient possible de ‘vivre’ (*erleben*) tel ou tel monde”).<sup>10</sup> To quote an Aristotle’s adage reminded by Thompson (27 and 47, fn 11) as well: “to be, for a living being, is to live” (*vivere viventibus est esse*).<sup>11</sup>

It is worth asking at this point if this background familiarity as such involves any epistemic advantage. Does it grant us a privileged access to some form of conceptual clarity on what life is ultimately about? Do we know something more on life in general just because we are living beings ourselves? Or is the opposite true? Is not precisely the fact of being alive that prevents us from objectively reflecting on life and its innermost nature? Is life something special from an ontological point of view or is it so—understandably—only for those beings who represent themselves as living creatures? How is it possible to go beyond the acknowledgment of a vague family resemblance among the living beings known to us (that are not only those which resemble us the most) and the restricted goal of understanding in

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*Behaviour* 151 (2014), pp. 385-402; M. Thomson, “The Living Individual and Its Kind,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* Vol. 21, N. 4 (1998), p. 591.

<sup>10</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D.A. Landes (London: Routledge).

<sup>11</sup> See also M. Garcia, “*Vivere viventibus est esse?* The Relevance of Life for the Understanding of Existence, *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* Vol. 2 (2012), pp. 347-374.

increasingly more precise and detailed manner their specific modes of behaving and breeding? And how should we imagine this “beyond”?

I do not think that I am far from the truth if I say that the queries underlying Thompson’s investigation in the first part of *Life and Action* belong to the same order of ideas. The passage from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* quoted on p. 25 (emphasis on life’s concreteness); Frege’s remark about simple matters from *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (cited on p. 33 ); the choice to start the discussion on the concept of life from the definition of it given in a “typical college freshman’s biology text” (34); the use of a public television nature program in order to exemplify the ordinary style of reasoning about life and life-forms (63)—these are all ways to draw attention to the commonplaces, conditioned reflexes and naiveties characterizing our intuitive understanding of the phenomenon of life that legitimately arouse the skeptical attitude which is dormant in any philosopher worthy of the name.

We usually think we know what life is, but as soon as we try to dig deeper these certainties quickly crumble. However, our familiarity with the phenomenon in question is such that this failure rarely makes us plunge into a state of total disorientation. Why?

## II

### A Hermeneutics of Life

The task of extending our familiarity with the “living” up to a form of rigorous knowledge would seem to lie in the domain of a phenomenology of life. But what kind of knowledge should we expect from it?

A phenomenology of life, if it does exist, ought to be based on some form of transcendental reduction, a bracketing of the natural attitude, an *epoché*. In an essay focused on Merleau-Ponty, Renaud Barbaras, however, has rightly pointed out—taking a cue from Husserl’s distinction between phenomenological psychology and transcendental phenomenology—that “life escapes the phenomenological reduction [...] because it appears again on the transcendental level.”<sup>12</sup> And it does not do much good to argue that we are talking here about life in a “*metaphorical sense*”, because

even if transcendental life is only metaphorically life, it remains to be seen how this metaphor is *possible*, that is to say, which dimension of transcendental activity allows us to establish a relation to biological life. In other words, to account for the possibility of the metaphor we would have to uncover a living dimension at the transcendental level, that is, a sense of life more basic than the difference between transcendental and natural consciousness. The fact that Husserl describes the transcendental level by using concepts borrowed from life in truth shows that life escapes the duality established by transcendental phenomenology. This means that “life” in the natural sense, as the basic characteristic of living beings, involves a dimension that exceeds the natural level, that overlaps the transcendental domain: it seems as if natural life were more than itself, part of a more primordial life, the other side of which would be the transcendental one.

Indeed, with regard to human activities, it seems sensible to claim that everything is life, including the “life” of the mind. But if life is the whole of our experience, what sense can make a phenomenology *of* life except in terms of the subjective genitive? Although phenomenology belongs in a strong sense to life—to the “phenomenality” of life—it is less clear whether life can really

<sup>12</sup> R. Barbaras, *A Phenomenology of Life*, in T. Carman, M.B.N. Hansen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), pp. 206-230, p. 207.

become a (cognitive) possession of phenomenology. In this context, the problem of life reveals its connection with the problem of the subject and its simultaneous belonging and not belonging to the world of experience: life seems to be first and foremost the subject (what is always under) and not so much a knowable object. The *Lebens-welt* is primarily a background, and as such it would seem fated to remain partially opaque, unable to rise above the level of *Lebens-welt-anschauung* (vitalist ideology), if I am permitted to indulge in a pun used by Thompson (35, fn 4) himself. Life itself becomes here the world as a place that we inhabit and that we explore always from the inside: an intermediate space between the transcendence of nature and the immanence of the spirit.

A phenomenology of life, therefore, is bound to remain within the boundaries of the lived experience, and then, at most, to brood over its deeper meaning, its informal “logic”, its point. Replicating a crucial theoretical move of twentieth-century philosophy, one could then try to get around the problem of transcendental reduction, aiming less to a phenomenology, than to a “hermeneutics” of life. Such a diversion would actually draw attention on the connection between life and meaning, life and form, life and mind, life and purpose. In light of our experience, the concept of life would seem to imply that of an organized whole whose (prelinguistic) “meaning” emerges from the conjunction of the parts, not as an extra, but rather as the principle of identification built into the organism itself. As Merleau-Ponty remarked in *The Structure of Behavior*, “the organism [...] is an ideal unity”, to the extent that it “means” a form that has no other reality besides its particular instantiations in the living whole.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, translated by A. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press 1963), p. 152

Unsurprisingly, working out a detailed hermeneutics of the living turns out to be a daunting task. Hans Jonas tried to develop something along this line in his philosophy of the organism and a similar ambition also underpinned the generous, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt by Helmuth Plessner at defining a logic of the living form in *Die Stufen des Organischen*.<sup>14</sup> I believe, however, that a philosophically shrewder way of thinking through and epistemically valorize the “phenomenal autonomy of life”<sup>15</sup> does not necessarily come down to reiterating a classical philosophical move—the self-appointed heroic task of “systematischen Begründung”, of discovering the “essential laws of life”, of searching for the “essence of foundation and principle”, of concocting a doctrine of the “essential laws or categories of life”<sup>16</sup>—but results rather from the endeavor to make out “the meaning of the object, the principle of the series which discloses it.”<sup>17</sup>

This is how one could comprehend the difficult task of deciphering the irreducibility of the phenomenon of life, whose theoretical bet essentially revolves around the vindication of the claim that, in a phenomenological enquiry into the essence of the “Lebendigen”, what is at stake is not merely a stipulative definition of what is meant by “life”, but a better understanding of the inherent meaning of a distinctive realm of agency which, by the way, is also the source of the puzzling capacity of “meaning” something.

<sup>14</sup> H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper & Row 1966).

<sup>15</sup> H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110, p. 78, p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by H. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press 1968), p. 8.

A hermeneutics of life would, then, be a conceptual articulation of a core truth about the biological phenomena which cannot be neither directly proved nor disproved by empirical knowledge, in so far the scientific investigation presupposes it as an interpretive tacit framework. To sum up its overarching aim, interpreting life amounts to making the most of the Cartesian legacy in order to understand the fundamental duplicity of aspect of living things, without succumbing to its hegemonic strain. For what matters here is not denying “the extraordinary expediency and clarity of the distinction between mental and physical”, which unquestionably “captures essential differences in the nature of reality,” but avoiding to turn it into an Archimedean leverage point that, in spite of all good intentions, may lead to breaking up or obfuscating the double edged unity of organic life.<sup>18</sup>

### III

#### Life’s Logic

I think that it should be clear by now that there are several points of contact between this understanding of the utility and urgency of a philosophical engagement with the notion of life, which be capable of doing justice to our intuitive apprehension of the associated phenomenon, and the view adopted by Thompson. He, however, seems to wish something more. What exactly? He clearly is not content to remain at the level of a mere articulation of a dim or inchoate insight—we could say that he is not satisfied with “finding a suitable context in which to say the obvious”, to quote a memorable Iris Murdoch’s phrase—and wants to go further. Where precisely? I would say, from articulation to justification. In other words, he seems interested in overcoming

<sup>18</sup> H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p. 79.

the view “from within” (or “life pattern recognition”<sup>19</sup>) and replacing it with a sophisticated conceptual analysis of the categorial distinctions built into the thought-form where the notion of life can be handled and given a coherent “representation.” The theoretical outcome is original and remarkable. Thompson (3) himself half-seriously depicts it as an “Aristotelian *scala naturae* erected on top of a Fregean infrastructure”, in so far as for every “categorial shift in our thinking”, there is a corresponding leap in the “form of being we apprehend through these thoughts” (3).

The opening claim that Thompson wishes to warrant is that possessing the concept of life does not mean defining life by means of a set of exclusive and exhaustive properties (e.g. organization, responsiveness to stimuli, metabolism, growth, reproduction, etc.) that are supposed to distinguish what is living from what is not living, regardless of the context (the empiricist delusion). The point is, rather, to be able to make proper use and sense of what he calls “natural-historical judgments” (63) and the corresponding sentences (“Aristotelian categorial”, 65). These are nothing more than descriptions that presuppose the broader logical category of life-form as their condition of intelligibility. In other words, the special property of being alive cannot be grasped if one neglects the “appropriate category of *form*” (52). So, the starting issue is simply a problem of description— “How is such a thing described?” (62) —while the end goal is to reach the “broader context” that makes possible to bring into focus things of this “kind” (that is “alive”). As Thompson himself makes clear: “A reference to the life-form is *already contained* in the thought of the individual and its vicissitudes” (81).

<sup>19</sup> M. Thomson, *The Living Individual and Its Kind*.

The description that is then made possible is a *sui generis* description which, in spite of its assertiveness (“the female bobcat gives birth to two to four cubs”, 63), does not entail universal quantifiers (“*all* the female bobcats give birth to two to four cubs”) and still makes fully sense in light of what is ultimately described. Part of the mystery of life precisely revolves around the existence of individuals which are not mere individuals, but first of all bearers of a historically contingent form. Recognizing this enables us to retain a significant use of the concept of species, avoiding the drawbacks of the traditional essentialist outlook (which is notoriously abhorred by contemporary biologists or at least by their Neo-Darwinian spokespersons in the intellectual public sphere).

If I understand correctly Thompson’s argument, the following conclusion is to be drawn from the above: biological species are natural kinds in a weak sense.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, a representative member of a species had better not be seen as an instantiation of an ethereal and intemporal Platonic essence, but rather as an embedded element of a both natural and inescapable way of representing the living world. This is “natural” because we can be confident that “the appearances are *bene fundata*” (76). And it is “inescapable” because the natural-historical judgments are “a logically special form of appearance of predicative expressions” (76), with a distinctive grammar: the “grammar of a life-form-word” (76).

I wonder, however, if Thompson’s highly original and persuasive argument, rather than as the unquestionable conclusion of a subspecies of transcendental argument, would not benefit from being conceived of as a compelling elucidation of how, within our philosophical and scientific tradition, is possible

<sup>20</sup> For a similar view, see M. Grene, “Evolution, ‘Typology’ and ‘Population Thinking,’” *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 27, N. 3, pp. 237-243.

to offer a coherent linguistic representation of the main facets of the “Lebendigen”—of life’s modes of presentation—such as they appear within the human life-form. To cut a long story short, I ask myself if, viewed from this standpoint, the wider context would consist less of a “particular form of general judgment or statement” (48), than of the self-correcting efforts made by a self-aware living organism in order to unravel the riddle of life’s duplicity of aspect (inner/outer; active/passive; intentional/causal; purposive/mechanic; individual/general).<sup>21</sup> But to what extent this slight change of perspective would make a real difference?

## IV

### Where do We Go from Here?

To answer this question, I have to explain what could possibly be the leitmotifs of the hermeneutics of life which I am suggesting as an alternative to Thompson’s agenda. Here, of course, there is room only to draw up a (necessarily incomplete) list of the issues around which is likely bound to revolve such a mildly naturalistic hermeneutics. Many of them, not surprisingly, show more or less explicit ties with images and metaphors which philosophical engagements with the phenomenon of life, including Thompson’s, had to deal with in the past and still do. What emerges then, I think, it is a significant case of overlapping

<sup>21</sup> There are signs that Thompson is not at all unsympathetic to this argumentative strategy. See especially his engaging as yet unpublished manuscript *Forms of Nature: “First”, “Second”, “Living”, “Rational” and “Phronetic.”* See Thompson (forthcoming): passim.

consensus, which probably signals the existence of a gap or blind spot in western metaphysics.<sup>22</sup>

(1) Life & Agency. What the experience of being alive is ultimately about? Of course, nobody knows with certainty. Yet, arguing at a high level of generality, it seems reasonable to assume that life always presupposes some form of agency and that life and action are basically synonyms. By agency I mean something close to what Thompson makes a convincing case for in the second and third part of his book: not mere causal processuality, but an almost “symphonic” chain of events that justifies the ascription of its upshot to an agent (and, accordingly, something like the identification of a point of view or positionality). After all, even in Schrödinger’s celebrated view, life *does* something: it strenuously “fights” against entropy.<sup>23</sup>

(2) Life & Soul. As one often hears said (more often than not unflappably), living matter is an “animated” matter. With this expression, people try to put into words the experience of life as something throbbing, active, with an independent motility, even a kind of rebelliousness to the influence of external forces. From this point of view, life is equivalent to dynamism, to desire. With a stroke of genius, Kant defined life as “nothing but the faculty of desire in its minimal exertion” (*Das Leben ist nichts als in der Begehrungsvermögen geringsten Ausübung*) in an unpublished annotation.<sup>24</sup> Life is synonymous with *Trieb*, *Streben* or *élan*, a

<sup>22</sup> B.A.G. Fuller, “The Messes Animals Make in Metaphysics,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 46 (1949), pp. 829-838.

<sup>23</sup> E. Schrödinger, *What is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), pp. 69-71. See also Fox Keller *Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth-Century Biology* (New York: Columbia University Press 1995), pp. 66-72.

<sup>24</sup> I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. XV/1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1923), p. 465. See L. Zammito, “Teleology Then and Now: The Question of Kant’s Relevance for Contemporary Controversies over Function in Biology,” *Studies*

striving or propensity towards a final state, be it a precarious equilibrium or a condition of homeostasis.<sup>25</sup>

(3) Life & Form. Life and form also seem to be inescapably connected. Form, of course, means many things. In this case, however, it stands first of all for a configuration of relations between the parts so sophisticated as to justify the recourse to the concept of self-relation. From this point of view, life is organization. It is, in other words, arrangement of the parts in a meaningful order. (Just think about the whole array of images traditionally linked in some way to the organism, including the vision of life as the capacity for self-organization and self-determination, and as a system of meaningful relations that evokes, not surprisingly, an influential view of reason.) Otherwise put: life is “signification” (Merleau-Ponty), it “says” something through the elements that constitute it and refer to something beyond itself. (In a way, life can be conceived of as a “mind” without representations.) It, therefore, also means dialectics of boundaries, the expression of a plasticity different from that performed by merely functional unities. Life, according to Plessner, is “realization” of the boundary, in so far as the living body is not simply *de-limited*, like any other physical body, but “owns” its boundary as the keystone of its dynamic identity, of its being *in* itself and *beyond* itself all at once. In this case, the boundary is not a pure “in-between”, but a threshold, a “passageway” (*Grenze*) and also an opportunity for going up against the medium where the bounded being is positioned: “When a body, aside from its boundary (*Begrenzung*), has as its property the boundary-crossing (*Grenzübergang*), then the boundary is both a spatial-boundary and an aspect-boundary and the

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*in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* Vol. 37 (2006), pp. 748-779, p. 763.

<sup>25</sup> H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*.

contour, notwithstanding its Gestalt quality, gains the value of the form of totality.”<sup>26</sup>

(4) Life & Self-Determination. Plessner’s idea of the realization of the boundary amounts to translating in abstract terms the fact of life’s plasticity, of its distinctive opened form. According to Plessner, “the form as a manifestation of boundary is an essential indicator of vitality/liveliness (*Lebendigkeit*).”<sup>27</sup> In the case of living organisms, the boundary is the condition for the body to pose and impose itself, i.e. for its self-affirmation as an autonomous entity with regard to (if not against) the medium with which it relates. Obviously, this position, this “centering”, is not understood in a voluntaristic sense, but as the surfacing of that minimal resistance or “rebelliousness” required for the emergence of the duplicity of aspect which is an essential characteristic of the phenomenon of life. For this appearance of form is also equivalent to a peculiar mode of the organic body’s self-relation which expresses the tension between exteriority and interiority characterizing all living or “autopoietic” things. Precisely because it appears under the guise of self-organization (and the presence of the prefix “self” here is in itself meaningful), life more or less directly evokes the idea of autonomy or self-determination. Indeed, the level of complexity required so that the relations between the parts give rise to a variety of self-relation allows a relative emancipation of the living organism from the surrounding environment and the achievement of at least a margin of “situated” (or “needful”, as Jonas liked to call it)

<sup>26</sup> H. Plessner *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

freedom. From every point of view, as Marjorie Grene once noted, life implies “a certain freedom of form within form.”<sup>28</sup>

(5) Life as a Melody. There is something about living forms that suggests that they may be the expression of a “rule” (or an idea, a meaning, a principle of constitution) which makes itself felt, however, only under the guise of a significant absence. In this sense, life is pure “phenomenality” because the *Ding an sich* of which it should be the appearance, is actually not a “thing” at all. As is noted by Renaud Barbaras, “the organism is like a musical theme that is never played as such and so only appears in its variations [...] is that unity without which the parts and the events would have no meaning but that is never present as such: the organism is present as absent, that is, as hidden in the events it governs.”<sup>29</sup> And again: “The whole, which escapes the distinction between being and nonbeing, must therefore be defined as that transversal dimension that links all spatiotemporal events, as the axis along which the events are equivalent, like a melody, which is nothing more than the notes, but precisely as they communicate with one another other.”<sup>30</sup> The grafting of this “transcendence” onto the heart of life itself could explain that characteristic feature of living beings whereby they never seem to coincide with themselves, and are, as it were, “traversed” by a crevice or a gap (which is the source of the aforementioned duplicity of aspect).

(6) Life as *bios* and as *zōē*. Although in different proportions, life as we know it always displays a more anonymous and a more specific, a more passive and a more active side. The two

<sup>28</sup> M. Grene, *Aristotle and Modern Biology*, in *The Understanding of Nature. Essays in the Philosophy of Biology* (Dordrecht - Boston: Kluwer 1974), pp. 74-107, p. 88. The idea is borrowed from F.J.J. Buytendijk.

<sup>29</sup> R. Barbaras, *A Phenomenology of Life*, p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

components are played out along a continuum that ranges from organisms that seem comparable in every possible way to mere replicators, to living beings marked by growing margins of “inwardness”, individuality and therefore by something like a meaningful, not just numerical, identity. The classic and perhaps abused distinction between *bios* and *ζοή* is precisely rooted in the awareness of the existence of a number of (emerging) levels of life-forms. And it is here that the characteristic ambivalence of the “Lebendigen” comes into view. To the point that, to quote Plessner again, we can claim that “one’s own body is not wholly placed within the bodily world, but on the contrary is treated as the ego’s boundary against the world, as periphery of the inwardness. The consequences of occasionalism are avoided if one understands one’s own body both as content of the physical world and as access to it, as its constitutive principle. *My* body [the body as a center of agency] is both an extended object and a bearer of senses, by means of which the ego gets news about an external world that transcends it.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, Thompson is right in claiming that a compelling representation of life is associated with a renewed form of *scala naturae*.

To conclude: this is just food for thought. However, it gives a glimpse of how both mine and Thompson’s approach are enveloped by a common theoretical horizon. And this shared backdrop has a genealogy leading directly to Aristotle. Thompson believes that the “ur-ancestor” of modern biology needs the assistance of a distant German descendant—Gottlob Frege. I surmise, however, that he can be content with the advices of his talented French disciple—Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The truth is likely to be somewhere in between. We need a sufficiently hospitable, without being confusing, theoretical space where the insights included in these two major thought trajectories can be

<sup>31</sup> H. H. Plessner *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, p. 94.

integrated. Together they can considerably broaden our understanding of what life is ultimately about.