On Ascensionism

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The concept of “life” has a privileged but ambivalent position within philosophy. On the one hand, “life” is the topic of regional philosophies whether it be the philosophy of biology, where life is understood in terms of the life sciences, or whether it be in ethical philosophy, where life is understood in terms of the qualified life of the human being. But “life” is not just something that philosophy meditates on as an object of study, for philosophy itself is living thought, a dynamic way of thinking and being in the world. There is not only a thought of life but a life of thought as well. From Aristotle to Descartes to Kant, one can witness this twofold aspect of life in relation to philosophy. Life is that which philosophy thinks about, as a subject an object, and life is also that which conditions the very possibility of philosophy.

It is with Kant that one discovers the central dilemma regarding the philosophy of life: if one can posit an order that is specific to the living, does this also presume a purpose that is likewise specific to the living? But the dilemma turns in on itself, for any thought of life must, of course, be thought and is thus not identical with life itself. As Kant notes, any assertion of a concept of life is inseparable from its relative value as a life-for-us as human beings: “If, however, the human being, through the freedom of his causality, finds things in nature completely advantageous for his often foolish aims…one cannot assume here even a relative end of nature” (Kant: §63, 240). The idea of discovering a concept of life in itself remains a horizon, precisely because it is we living human beings
that are at once enmeshed within the living as subjects and yet thinking about the
living as an object. The best we can do, Kant notes, is to posit a mysterious
“purposiveness without a purpose” that we can never really comprehend except
via an “analogue of Life” borrowed from either theology or art.

This problem is already found in Aristotle’s De anima. While we can point to this
or that particular form of life, such an act and the boundary it establishes
between the living and the non-living presumes a prior concept of “life itself”
that would be common to every particular instance of the living. This prior
concept – “Life” – is thus logically necessary in order to be able to identify,
describe and explain this or that form of life – “the living.” Without it, one enters
the muddy waters of relativism in which any and everything is alive (as well as
its dark inverse – that nothing is alive).

Hence, this metaphysical necessity, this principle of life – the distinction between
Life and the living – which then opens onto various boundaries of articulation – the
living vs. the non-living, the natural vs. the artificial, the human vs. the animal,
and so on. Taken together, the principle of life and the boundaries of articulation
constitute an entire ontology of life, one that enables philosophy to think life both
in its regional aspects (e.g. philosophy of biology, ethical philosophy) as well as
in its fundamental aspects (the logical necessity of the Life-living distinction).

In a sense, one of the main challenges of post-Kantian philosophy was to move
beyond this stalemate, this irrevocable gulf between Life and the living. A
solution to the problem was put forth in the form of a proposition: it is because
we as human beings are both living subjects thinking about living objects that we
can adequately think life. In other words, it is precisely the collapse of Kantian
critical distance that enables us to formulate a coherent and comprehensive
ontology of life. The life that is in me as a reflective subject is also the life that is
manifest in the living organism that I am thinking about. This life that cuts across
subject and object is an immanent life, omnipresent and universally affirmative. Life is immanent to the living, just as the living is the immanence of Life.

This is, in short, another name for the Absolute in German Idealism and it relies on a notion of Life that is superlative with respect to the living. It takes different forms, however. In the early Hegel, the organicist model of the dialectic, moving across nature, logic and history is described as the “life of the Absolute” or, more simply, “the life of Spirit.” For Schelling, whose work is deeply informed by natural philosophy, nature is understood as a continuous flux and flow between the manifestation of this or that living being, and the living being in itself as evidence of the background flux and flow of Life. This is what Schelling describes as the “absolute life of all things.” Even Fichte, who is otherwise not given to speculation on nature and life, repeatedly returns to the philosophical motif whereby an abstract logical principle is common to each of its manifestations, connecting self and world, I and not-I – a phenomena he terms “absolute life.”

Thus post-Kantian philosophy challenges the impasse that Kant had proposed with regards to the concept of life. More specifically, German Idealism puts forth an ontology of life as governed by a principle of flux and flow that runs through the world, cutting across different material orders, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. This is what we can call the ontology of generosity.

The ontology of generosity states, firstly, that all thought of life is conditioned by an ontological framework of overpresence. Life is generosity, genesis, givenness; life is that which flows forth and its overpresent in its fecundity. Secondly, the ontology of generosity states that all thought of life is conceptually dyadic, split between regional and fundamental philosophy – a split whose endpoint is the positing of an overpresent, overgenerous immanence between the regional (the living) and the fundamental (Life).
Finally, the ontology of generosity usually expresses itself via one of two paths. The first is that of life-as-genesis, in which life is thought in terms of its generativity, as becoming, process, and genesis. If, in traditional metaphysics one asks “why is there something and not nothing?”, here one asks “why is there something new?” The second path is that of life-as-givenness, in which life is thought in terms of gift, of being given, of donation. Here life is an affirmation that is already given to us, an affirmation prior to all being and prior to all becoming. Here the question is not “why is there something new?” but instead “why is there already something?”

These paths – life as genesis and life as givenness – are not exclusive to post-Kantian philosophy; they are very much alive today. In the notion of life-as-genesis we can detect the participation of philosophies of becoming, process philosophy and biophilosophies inspired by thinkers such as Bergson, Whitehead and Deleuze. In the notion of life-as-givenness we can likewise detect the participation of phenomenology and philosophies of affect inspired by thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion. The point here is not to make a historical argument and suggest that thinkers like Deleuze or Henry are working in the tradition of German Idealism. Rather, it is to suggest that these are the contours of thinking about life that cut across disparate traditions, methods and schools of thought.

How then does the ontology of generosity attempt to resolve the problem posed by Kant, the irrevocable split between Life and the living? Put simply, the post-Kantian philosophies of Fichte, Hegel and Schelling attempt to expand and to raise the concept of life to the point that “life” becomes identical with nature, the world and even with being itself. In other words, life for these thinkers is not reducible to its biological, anthropological or zoological definitions. Life is also not exclusive to the subjective human experience of being alive (that is, to a life experience). In post-Kantian philosophy, the concept of life oscillates between these regional concepts (life science, life experience) and a more fundamental
concept encapsulated in a phrase like “Absolute Life.” Life is elevated and raised beyond the human and beyond nature, even beyond the divine. We can call this kind of thinking **ascensionism**, as it denotes the process by which the concept of life is raised to the status of a metaphysical principle. Ascensionist thinking has two forms both of which we can still see today.

The first form of ascensionism states that the world is alive. By this is meant the process by which the concrete is raised to the abstract. Thus the concrete notion of life as defined within natural philosophy or life science is raised and expanded so as to describe the world itself. One begins with the individuated living organism and scales it up to the planetary level. In the history of philosophy, animism, panpsychism and certain strands of phenomenology are examples of this first form of ascensionism. In science, a well-known example might be the Gaia hypothesis as well as certain aspects of deep ecology.

The second form of ascensionism states that life is the world. This is the near inverse of the first form. Here we see the raising of life as the privileged manifestation of metaphysical principles, such as time and temporality, form and causality, or the concepts of becoming, process and immanence. In philosophy, vitalism, mechanism and pantheism might be examples of this second form of ascensionism. In science, one might cite certain aspects of biocomplexity and systems biology as examples.

Both forms of ascensionism are readily present in post-Kantian philosophy. Indeed, they imply one another. For instance, Hegel’s comments on the organicist “life of the Absolute” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are linked to his study of living organisms in the *Philosophy of Nature*. Kant himself engages in ascensionist thinking when, for instance, he states that the principle of order in the world must be sought for in the “analogue of Life” in which life serves as the model for the ordered and purposive character of the world as a whole.
The ontology of generosity expressed in ascensionist thinking is not without its own limitations. Primary among these is the investment in an affirmative ontology with regard to the concept of life (whether it be in terms of genesis or givenness). So much is this a veritable apriori of the ontology of generosity that in some cases it tends to become a moral principle as well - life is good precisely because it is fecund, generous, bountiful and gives itself forth. We must have faith in life, go with the flow, endure our life changes, learn our life lessons and so on. And we as human beings become dubiously romanticized within this bountiful flux and flow resulting in a lyrical and therapeutic anthropomorphism of the Absolute. In this heady mix of hippie-affectivism and chaos theory, the human expands to such an extent that it eclipses the world itself, absorbing the nonhuman into its embrace, able to know all and to be all. And here the ontology of generosity inadvertently reveals its therapeutic function for us as human beings, which is to conceive of life in such a way that the life-for-us is indistinguishable from life-itself.

There is a sense in which philosophical reflection on life must always fail, if only because we as human beings seem peculiarly ill-fated to think life, and therein lies the minimal distance, the smallest interval that reveals contradictions between "Life" and "the living", the principle of life and the boundaries of articulation. Thus, while German Idealism provides a solution to the Kantian problematic, that solution often ends up being compromised by the Kantian framework itself. There is, for instance, the problem of causality. Within the ontology of generosity, one must still posit a source of life even if this source is self-caused or self-generating. There is also the problem of teleology. This positing of a life-source necessitates the positing of an end or purpose in order to qualify and to justify the organization inherent in life - order demands an end. This is true even if the end one posits is the process of process itself, the becoming of becoming itself. The positing of a source and end dovetail into the need to accept a distinction between source and end and this is still the case even if one asserts an immanent relation between source and end.
The result is that the ontology of generosity inherited from German Idealism looks to be a compromised, weak Kantianism and the same can be said of philosophical reflection on life on down to our own time, whether it be in the form of speculative realism or object-oriented ontologies, eliminativism or accelerationism. The question here is whether there are any alternatives to the ontology of generosity and its ascensionist thinking – a form of thinking in which “life” is always the “life-for-us” as human beings. But such a question already sets us up for a further failure and more discourse. Another question is whether it is possible to have done with the concept of life altogether.

Bibliography