

On Life & Its Point: Reflections on What “They” Say

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ABSTRACT: This essay proposes that in thinking about life and its point we review a select list of commonplace questions, comments, and even quips about what Aristotle calls the “to be” of living things. If we so explore the phenomenon of life, we will soon enough confront pivotal issues in natural philosophy, metaphysics, political thought, and the theory of value. Hans Jonas and Robert Spaemann prove to be helpful guides in our inquiries.

WHERE TO START? We might well begin with the deepening *disenchantment* of the world around us.¹ A stanza from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, already penned in the nineteenth century, reflects something of the pathos of this disenchantment:

In the elder days of art
Builders wrought with the greatest care
Each minute and unseen part,
For the Gods are everywhere.²

Well over a century and a half later, we must add a gloss: and now the Gods are *not* everywhere; they are not anywhere. Nor, it seems, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses, nor even the Messiah. Comes now

¹ For a helpful discussion of “disenchantment,” including its use by Friedrich Schiller and Max Weber, see Mariano Artigas, “The Mind of the Universe: Understanding Science and Religion” in *Faith, Scholarship, and Culture in the 21st Century*, edited by Alice Ramos and Marie I. George, with an Introduction by Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association, 2002), pp. 113-25.

² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Builders,” *The Seaside and the Fire*. Harry G. Frankfurt cites these lines in his *On Bullshit* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 19-20. Frankfurt thinks that truth-telling was easier in “elder days.”

the whirlwind.

The University Faculty for Life works to build a culture of life. The wages are low, but the work is steady. On occasion, it is daunting. But why should this be a surprise? Already some fifty years ago the Jewish thinker Hans Jonas wrote that “Our thinking...is under the ontological dominance of death.”³ Must we, though, like a conquered people, submit to this *dhimmitude*? By no means! Yet to break free we must think keenly and clearly about life.

And whatever death’s dominance, we do speak often and at times urgently about life. With a hint of bravado, we can even speak playfully of life. I propose, then, that in thinking about life we take time to review a short list of commonplace questions, comments, and quips about the phenomenon of life. They suggest strategic explorations that the friends of life do not always undertake, much less complete. In doing so, we take a cue from Aristotle, since he often begins his analyses with what people say and how to make sense of it.⁴ Although my list is a short one, it can help us identify confusions about life both as a conceptual category and as an existential reality. These muddles, it turns out, have much to do with the mischief of René Descartes and John Locke; further misery is wrought by the species *homo economicus*, that is, man the wholly self-interested producer and consumer. Here, then, is the list:

*Who’s to say when there’s a life?
Can we agree that there’s a potential life?
Get a life!
I have a life, after all.
Life goes on.
So what’s the point of life?*

Drawing on Hans Jonas and the Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann, I want to explore some promising ways to address this list, albeit in rather a “bare knuckles” fashion. So, let’s begin at the beginning.

³ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 12.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated with Introduction and Notes by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1998), pp. xix-xx.

Who's to say when there's a life?

To answer this question, we need an account of the essential properties of living things. Internal unity and, this side of eternity, the immanent capacities for self-motion, growth, appetite, and reproduction are essential. More broadly, nothing can live without being in act, even if minimally, at some level or other.⁵

But talk about the operations or properties of life, however important for its recognition, leaves unsaid what is perhaps most important: life itself is *not* a property of living things. Nor is one's life simply the same as one's consciousness, though John Locke elevated consciousness to outrank both the soul and the body as the source of personal identity.⁶ Rather life, as Aristotle teaches, is the "to be" of living things.⁷ Ordinary language examples make the same point in a different way. We cannot sensibly say of Lady Gaga that she is a brazen self-promoter, just possibly born that way, and also *alive*. Nor, strictly speaking, can we say that we have been put to read too many dead white males. No, we can only tally up the memorialized remains of poets interred in Westminster Abbey.

In answering the *Who's to say...?* question about life, we also need to identify the several preconditions of life. Many are physical, of course; and they have yet to be thoroughly vetted. We are familiar with carbon-based life forms, although some think that there might be silicon-based life forms and are impatient with "carbon-chauvinism." Of late, *The New York Times* piqued our curiosity and invited our credulity when in 2010 it headlined "Microbe Finds Arsenic Delicious, Redefining Life." Two years later the editors of *The Times* had second thoughts, a

⁵ Indeed, being in act is a transcendental, that is, a characteristic of everything that is. So understood "being in act" is an analogous term. See W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 31-34.

⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Volume One, Book II, Chapter XXVII, §16.

⁷ Aristotle, *De Anima* 415b13. Citing Aristotle with approval, Thomas Aquinas makes the same claim. See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 18, a. 2.

precedent with promise.⁸

We also need to acknowledge the relational preconditions of life, and we can access these preconditions from life's always being in act at some level or other. This "being in act" means that life is always "going beyond itself," and it is doing so within the metaphysical context of potency and act, the web of causality, and the limits of time and place.⁹

Well, then, *Who's to say when there's a life? Not* physicists, at least not if they are in the grip of a materialist "theory of everything." Rather, biologists are to say – *if* they appreciate that biology is not subsumable under the mathematized laws of physics and chemistry.¹⁰ Biology cannot be so subsumed because life itself is not a property that admits of such a reduction. Nonetheless, it is not only biologists who are to say. Plain people, too, can often *say when there's a life* if they are aware of themselves and their senses are in order. Yes, plain people are to say. After all, they are alive; and they know themselves to be alive through a self-awareness that enables them to perceive that other beings are alive as well.¹¹ (There's no doubt, gentle reader, that you are alive!) We come now to the next item on the list.

Can we agree that there's a potential life?

Even though often this second question is thought to be easier than the first and thus a more diplomatic inquiry, we better answer "probably not." Not, at any rate, if we pay close attention to what is at issue. Potentiality is not free floating. So, our first task is to identify *that which has potential*. More specifically, only that which is already living has the potential to continue to live. So, the phrase "potential life," at best, refers

⁸ See Dennis Overbye, "Microbe Finds Arsenic Tasty; Redefines Life," *The New York Times*, Page A1 (3 December 2010) and "Studies Rebut Finding That Arsenic May Support Life," *The New York Times*, Science Section (9 July 2012).

⁹ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰ For a discussion of this claim, see Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 19-20.

¹¹ Robert Spaemann, *Love & The Dignity of Human Life: On Nature and Natural Law*, with a Foreword by David L. Schindler (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), p. 45.

to either something already actually alive and with the potential to remain so, or it refers, less ambitiously, to conditions that are friendly to life. What often draws attention to this potential is that in virtue of it we look for further and welcome development, say, blossoming in a bigger pot or even gaining fame and fortune. Nonetheless, all things considered, we would do well simply to retire the phrase “a potential life” in favor of “the potential of a life,” whether or not its actualization wins acclaim.

Furthermore, in discussing life and its potential, and their coming to be, we need to keep in mind that life is not instantiated. That is, life is neither deduced from a formula nor patterned after a mechanical model. In light of its ontology, life admits of neither “mathematizing” nor engineering, and this despite René Descartes’s removal of life to the sphere of physics.¹² Life comes about through an act of generation, however much we manipulate that act. Such generation has its own ontological character. Thus Hans Jonas observes that parents bring about both the existence of an offspring and its form, and do so by their possession of this form. “This is a pattern,” he writes, “very different from the mechanistic chain of cause and effect and strongly suggests the operation of a [formal cause] in addition to an [efficient cause], or the existence of [otherwise banned] substantial forms.”¹³ A Catholic, rejecting traducianism, says something stronger: God’s direct creation of the human soul precludes the mechanistic project.¹⁴ In any case, though Descartes would separate us into *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, both the living of our lives and our generation of new lives testify to the unity of the human person.

So, we return to our second question: *Can we agree that there’s a potential life?* Only if we reconstruct the question to acknowledge at

¹² On this point Hans Jonas cites Descartes’s letter to Regius and its claim that man’s growth and motion are “nothing else than a certain disposition of the parts of his body.” See Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 660 n3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁴ John Paul II, discussing the genealogy of the person, writes: “Human fatherhood and motherhood are rooted in biology, yet at the same time transcend it” and emphasizes that “God alone is the source of that ‘image and likeness’ which is proper to the human being, as it was received at Creation. Begetting is the continuation of creation” (*Letter to Families* §9).

least tacitly that all life is actual life and it is only in this actuality that life has potential. Let's move from our lead pair of questions to the single imperative on our list.

Get a life!

Ah, what prayer warrior or sidewalk counselor has not heard this? But to pause here – if only to ask “Who, me?” – presents a bit of a puzzle. After all, *Get a life!* is an imperative only for the living, and they already have a life.

To parse this puzzle we need to distinguish, as Aristotle did, between *bios* and *zōe*.¹⁵ That is, we need to distinguish between a living organism and an organism that can by nature freely and deliberately choose to live fully and well.¹⁶ Any amoeba has a life, but none lives it deliberately. Nor are we human persons in the way an amoeba is an amoeba or even in the way that a dog is a dog.¹⁷ Unlike life forms that only follow their nature, human persons “have” a nature.¹⁸ Or perhaps we might say, as some prefer, that our nature is to transcend our nature.¹⁹ Either way, we cannot understand ourselves in the same way that we set out to understand living entities whose lives cannot be free and deliberate. Of the difference that our freedom makes, Hans Jonas writes: “This transcendence goes on as long as man is alive as man.” For this reason, “history succeeds... evolution, and biology cedes the field to a philosophy of man.”²⁰ Let's turn now from an imperative to a simple declaration, although it is too often made defensively.

I have a life, after all.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima* 434b21.

¹⁶ In the Gospel of John “life” plays a central role. Here, too, we find *zōe* rather than *bios*. For a rich discussion of John's Gospel see Carlo Leget, “The Concept of ‘Life’ in the *Commentary on St. John*” in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2005), pp. 153-72.

¹⁷ On a dog's life, see Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference Between “Someone” and “Something”* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-33.

¹⁹ See Alasdair MacIntyre's review of Spaemann's *Persons* in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 20/3 (2007): 443.

²⁰ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 187.

Imagine, and how easy it is to do so, that one labors in the coils of a bureaucracy. At best, if one's cause is noble, one can labor on as a good soldier. But the evil genius of bureaucracy is to put aside the substantive question of its ends, whether noble or not, and give itself over to the procedural question of how to refine its means in the pursuit of ever greater efficiency.²¹ Long live "best practices," and never mind whose or to what purpose! Yet to the extent that one serves the bureaucracy as such, one no longer lives freely and deliberately; because to that same extent one's life becomes externally directed. In this case, how can one labor on as a good soldier? A good soldier, after all, is obedient to a rightful authority. But bureaucracy forfeits rightful authority when it dismisses the question of worthy ends. By forfeiting its authority, it also denies us a critical sphere, the workplace, in which we might acquire the virtue of obedience, a key strength of character that we need for human flourishing.²² Too late, it seems; skill-sets have supplanted the construction of character.

But how does this critique of bureaucracy bear on the mission of building a culture of life? The links are clear enough. Bureaucratic structures are the mainstay of advanced capitalism, the sterile habitat of *homo economicus*. (To be sure, they also undergirded State communism.) These structures are now the mainstay of the politically liberal State *à la* John Rawls. This State is the construct of those who are skeptical about reaching a shared understanding of the common good. For this reason, the liberal State privileges the procedural over the substantive. It routinely rejects metaphysical reflection on the nature of life in its licensing of basic political and judicial institutions. In this State the unborn are by design voiceless, and no one has standing to speak in their behalf.

With respect, then, to the declaration *I have a life, after all*, it is a fine thing that we hear it as often as we do. Yet why be defensive? Better to roar it from roof tops and broadcast it to boardrooms. Let it

²¹ On Max Weber's logic of bureaucracy, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 24-26.

²² Yves R. Simon's *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1993) analyzes the interrelation of obedience, authority, and the common good. See especially Ch. III, pp. 144-94.

drown out the usual clanking of the wage-slave's fetters!

But now it is time that we turn to a second declaration. It is a declarative that looks to be true, and it has a Stoic tone.

Life goes on.

Here we need to ask why (to-date) this has been the case, and in doing so the distinction between the necessary – what must be so – and the contingent – what happens to be so – becomes critical. It is a distinction that is fairly easy when made with regard to *statements*. For example, it is a necessary truth that “All squares have four sides” and only a contingent truth, at best, that “Everyone reading this essay will finish reading it.”

Yet life is neither a property nor a proposition. Life is the “to be” of living things. So, we must turn to the distinction between necessary and contingent *beings*. Conveniently, we need only look to ourselves for examples of contingent beings. None of us has always existed; nor will any of us always exist, and this despite our *souls* being incorruptible. Still, a contingent being can have a necessary quality. For example, although we are contingent beings we are necessarily rational animals.

Many of us, in contrast, believe that God always has and always will exist and that as the Lord of Life cannot but exist. That is, we believe that God is a necessary being and, in fact, the only necessary being. Doubtless we have all heard arguments both to support and to contest that belief, but perhaps few of us have heard this “flip” of the problem of evil:

Evil exists.
 But evil is a privation, that is, parasitic on the order of the good.
 Yet there would be no order of good apart from God.
 Therefore God exists.

As it happens, Thomas Aquinas presents this argument.²³ The Common Doctor, of course, did not suffer from *disenchantment*. Nor was he a Stoic. That our life goes on is God's good gift, and we dare not tempt the Lord by acquiescing in the slaughter of innocents. In any case, since

²³ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 71. Federico Tedesco called this argument to my attention.

even an atheist admits that life does not go on necessarily and of its own accord, admits indeed that the whole of life is cosmologically at risk, there is no Stoic safe-house in which to hide ourselves.

We come now to the last entry on our list, and with it we face the most exigent of the enduring questions.

So, what's the point of life?

The point of life, classically put, is its *telos*. To speak thus is to contest any supposed unity of science, as expressed in mathematical physics, that recognizes neither the irreducibility of life nor any finality to which life is both ordered and orders itself. Whatever the sway of scientism, our experience of life, of our being, shows life to be a “going out for” something more and other than itself.²⁴

This “going out for” reveals both an inner and an outer dimension of what it is to be a human person. Given our experience of this phenomenon, we can understand the emptiness of any simulation of human life. Whatever emerges from an attempted simulation, however sophisticated it might be, has no inner life; it is a product, an artifact, whose unity is only external. Sadly, to lose sight of the limits of simulation might well impoverish our own interiority. Yet there is a tendency to worship idols dressed up in digital form.

The interior dimension of our personal *telos* suggests a provocative thesis: *it is life that gives meaning to life's goals; the goals, in themselves, do not give meaning to life.*²⁵ Enter a new worry: does not *this* thesis undercut the belief that life has a point and even the search for what that point is? Does a turn to teleology, to explanation in terms of purpose, only lead us to an empty vitalism, that is, to positing an autonomous life dynamic at odds with physical laws?²⁶

But the thesis at issue is not as counter-intuitive as it might seem. Nor does it undercut teleological explanation. After all, does it make sense to suppose that there are goals *apart* from life? (To suppose such

²⁴ Spaemann, *Persons*, p. 42.

²⁵ While Spaemann's work inspires this thesis, I have no specific citation to confirm its source.

²⁶ Here I follow Jacques Maritain. See his *The Degrees of Knowledge*, translated by Gerald B. Phelan (New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 198.

goals is a bit like supposing that there are independent pots of gold at the end of a rainbow that no one reaches.) What does make sense, however, is to conjoin teleology, with its logic of goals, and *axiology*, that is, the logic of the good. The atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel now thinks that “Value enters the world with life” and that “life is a necessary condition of value.”²⁷ Teleology has value as its goal, and life is the sphere of value. But there is more: to hold that every value is merely instrumental invites circularity. Hence, if there are any values, there are intrinsic values; and as persons our “to be” is of surpassing intrinsic value. Moreover, our core goals, the basic goods of the person, exist and are of value only insofar as they are dimensions of our life. Consider, for example, the good of knowledge. The real, *that which is*, is humanly intelligible and known only in its becoming a dimension of a human intelligence, itself a power of the soul.²⁸

Let me offer another example of the commingling of life and its core goods. For those who build a culture of life, it is a striking convergence. *In the most primary sense, none of us dies too soon nor achieves too little.* And how could this be so? Do we not weep the bitterest tears at the death of our children?²⁹ Yes, and Rachel is not to be consoled.³⁰ Yet in regard to what is most important, with respect to our very being, each life bears an extraordinary dignity. It is not the sort of dignity that one can achieve as if it were a goal external to one’s life. Rather, it is a dignity with which one’s life is endowed and because of which every life is precious.

In sum: we serve the cause of life when we are reflective about life itself. Our inquiry, of course, must be open-ended. But even a “short list” of questions, comments, and quips about life can season our steady work. *C’est la vie!*

²⁷ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 120 and 123.

²⁸ On this point see W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame, 2001), pp. 17-18.

²⁹ The poet Ben Jonson, whose son died at the age of seven, testifies to this grief. See his “On My First Son.”

³⁰ Matthew 2:18.