

Life Problems: Ambivalence, Valorization, Validation

The manifold, elusive everyday uses of the notion of 'life' carry over into its under-determined, ambiguous and often ambivalent function within numerous theoretical and applied disciplines as well as within philosophical discourses.

In order to thematise the import of this ambivalence and explore its potential we, the Masters students of the School of Philosophy, organize an international symposium and aim to publish its outcomes in a special issue of the *Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy*.

We wish thus first to examine and valorize the under-determination of life within various discursive contexts. By weaving together different approaches to life within a single project, we seek both to concretize and extend discussions *within* these discourses, as well as tease out the commonalities and disjunctions *between* them, in order to open new paths of knowledge.

We wish also to take transdisciplinarity to its limit and show how ultimately, every object within philosophical discourse, becomes in its relation to the question of life, itself a question of 'life and death', demanding a valiant validation of the inherent and existential value of every question. By bringing life to the centre of philosophical discourses, the latter must assume the responsibility of cultivating forms of knowledge whose value is centered around *lived life*.

Biopolitical questions of race and market practices, the potential of categories such as '*bare-life*' and '*form-of-life*' in reconfiguring contemporary practices, the ethico-political significance of the epistemological *boundary between life and death*, the scope of *biosemiotics* in making sense of the world and the fraught relation between *viral life* and *technics* which will undoubtedly determine much of the future are thus some of the of the dimensions that we set out to explore. A more detailed description of our individual trajectories follows.

Sonia Shvets

On Naked Life and Its Form: Redefining the Fracture between *Zoē* and *Bios*

In *The Highest Poverty*, Giorgio Agamben examines the Franciscans, whose lives, he states, were fully determined by an all-encompassing rule of poverty. In this way, the line between the rule and the life became not just irrelevant but non-existent. Instead of ‘rule’ and ‘life’, a third term appeared: ‘form-of-life’, where the rule is the life as much as the life is the rule embodied and constructed, as an exemplar.

Agamben draws the term ‘form-of-life’ from late Wittgenstein, and contrasts it to his notion of ‘naked’ or ‘bare life’, which he equates to Greek *zoē*, a life reduced to mere survival, what Agamben frequently equates to ‘biological life’. Given that for Agamben naked life can never be isolated within a ‘form-of-life’, a positive definition of its nakedness remains unforthcoming. He defines naked life purely negatively, as a non-death, opposing the positively defined *bios*, which is a political and distinctly human life, inherently always a possibility. Given its great implications for Agamben’s political philosophy, this distinction deserves close examination.

In his essay *Form of Life*, Agamben not only ascribes explicitly positive value judgements to form-of-life – as opposed to naked life – but also informs these judgments through a distinctly anthropomorphic conception of thought and intellect characteristic to *bios*. The essay aims to challenge the purely negative definition of naked or biological life through the exploration of the exact division between *bios* and *zoē*. An exploration of how animal lives and activities are conceived will serve as a guide to discovering the positivity of the biological life and the implicit potentiality that may accompany it. Consequently, the essay queries the distinction between form-of-life and naked life, to examine whether the two terms remain separable on the basis of a principle, other than a positive or negative structural definition.

Henk Oosterling

Wanted. Dead or Alive! *Adapting to Life in the Anthropocene*

The Anthropocene is no longer a geological issue. By now plastic literally runs through our veins. Pointing at a structural temperature rise in 2027 of 1,5 degrees is no longer a rhetorical move of alarmists. Yet, in spite of a self-inflicted climate crisis, the on-going risk of global pandemics, and recently the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, in order to survive in the Anthropocene, mankind rather desires a devastating ‘normality’ than changing the constitutive bad habits of his excessive life style.

In addressing this ecopanic by differentiating meticulously the deflated concept of sustainability politically, in terms of health and policy wise, an ecosophical hypocritique enables us to redirect the discourse of our human condition towards our anthropocene condition.

Constantijn Kusters

Signs of Life

When a headline calls for our attention with the title ‘Signs of life found on Mars’ it is sadly not the Star Trek-like encounters with organisms from another world it will be referring to. Instead, the life discussed takes a form so small that what makes it alien is its distance not just from our earth, but also from the experience of life in the everydayness of our existence.

This essay aims at conceptually narrowing this gap between the experience of human-sized life and microscopic life, by focusing on the similarities our meaningful experience has to what might be considered life’s most basic forms, while also briefly problematising the health aspects of not taking up this connection. This essay will do this through the biosemiotic principle which states that the first signs of life, are the life of signs itself.

To show how signs are present in all of life, the essay will first introduce the Umwelt theory of biologist Jakob von Uexküll, which serves as both an inspiration for the biosemiotic project and philosophical phenomenology, a connection which will help breach the gap between experienced and biologically observed semiosis. After this it will briefly introduce Peircean semiosis in relation to the type of life most familiar to humans, the phenomenological life. Until finally the essay will, through the work of Jesper Hoffmeyer and Terrence Deacon, show how semiotic processes are also present on the microscopic level of cellular mechanisms and might even be considered as the genesis of life itself.

Giovanni Prins

Generating Two Modes of Life: a Biopolitical Reading of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in asylum seekers and refugees. While this is a global phenomenon, the gravity of this situation has primarily been felt in Europe. In order to properly analyse, problematise, and explain this phenomenon and the respective responses to it, I will draw on Michel Foucault’s conceptualisations of biopolitics.

In his work, Foucault traces two distinct but intertwined genealogies of biopolitics. One finds its roots in race struggles and state racism, whereas the other originates in the development of liberalism and political economy. Biopolitics can be seen accordingly as a mode of power that on the one hand seeks to produce docile bodies through disciplinary power, and on the other, regularise and control entire populations through biopower. In

turn, the two genealogies of biopolitics create two different but not entirely separate modes of life: bare life and precarious life. This theoretical framework is applied to the modern asylum seeker and refugee, in order to show that this figure exhibits, in an exemplary fashion, traits of both modes of life. Additionally, using Germany and Great Britain as examples, I argue that government policies on immigration and border control are the result of a biopolitical governmentality that excludes those bare and precarious lives that are a threat to the cohesion of the homogenous State. Consequently, intensifications regarding border control and deportation become the ultimate strategy of doing away with life deemed inefficient, threatening, and ultimately unworthy of living.

Howard Caygill

Thomas Nail's Critique of Vitalism

Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Earth* (2021) marks a major departure in the philosophy of life and a powerful critique of philosophical vitalism. It approaches life as a planetary phenomenon and attempts to think it within the concept of an energy gradient. The lecture will assess Nail's contribution and suggest that it can be developed further through the resources of thermodynamic biology.

Mark van Loon

Hiding, Mutating, Spreading: Rethinking the Past, Present, and Future of Technical Life

Within the context of the Anthropocene, in which the dominance of technology and the destruction of life forms are seen as being both 'our own making' as well as 'out of control', humanity, technology and their relation must be rethought and reappraised. The computer virus offers an exemplary perspective for this reappraisal.

Drawing on Stiegler's theory of technical evolution, this essay will argue for the integral role of technology within life and corroborate Stiegler's claim that current modes of technical production are 'out of joint'. This diagnosis calls for a re-examination of the status of knowledge in technology, particularly in connection to intrusive digital technologies within consumerist societies, and demands that technical development does not merely seek instrumental optimization and efficiency, but strives instead to sustainably harmonize life's systems.

The work of Stiegler is further inflected through that of Michel Serres, by looking at parasitic relations within technological and vital milieus. Parasites such as viruses are not simply distortive objects, but play a role in forming life-systems, serving as a source of innovation. By examining the computer virus as a quasi-object which, through its abstraction, can function as a mediator, the essay will shift the emphasis from the virus' 'destructive character', to the ways in which its occurrence within digital cyberspace opens new possibilities for collectives to form in relation to the contemporary technical environment.

Charles Smoot

Defining the Moment of Death

Throughout most of the history of modern medical practice, the point of death was determined by the cessation of cardio-pulmonary functionality. In more recent years the aforementioned criterion was sidelined as insufficient for a definition of death, and replaced by the more contemporary notion of brain death. However, even brain death as a criterion is not without its own critiques and therefore merits revisiting.

This essay concerns itself with arguments for and against both the brain death criterion, 'higher brain' i.e lack of consciousness and voluntary muscle movements, and 'brain stem' i.e lack of spontaneous respiration. It also investigates similar considerations with regard to the more traditional cardio-pulmonary criterion. This essay concludes that these criteria often cannot provide us with a definition that is both practically or metaphysically satisfactory, and opts for a sort of 'alternative approach'.

This modest approach, previously expounded by Winston Chiong takes into consideration that death may be more of a 'fuzzy term' than a concrete one, i.e. that the moment of death will ultimately be unclear and indeterminable. Moreover and through the use of both Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance' and criticisms of descriptivism from Kripke and Putnam, the concept of death becomes more of a complex network of similar interdependent properties than a singular definable moment. Such a conception is not only sympathetic to the complexity of life and death but also provides adequate precision necessary for medical procedures.

Havi Carel

Vulnerability and Contingency of Human Life

My paper characterises life using a nexus of terms – mortality, limits, contingency and vulnerability – which weave a picture of human life as marked by limitation and finitude. I suggest that limitations of possibility, capacity, and resource are deep features of human life, but not only restrict it. Limits are also the conditions of possibility for human life and as such have productive, normative, and creative powers that not only delimit life but also scaffold growth and transformation within it. The paper takes a less known interpretation of the term 'ephemeros', to mean 'of the day', rather than 'short-lived' and suggests that as ephemeral, human life is contingent and mutable, subject to events beyond our control. However, virtue can still be exercised – indeed, can be exuberantly displayed – when we respond to contingent events marked by adversity.