Why Life Now?

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FOREWORD

Why Life Now?

As we struggle to understand and prepare ourselves for climate change, the effects of globalized neoliberal capitalism, and violence (both governmental and extra-governmental) on a planetary scale, we also struggle to name what it is that we cherish and hope to foster and protect as well as what it is that, of itself, opposes the forces that may well destroy us. One of the words that has emerged in this context is life.

Philosophers do well to pay close attention to any concept that attains such centrality and exercises such power in our thinking, which is one reason to be grateful for the thinking collected in Feminist Philosophies of Life and for the editorial work that brought it together. The collection could not be more timely. Yet it is also puzzling, prodding a reader to wonder: What is it that brings these very different essays together? They all speak of life, but when they do so, do they speak of the same thing?

Editors Sharp and Taylor are aware of the question, and the answer they give has to do not so much with the thematic content of the essays but rather with their strategic intent. Something has changed in feminist thinking since the turn of the twenty-first century, and that change is reflected here, they suggest. Whereas so much feminist scholarship in the last century was dedicated to exposing “the tendency of discourses to normalize and exclude,” as they write in the introduction, these essays strive to move beyond those discourses and imagine and cultivate new ways to speak, think, and act. And a necessary step in that project is “to ask what life is.” No one essay answers that question or even addresses it directly. But the great value of the collection as a whole lies in its creation of an
occasion for philosophical meditation on the question and its implications and possibilities.

I confess to skepticism regarding the ontological importance of the question; as a student of Foucault's work, I much prefer to treat powerful terms—which life most definitely is—as effects of and operators within historical and political forces. Nevertheless, I believe the editors are right to raise it as a general intellectual imperative. What is life? What is life? What is life doing here, among us, in our work, in this feminist philosophical moment?

In this collection—and in fact in much of the work now referred to as feminist new materialisms and posthumanism—the term life operates in a number of ways and has multiple meanings and effects. These are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive—in fact, some functions and meanings reinforce or shade into each other—but there are differences. And it is important, I think, to consider these differences in their differences as well as in their overlappings and similarities. Although I would like to consider how life functions in posthumanisms and new materialisms in general, here I will simply identify and briefly explore a few of the divergences that occur in the present collection.

Herein life names, first and obviously, the course that one traverses between birth and death. Life is not a general phenomenon but an oft-repeated—though never precisely replicated—particular one. It is my life, your life, the president's life, the life of the janitor who cleans my classroom. As Jane Barter writes (following Adriana Cavarero and opposing Giorgio Agamben), there is no such thing as bare life; there is always a "who," and a singular who at that. It is not clear to me whether Barter would attribute a who to the lives of nonhuman beings, but many contributors to this collection might well do so; not only my life and your life, then, but also those of the doe and the oak tree, and the twenty-one-day life of the evasively buzzing house fly. Each is particular, though we may not be able to discern it in its material and temporal particularity.

Related to this first way of employing the word life are the ways in which some of these authors use Gilbert Simondon's concept of individuating, Stephen D. Seely most overtly. For Simondon, as Seely explicates, life is or at least fundamentally involves the activity of individuation. This is not to say that any living being ever becomes a complete individual totally separated from all others, but that each emerges out of an indeterminate
multiplicity in an ongoing process of differing from its own field of emergence. Particularity, or singularity, though not individualism, is affirmed; differentiation takes precedence over replication of the same. Life is this activity of differentiation, ever differing from “itself” — that is, from whatever is.

Another way that life functions in these essays is as a means to emphasize the occurrence of activity without total predictability, without epistemic or ontological certainty. Life is change — self-transformation (or perhaps a middle-voiced event of materially transforming itself, with no determined and determining telos). It points, therefore, at what always ultimately escapes the forces styled and ranged to catch it, manipulate it, direct it, and manage it — forces such as the carceral eugenic complex that Lisa Guenther identifies in chapter 11. Life “is” resistant to conceptualization and instrumental rationality. It names a material force that is, finally, unnamable and untamable.

Yet another function of life in many of these essays is to oppose the assumption of passivity in material existence. Understanding life as matter’s self-organizing activity rather than as some kind of nonmaterial force added to or acting on materiality “destabilizes anthropocentric and humanist ontological privilege,” writes Astrida Neimanis in chapter 2. Indeed, these authors assert, matter needs no external nonmaterial impetus or mentality; it is its own agent for change. A sort of Spinozist monism runs through much of this collection, a nonreductive materialism that celebrates matter as a (self-)organizing, structuring, transforming force — in other words, that celebrates life not or not only as particularities of becoming, but as a general phenomenon of material transformation of planetary and perhaps cosmic proportions.

Celebration, but also alarm, animates many of these essays. Life is what is most endangered; life is what must be protected; harm to life must be averted to whatever extent possible. Climate change, mass extinction, discrimination against the disabled, violence against queer people, murders of indigenous women of Manitoba, eugenic incarceration — all these forces assail not just individuals and classes but also life itself. For that reason, as well as others, these issues are of great feminist concern. Life as trans-formal phenomenon is not only valorized, therefore, but also powerfully desired and fearfully defended. Is life emerging here as another name for the good? At times, one might be justified in suspecting so. At other
times, it can have no such metaphysical meaning. And that tense difference is worth pondering at length as feminists take up this work for further exploration and elaboration.

Life points in many directions in this collection, then: life as singular temporal becoming, life as nonteleological event, life as active material self-organization, life as to be desired and protected from harm. Life works very hard. But why? Why life, and why now?

Many feminists now search for ways to talk about ways of being that are not accommodated by – and in fact are largely inexpressible in – Enlightenment humanistic and liberal discourses. We witness a broad rejection, here and elsewhere, of atomized individualism and valorized mentality; of the purely spiritual; of hard distinctions between subject and object, self and other, Homo sapiens and our coevolving cohort of eukaryotes and even prokaryotes. But this rejection is not new to feminist thought. Feminist philosophy and cultural critique have taken Enlightenment Man as a major target for four decades. We need only remember the work of Genevieve Lloyd or Susan Griffin or Carolyn Merchant. Feminists have virtually always understood Cartesian dualism and liberal political theory, with its emphasis on rational self-mastery, to exclude the feminine, the effeminate, and anyone or anything that might be labelled as such, including "nature." Knowledge figured as the disinterested subject's mastery of the inert object is an old and well-treated theme. Critique of Enlightenment Man is not new among feminists, which has prompted many critics to suggest that there is nothing really new at all about the supposedly new feminist materialisms.

What may be new, as Sharp and Taylor suggest, is this particular concerted effort to leave Enlightenment Man behind, which here and elsewhere now often takes the form of an attempt to produce an ontology that simply excludes him. The Enlightenment Man is decentred – totally marginalized if not eradicated – in favour of an all-inclusive, down-to-earth, inherently self-overcoming concept of life.

This decentralization is a bold move beyond critique toward creation. It signals a break, albeit an incomplete one, with the feminist theory of the twentieth century, a decision to be done with the work of finding the fault lines in masculinist cultures, and to turn instead to the work of building new conceptual frameworks and systems for thinking. In that context, life is a versatile new building material – the twenty-first century's concrete or
synthetic polymer – whose potential for conceptual formation and structuring is currently under exuberant exploration. What can life do? Where can thinking with life take us? These essays embody preliminary answers to those questions, even when they do not overtly state them: unlike man, life is inclusive of the nonrational; unlike man, life is immanent in and as the material world. And insofar as life differs in these ways from man, it enables thinking to diverge and venture.

But there are reasons to worry about all this. As Lynne Huffer warns, there are dangers in using life as our means of departure from Enlightenment thinking. In our time, she writes, life is a problem. She means this in a very specific Foucauldian sense: life is problematized; it is a site of interrogation, analysis, and struggle. Far from a happily neutral given, it is a particularly fraught and intensified node of power/knowledge.

Huffer offers a brief but very important genealogy of this notion of life, likening it to Foucault's description of sex in *The History of Sexual-ity*, volume 1. Sex is a product of biopower, according to Foucault, not the natural given upon which power seizes. Sex is the node formed where biopower groups together, "in artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere." Huffer suggests that in both Judith Butler's and Elizabeth Grosz's work, life functions very much as sex functioned in biopolitical discourses of sexuality as they emerged in the late nineteenth century. Life is an artificial unity surreptitiously comprising disparate elements but posing as the common key to understanding ourselves and our world. If that is a plausible claim, the obvious danger is that life tends to operate as an allegedly transhistorical signifier; it purports to have no history and no political investments. But it does, and because it does, we feminists are not in control of how it operates through our discursive productions.

If life is to be a major force in organizing feminist thinking now, Huffer cautions us to be very deliberate and as clear as possible about life's histories and politics. We need a conception of life that is alert in its own manifestations of those forces and their contingencies. She suggests that the conception that Foucault offers is less apt to lead in directions that feminist materialists do not want to go than are less genealogically informed conceptions. Foucault's concept of life is unstable in that, as Huffer puts it,
"the evidentiary matter that grounds our belief in something called life is, by definition, fragmented, incomplete, and shifting." His genealogical approach – in particular his archival research – focuses on "material traces of lives" (note the plural) and thus "can break open the metaphysical frame of life itself that characterizes some feminist renaturalization projects." Whether we use Foucault's techniques or others, we must take care to attend the materialities of singular lives, multiple and mortal, not life as a sort of universal presence.

The space of philosophical meditation created by Feminist Philosophies of Life is a crucial one, therefore. The project of thinking how to think – thinking thinking – without Enlightenment Man is among the most important facing us. We are rapidly living into an unforeseeable future that will demand of us a new ethos, new ethea. Will life help us imagine a path into it? Is that what life is doing here?

Ladelle McWhorter
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NOTES

1 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, 154.
2 Ibid., 122.
3 Ibid.