

# Phenomenological Interpretations of Life

## Reductivist and Non-Reductivist Approaches in Heidegger, Scheler, Jonas, and Barbaras

Andrew Tyler Johnson\*

### Abstract

This paper provides a critical introduction to the most important phenomenological treatments of life. Formally, we may characterize these treatments as either reductive or non-reductive according to how they situate life ontologically vis-à-vis specifically human life, what the tradition calls “existence.” Whereas reductive or “existentialist” accounts posit an experiential continuum, a single horizon of disclosure articulated by structures which are present to varying *degrees* commensurate with organizational complexity, non-reductive accounts understand life and existence as modes of being in their own right, as defined by regimes of disclosure which are different in *kind*. On my reading, the Heidegger of the 1920s, his student Hans Jonas, and more recently, the French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras fall into the reductivist camp, while the later (post-1930) Heidegger and Max Scheler can be counted among the non-reductivists. After briefly sketching out the respective positions, I suggest arguments in favour of the non-reductivist approach.

### 1. Introduction: What is Life-Phenomenology?

Life, as with all the foundational concepts of philosophical investigation – being, truth, the good – has the curious property of being at once too near and too far. In one sense, there is no great mystery about life. We can give a more or less stable, consistent, theoretically useful account of life in terms of biochemical states and processes. We can even speculate cogently about the more sublime cosmic origins of life (perhaps microscopic life is carried everywhere throughout the universe by meteoroids, as the theory of panspermia holds). To be sure, there are limit cases and lingering, perhaps insurmountable problems of definition. But on the whole these serve to confirm rather than undermine the strength of the scientific account of life. Indeed, it is that very strength and intelligibility which provide the background against which such problems and limits can first appear and make sense at all, as they do.

In another sense, however, life eludes us entirely. If upon reflection we are

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\* Independent Scholar. Email address: andrewtyler19[a]gmail.com

inclined to describe life, generally speaking, in scientific terms, this is not the way we typically think and talk about life in ordinary language. If I say “Lazarus rose from the dead,” I certainly do not mean that Lazarus suddenly began to maintain homeostasis or that he reacquired the ability to adapt to conditions in his environment. If when baking a loaf of bread I open a sachet of yeast and wonder whether it is alive, it is possible that I am simply asking whether it *works* – but it is equally possible that I am asking a question about what it means to attribute “living” to this little pile of brown dust at all. In this case, I am not asking whether it is in fact capable of performing some kind of energy-yielding chemical exchange, but rather whether that itself and as such bears any relation to, or is in any way commensurate with, what I know and understand of life.

The success of the scientific account of life is due to the way in which it objectifies life. It sets life apart, as the defining feature of living beings, in order to make various empirical, or “ontic,” determinations about it. Life becomes comprehensible just to the extent that it remains something external, other. Even when we apply these empirical determinations to ourselves, it is only insofar as we bring ourselves into focus and take stock of ourselves, from the privileged position of the abstract distance opened up by the theoretical gaze, as equally objectified, as bearers of life taken as a set of features characteristic of certain kinds of organized systems. Likewise, it is only because life is held in focus in this way that local disagreements can arise concerning precisely which features belong to life and which do not. On the other hand, the life that we know and refer to in an average everyday way is manifestly not of this sort. It is rather the life that we know *subjectively*, “from the inside,” as it were. The special vantage point here is not that of the theorist who stands over and against life as an object of study but instead that of *the living* – one who *lives out* or *lives through* life, one for whom life is not merely another thing encountered in the world but rather a condition of encountering anything at all, not something experienced so much as a horizon of experientiality.

Whenever we apprehend life in this way, from out of the midst of its very living, we understand life not ontico-empirically but *ontologically*, as a mode of being definitive of certain kinds of beings. What we see, more precisely, is the way in which what it means to be a being of a certain sort is a matter of what is *given* to such a being and how it, in turn, is open to, encounters, and relates to the given in its givenness. As beings whose way of being is (at least partially) determined by life, we are what we are precisely in our opening up onto, having,

and negotiating what manifests itself to us in just those ways which accord with life.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that in our average everyday understanding of life we carry around and wield sophisticated ontological theories of life. The problem is rather just the opposite. If the scientific account of life makes life intelligible and manageable only at the cost of a certain artificial distancing and objectification of life, the problem with our everyday understanding of life is that life is far too near and intimate to be able to say anything meaningful about it at all. That which puts us in touch with the very being of life at the same time ensures that this being forever escapes us. *What we call the “mystery” of life resides precisely here, in the aporia of life’s ineluctable disclosure in retreat.* To wonder at life is at once our prerogative and our curse. Stranded in the  $\chi\acute{o}\rho\alpha$  between absolute knowing and absolute ignorance, we are stirred and solicited by life despite, or rather because of, its very elusiveness. Intuitively, we all know that life exceeds – *essentially* – the sum of its biochemical concomitants, but the *meaning* of this excess seems structurally and permanently out of reach.

When we ponder the possibility and meaning of the life of that sachet of yeast, we are above all questioning the silent ontological assumptions of the scientific account itself. We are asking, in essence, whether and how anything like a “living out” can be attributed to this stuff – whether it admits of any sort of relation to the given in its givenness, even formally. Of course we do not doubt that this stuff does what science says it does. Rather we are asking if that is all life really *is*. Is this stuff “open” in any meaningful sense? Does anything “appear” to it in any way, and how? And does that matter? It is in this way that reflection on the empirical determinants of life quietly but inevitably passes over into philosophical speculation about the being of life.

How, then, shall we approach life in its most mysterious aspect? Can philosophy provide any insight into what our everyday proximity to life always already withholds from us? Does philosophy have any resources by means of which we might step into the midst of actually lived life and describe what is given to life in the specificity of its givenness?

Generally speaking, whenever philosophy situates itself within the midst of the given in order to isolate and describe some cohesive set of formal structures of givenness, it is phenomenology. Formal structures here means neither empirico-psychological features nor *a priori* transcendental conditions, but rather something like “schemata” which articulate and specify an ontologically

determinate horizon of disclosure. Methodologically, then, phenomenology necessarily begins with some procedure of “bracketing” (*epoché*), a shifting of orientation or perspective by which the so-called “natural attitude” characteristic of unreflective, pre-philosophical daily life is suspended or disqualified in order that the particular horizon at issue (pure consciousness, being-in-the-world, perception etc.) can be set off and held in focus. In this way the given is apprehended not as *object* but precisely *as given* in conformity with these schemata, that is, as *phenomenon*. To take a simple and classic example, when I stand at the lectern, I position myself vis-à-vis an object of a certain size, shape, texture, and weight, and with a certain number of sides etc. From the perspective of pure consciousness, however, all that is ever *given* to me is a never-ending series of partial images, or “adumbrations,” that together constitute an objective unity structurally shot through with incompleteness, negation (such that I never have the “whole” object in view, or more precisely, there is a “hole” structured into and constitutive of the “whole” itself).

To ask whether and how we might situate ourselves in the midst of life with an eye to its concrete *being-lived* is thus simply to ask about the possibility of a phenomenology of life. It is to ask whether we can in fact discover any such general experiential forms or patterns that would justify an interpretation of life as a horizon of openness in its own right. More specifically, it means asking whether any being that can be said to partake of this experiential horizon “has” things in certain ways that are exclusive to such partaking and therefore withheld from all beings we regard as standing outside it. To return to our yeast example, if we were to attribute life to this pile of dust in a phenomenological and not merely a biochemical sense (and ignoring as irrelevant the *metaphysical* problem of the possible relation between these), this would mean committing ourselves to the view that the yeast “has” things in ways that non-living entities (actual dust, for example) do not – ways that, moreover, are *formally identical* to the “ways-of-having” characteristic of *everything* that lives (whether plankton or people). What would such a “having” entail? Or, put differently, what does it mean *to be* in a “living” sort of way?

## **2. Reductivist and Non-Reductivist Approaches to Life**

Historically, philosophical attempts to provide a phenomenological account of life have tended to fall into two general camps, what I will call *reductivist* and

*non-reductivist*. On the reductivist side I count, for example, the early Heidegger, his student Hans Jonas, and the contemporary French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras. On the non-reductivist side I include the later (roughly post-1929) Heidegger and Max Scheler. *Reductivists* are so named because they posit a single mode of being, “life,” of which the way of being characteristic of human beings, what the tradition calls “existence,” is only a particular moment or local modification. At the same time, the description of the *lived content* of life is modelled on human existence itself as life’s most advanced form and the completion of its “evolutionary ascent.” The reductivist itinerary is succinctly expressed by Jonas when he writes in *The Phenomenon of Life* that his aim is to provide “an ‘existential’ interpretation of biological facts” so as to “recover the inner dimension” which is necessary “for the understanding of things organic.”<sup>1</sup> Reductivism, in other words, proceeds in two directions at once: *ontologically* it collapses existence into (a mode of) life, while *ontically* it arrives at the concrete reality of life by way of a “privation” of the basic structures of existence (the so-called “*existentialia*”) as the end and summit of life’s own teleological unfolding. (For this reason, we may use the terms reductivist, existentialist, and teleological interchangeably.) *Non-reductivists* naturally reject this approach. In place of an unbroken chain of being culminating in “existential life,” they posit a kind of “ontological surprise” irrupting into being itself – the spontaneous emergence of an entirely *sui generis* field of manifestation and relation.

## 2.1. Reductivism: Early Heidegger, Jonas, Barbaras

Reductivism can be characterized as a form of onto-phenomenological monism. This does not mean a metaphysical theory according to which the totality of being is conscious or pre-conscious (though it is certainly compatible with such a view: Jonas himself advances a neo-Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* whereby human Spirit is “adumbrated” in the lowest forms of inorganic matter). Rather it means only that the principal distinction to be drawn is between non-openness and openness *simpliciter*; in positing a single horizon of openness, it treats all openness as such as formally-ontologically identical. This horizon is known simply as *world*. World, Jonas says, is “the basic setting for experience – a horizon of co-reality thrown open by life.”<sup>2</sup> In the same way, for the early Heidegger, the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonas (2001), p. xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

“phenomenological category, ‘world,’ immediately names...what is lived, the content aimed at in living, that which life holds to.”<sup>3</sup> The *essence* of life is therefore “*being-in-a-world*,” such that anything that lives, from protozoa to primates, must be said to have a world. That the terms “life” and “world” have the same fundamental meaning, Heidegger says, is expressed in ordinary language by the fact that “the one word can stand in for the other: e.g. ‘to go out into life,’ ‘out into the world’; ‘to live totally in one’s world,’ ‘totally in one’s life.’”<sup>4</sup> In a passage that will surely sound strange to anyone familiar only with his later work, Heidegger insists on the basic and irreducible enworldedness of all living beings:

Life is that kind of reality which is in a world and indeed in such a way that it has a world. Every living creature has its environing world not as something extant next to it but as something that is there for it as disclosed, uncovered...[Biologists] are now reflecting on the fundamental structure of the animal. But we miss the essential thing here if we don’t see that the animal has a world. In the same way, we too are always in a world in such a way that it is disclosed for us.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, onto-phenomenological monism implies that all differences in the lived content of life can amount only to *ontico-empirical* differences in the world-relation itself. If human existence and plant and animal life are not separated by an unbridgeable “abyss,” then there is only ever being-in-a-world *more or less*..., a continuum of what Jonas describes as “rising degrees of world-perception” and “scope and distinctness of experience” culminating in the human λόγος. Both Jonas and the early Heidegger share this teleological view of the ontologico-evolutionary ascent of life. Jonas leaves no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation here:

[There] is always the purposiveness of organism as such and its concern in living: effective already in all vegetative tendency, awakening to primordial awareness in the dim reflexes, the responding irritability of lowly organisms; more so in urge and effort and anguish of animal life endowed with motility and sense-organs; reaching self-transparency in

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger (2001), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger (2002), p. 163.

consciousness, will and thought of man: all these being inward aspects of the teleological side...of “matter.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Jonas traces the line of ascent to humanity back to bare matter itself, whose properties “found their opportunity along the course of mechanical evolution to realize, in the seeming automatism of causal sequence, some of the hidden potentialities of original substance: of which realization we are instances.”<sup>7</sup> Conversely, “the more we descend to the lower rungs of the ladder of life-forms,” the more do these “hidden potentialities” dissolve back into their primordially constitutive elements, first into “obscure sensations” and the “elementary stimulation of organic irritability,” and ultimately into the “primeval restlessness of metabolizing substance”<sup>8</sup> itself. Heidegger, likewise, although he shares none of Jonas’s idealist metaphysical leanings, advances essentially the same view. When Heidegger writes that “[everything] that is alive, to the extent that it exists, has a *world*, which does not hold for what is not alive,”<sup>9</sup> it is clear that he is treating “existence” as the highest expression of life insofar as it involves the greatest “extent” of world. The essential point, to be clear, is not merely that the horizon of life expands and contracts corollary to the external development of the organism, but more fundamentally, that the ontologically defining features of life are already present, *in nuce*, even in the most primitive and germinal manifestations of life. This is why Heidegger can claim that even the most rudimentary life-form “knows about itself, even if only in the dullest way and in the broadest sense.”<sup>10</sup> Whereas a stone, say, is simply “on hand,” even a “very primitive unicellular form of life...will already find itself,” though such self-finding (*Befindlichkeit*) may be no more than “the greatest and darkest dullness.”<sup>11</sup>

As for these ontologically defining features themselves, the lived substance of being-in-the-world, it is now easy to see that a certain “method” is implied. For if life is an experiential continuum of which the human stands at and as the summit in virtue of a “psychological totality which represents the maximum of concrete ontological completeness,” it follows that the essential meaning of this lived

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<sup>6</sup> Jonas (2001), p. 90.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger (2007), p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger (1992), p. 255.

substance is “determined by way of progressive ontological subtraction,”<sup>12</sup> a kind of “reductive biology” whereby, as Heidegger says, we “determine the worldhood of the animal by certain modified ways of considering”<sup>13</sup> our own world-relation. Now we know life just insofar as, and in the way that, we ourselves live it, namely, as *resistance* to what stands over and against us as a domain of opposition and constraint. For reductivists, accordingly, *alienation* is the basic experience and setting of all life: the living being forges its “internal identity,” first awakens to self-consciousness, in the struggle with finitude, its Sisyphean reckoning with the external powers that confront it and ultimately threaten it with death. In his summer semester lectures from 1925, Heidegger gives the example of a snail crawling out of its shell. Is the snail “in” its environment in the way that water is “in” a glass? Does the snail first encounter a world only by reaching itself out to something which it thereby, in and through such reaching, discovers as “not-itself”? By no means. Rather, having a world is the *a priori* condition of its reaching out and encountering anything to begin with. The snail’s crawling out of its shell, Heidegger writes, “is but a local modification of its already-being-in-the-world. Even when it is in its shell, its being is a being-outside, rightly understood. It is not in its shell like water in the glass”; rather “it has a world” from the beginning and essentially.<sup>14</sup> But what sort of world is this? Fundamentally, “a world described as standing over and against it, an opposition which it broaches by first crawling out.” Jonas takes this abstract idea of the world as a zone of originary “opposition” to its logical conclusion. For Jonas, the dawn of life is itself “the emergence, with life as such, of internal identity,” but in that very emergence, life’s “self-isolation too from all the rest of reality.” Thus –

Profound singleness and heterogeneousness within a universe of homogeneously interrelated existence mark the selfhood of organism. An identity which from moment to moment reasserts itself, achieves itself, and defies the equalizing forces of physical sameness all around, is truly pitted against the rest of things. In the hazardous polarization thus ventured upon by emerging life, that which is not itself and borders on the realm of internal identity from without assumes at once the character of absolute otherness. The challenge of selfhood qualifies all this beyond the boundaries of the

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<sup>12</sup> Jonas (2001), pp. 23-4.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger (1992), p. 222.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-6.

organism as foreign and somehow opposite: as “world,” in which, by which, and against which it is committed to maintain itself. Without this universal counterpart of otherness, there would be no “self.”<sup>15</sup>

We are not far from the philosophy of Fichte here, for whom “infinite striving,” the “ceaseless struggle against a hostile world,” is “the condition of the possibility of all objects, of experiencing a world opposed to our activity.”<sup>16</sup> Just as for Fichte neither self nor world can appear except in and through their mutual limitation, so too for Jonas and early Heidegger life just *is* the opening up of a zone of opposition *tout court*. Such opposition is the *meaning* of the “in” of the living being’s “being-in” its world.

Although he comes armed with a more sophisticated conceptual toolkit, the contemporary French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras takes essentially the same view. Like Jonas and early Heidegger, Barbaras thinks “existence in terms of life,” that is, not an addition to life “but only a new dimension of life.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, “that to which life relates and that at which life is aimed”<sup>18</sup> is the unitary horizon of “world,” which, as before, is described as inherently provocative and “alienating,” such that life is condemned to eternal restlessness and unsatisfactoriness. The main difference is that whereas Jonas, for example, understands alienation in terms of the threat of lost continuity of being (in short, of death), Barbaras locates it more anciently, in the nature of manifestation, i.e. “be-ing,” as such.

Life, Barbaras writes, “is the condition of the appearance of a being that is absent from what presents it.”<sup>19</sup> Because being necessarily retreats and recedes behind the manifold “adumbrations” by and through which it appears, “the being offers itself up to an exploration that is, in principle, unending.” For Barbaras, this *a priori* incompleteness and opacity of the world are the ontological corollary of a *movement* out toward the world. By a logic which is never entirely made clear (and which non-reductivism will call out and contest, even if only implicitly), it is precisely because the world “continuously slips away from the gaze that it is given as the end or goal of a movement.” The being solicits in its very withdrawal – “it offers itself up as a weak directionality because it cannot be possessed in an

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<sup>15</sup> Jonas (2001), pp. 82-3.

<sup>16</sup> Beiser (2009), p. 312.

<sup>17</sup> Barbaras (2003), p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Barbaras (2008), p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Barbaras (2012), p. 99.

intuition.”<sup>20</sup>

Life, in short, is “desire,” that is, an impossible yet irrepressible drawing nearer toward what, if the integrity of life itself is to be conserved, can and must never come forth to meet or fulfil it. Desire does not first experience an object to which it subsequently draws near; just to the contrary, “it only experiences its object in advancing towards it,” in the sense that “it does not become conscious of its object except through the momentum with which it approaches it.” Thus insofar as desire is always already too late, “what desire reaches exacerbates as much as appeases it.” Desire “never meets its object except in the mode of the object’s own absence, and this is why nothing stops it.” It follows that what “fulfils” desire “only serves to further hollow it out,” which is “why it can only be effectuated as movement.” Life is what Plato called a “leaky jar”: it is the “insatiable advance of desire” which corresponds to “the non-positive excess of the world.”<sup>21</sup>

It therefore matters little that Barbaras faults Jonas’s account for being too death centred. It is not the *fact* of finitude to which Barbaras objects, but only its origin and logic. Non-being does not stand opposed to being as subject to object, but rather inscribes the object itself and from the beginning. Accordingly, Barbaras arrives at the same fundamental interpretation of life, though by a different route and in a more originary sense. Life remains “an attempt at self-realization” through “the mediation of an other” that resists it, only now resistance is understood in terms not of a “defiance” of the “equalizing forces of physical sameness” (Jonas) but of an originary self-refusal of the world itself. There is no *essential* break here with the interpretations of Jonas and early Heidegger. Where Heidegger speaks of the “opposition” of the world and Jonas the radical “fitfulness” and “deep anxiety of biological existence,”<sup>22</sup> Barbaras invokes the romantic language of being “condemned” to a perpetual “longing” for the world. “Subjectivity is precisely the unity of this loss and this longing” – life “refers back to the event of a loss of its existence that takes the form of a longing.” If life is “characterized by a fundamental alienation,” this means not any struggle against hostile external forces but rather its *a priori* condition, “a lack of Being that prohibits [the subject] from ever fully being what it is and without which it would not even begin to desire, and hence, exist.” Life signals the birth of a *self to be*

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>22</sup> Jonas (2001), pp. 90, 106, 96.

*realized* in and through its pursuit of a world that structurally refuses it. As “a search for the self in the other,” life “is condemned to a never-ending quest, the insatiability of which is the measure of the subject’s self-privation.”<sup>23</sup> Such originary privation is “the advent of living being” – a “living that refers back to life as a form of scission deep within its core, that is to say, fundamentally, as its negation.”<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2. Non-Reductivism: The Later Heidegger and Scheler

For non-reductivists, the central problem with the teleological-existential view of life is that it leaves no room for the specificity of *human* life, which is now understood simply as a qualitatively enhanced manifestation of life in general. Ultimately the thesis of ontological continuity breaks down inasmuch as, if all life is an originary unsatisfactoriness vis-à-vis the world, we are compelled to maintain that even primitive life is constituted by what seem to be paradigmatically human forms of experience. If I see a garden snail munching on a leaf, there is a high burden of proof to meet indeed if I am to insist that the best interpretation of what this creature is doing is that it is fighting to maintain the integrity of its felt experience of selfhood against a hostile external world or, still more abstractly, that it is irresistibly solicited by the structural negation lurking at the heart of being itself. This raises the suspicion that reductivism is motivated above all by *ethical* concerns – and indeed it is clear that Jonas, for example, and for precisely this reason, simply cannot make up his mind about the ontological status of human life. At the very same time he claims that all life is subject to evolutionary ascent, he carves out a special subset of *sui generis* human faculties – representation, memory, self-creation – which emerge fully formed. But in that case, why does this special class of properties not also extend to such things as awareness of self and anxiety about death? Conversely, why do these special faculties not likewise appear in “rising degrees”?<sup>25</sup>

Precisely these concerns are what motivate the non-reductivist theories of Scheler and the later Heidegger. The early Heidegger could advance a teleologico-existential view of life on account of the fact that his main concern was rescuing life from what he saw as its illegitimate though near constant objectification by

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<sup>23</sup> Barbaras (2012), pp. 101-2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Johnson (2014).

the tradition from Plato onward. Thus Heidegger writes that the entire subject-object schema “fundamentally and forever obstructs access to that which we have indicated with the term ‘factual life.’”<sup>26</sup> Operating within this schema, “the basic phenomenon of being-in-the-world does not come into view.”<sup>27</sup> In opposition to all theoretical “de-interpretation” and “de-vivification” of life,<sup>28</sup> Heidegger describes life as pure openness – a primordial “it lives” (*es lebt*) or, insofar as all living is in, through, against etc. a world, “it worlds” (*es weltet*) *simpliciter*.<sup>29</sup> Given the focus of this early philosophical itinerary, it is not surprising that Heidegger would, at this stage, think life in wholly universal terms. When the agenda is principally one of destructing all overly “theoretical” accounts of the subject, there is no reason not to regard animals and even plants as partaking of the same being-in-the-world as human beings, though to lesser degrees. Life (ζωή), Heidegger insists, “refers to a *mode of being*, indeed a mode of *being-in-a-world*. A living thing is not simply at hand (*vorhanden*), but is in a world in that it has a world. An animal is not simply moving down the road, pushed along by some mechanism. It is in the world in the sense of having it.”<sup>30</sup> It is only later, in the process of working through the implications of his fundamental ontology, that Heidegger recognizes and clarifies that the kind of world-relation he has been describing could only first arise at all if it supervened on deeper structures (namely, time and what it makes possible, an understanding of being) that were, to all appearances (specifically, the living being’s *alolia* as the “sign” of the absence of such structures), the ontological prerogative of certain living beings exclusively, namely, us ourselves – and accordingly insists on an essential rupture *within* the open itself.

This “turn” in Heidegger’s thinking about life, though long in preparation, is accomplished quite suddenly. As late as 1927, Heidegger is still speaking (cautiously, to be sure) in terms of a continuum of life ranging from the “mere” life of plants and animals to the “existential” life of human beings, and thus of the possibility of “making out reductively” how the animal might experience its “world.”<sup>31</sup> By the time of the seminal winter semester lectures on theoretical biology two years later (titled *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World,*

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<sup>26</sup> Heidegger (2008), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger (2009), p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger (2000), pp. 75-6.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger (2001), p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger (2009), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger (1982), pp. 190-1.

*Finitude, Solitude*), however, the problematic has shifted entirely. Inasmuch as it was simply a matter of emancipating the primordial openness of the “it lives/worlds” from all occluding and inappropriate objectification, Heidegger had no trouble invoking the “very simple” world of a “primitive animal,”<sup>32</sup> and even speculating about the possibility of understanding the animal’s world “by certain modified ways of considering” our own world. By contrast, once it is determined that the animal is “poor in world” (*weltarm*) – that whatever the animal “has,” it does not have beings qua beings – such an itinerary becomes unintelligible. For in that case “it is *not* simply a question of a *qualitative otherness* of the animal world as compared with the human world, and especially not a question of quantitative distinctions in range, depth, and breadth” – as in any reductive account of “primitive” being-in-the-world. Indeed, “it is not a question of whether or how the animal takes what is given to it in a different way, but rather of whether or how the animal can apprehend something *as* something, something *as* a being, at all. If it cannot, then the animal is separated from man by an abyss.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the 1929-30 lectures are concerned above all with “finding out what constitutes the *essence of the animality* of the animal and the *essence of the humanity* of man,” and the former by way of an ontological determination of “the *living character of a living being*” as such<sup>34</sup> – and indeed Heidegger pauses no fewer than seven times in the first thirty pages of the biology material to remind us, often emphatically, that “life” and “living-being” refer always and exclusively to the plant-being of the plant and the animal-being of the animal, never to the human-being, the “existence,” of the human.

Heidegger’s contemporary Max Scheler held a similar position about life. Like the later Heidegger, Scheler argued that human reality exhibited structures and properties that were different *in kind* from those observed in all other living beings, and therefore that human beings, though undoubtedly “alive,” could never be defined *ontologically* by their participation in life. Human reality is not simply “above” life, but rather situated on an entirely different plane of being – the plane of *spirit*. This “novel phenomenon” is not merely “an addition to the psychic levels of impulsion, instinct, associative memory, [and] intelligence.” Rather, “[this] new principle is *beyond* what we call ‘life’ in the widest meaning of the word. What makes the human being a ‘human’ is not a new level of life,” but

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<sup>32</sup> Heidegger (2002), p. 163.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger (1995), p. 264.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

something “*opposite anything we call life, including life in the human being: it is a genuinely new, essential fact which cannot at all be reduced to the ‘natural evolution of life.’* If reducible to anything at all, this new principle leads us back to the one ultimate Ground of all entities of which life happens to be one particular manifestation.”<sup>35</sup>

In his last published work, the short text *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (an expanded version of a presentation titled “The Special Place of Humankind” delivered at a conference in 1927, one year before his death and two years before Heidegger’s *Fundamental Concepts* lectures), Scheler defines the essence of spirit in terms of an “*existential detachment from organic being.*” In other words, “a being having spirit is not tied anymore to its drives and environment, but is ‘non-environmental,’” that is, “‘world-open’: such a being has ‘world.’”<sup>36</sup> As with the later Heidegger, “world” is thought as the horizon of manifestation of beings qua beings. Whereas merely living beings “are ecstatically immersed in their environs,” a being that partakes of spirit “turns its centres of resistance and reaction into ‘objects’ in order to grasp the ‘what’ of all objects itself.” Spirit, therefore, involves “matter-of-factness” (*Sachlichkeit*) in that it is “determinable by ‘what’ things themselves are.” Whereas an animal “is unable to turn the environment into an object” – that is, “is not removed from its environment and does not have distance from its environment so as to be able to transform its ‘environment’ into ‘world’” – in contrast, “*the being of objects is the most formal category of the logical side of spirit.*”<sup>37</sup>

This lack of “*Seinsverständnis,*” “being-understanding,” implies, *a fortiori*, that the animal, despite being conscious, can never possess that inward subjective consolidation or “in-gathering” (*Sammlung*) which we call “self” and “selfhood.” Unlike “the simple reporting-back of the contents of an animal’s lived body schema, the human spiritual act is tied essentially to a second dimension or second level of the act of reflection,” namely, “‘concentration on one’s own self,’ or the consciousness of the spiritual act-centre of itself, ‘self-consciousness.’” An animal, to be sure, is “conscious,” but it “does not own itself, it has no power over itself – and this is why it is also not aware of itself.”<sup>38</sup> This, in turn, suggests that the essence of the reductive-existential picture of life – namely, life as a congenital

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<sup>35</sup> Scheler (2009), p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

“fitfulness” and “unsatisfactoriness” vis-à-vis what stands over and against it as hostile, alien, foreign, inaccessible otherness – is unintelligible and untenable. For it is precisely because “an animal does not have a specific kind of self-centredness that unifies all sense data with its respective drive impulses and that releases the *one ‘world’* ordered by the senses” that it has no experience of that “lack which is not a lack of this or that” (as Merleau-Ponty calls it<sup>39</sup>) which lurks at the root of all desire. Rather, desire “can only occur in a being having spirit and whose lack of satisfaction of its drives is always more than its satisfaction.” What the animal lacks, in short, is the *temporal* dimension that first opens up that horizon of *expectation* – the experience of *never enough*, the ceaseless approach to the *ever-still-outstanding* – on which desire necessarily depends. Thus, “[we] call ‘empty’ what remains unsatisfied in the expectations of our drives – the primary ‘emptiness’ which is, as it were, the emptiness in our hearts.”<sup>40</sup> Man is “an eternal ‘Faust’ or a *bestia cupidissima rerum novarum*,” one who “is never at peace with his environing world,” “always eager to break through the borders of now-here-whatness,” and “always desirous to *transcend* the reality surrounding him, including the reality of his own self.”<sup>41</sup> Being may very well be inscribed with an irreparable negation, as Barbaras maintains, but this fact is *meaningful* only to beings who are already “temporally primed,” as it were, to perceive it – and in perceiving it, to first *become* a subject *as the subject of it*, that is, as stirred and solicited by it, as essentially lacking or unrealized vis-à-vis being’s immanent withdrawal and concealment. This is why, unlike the animals, “who always say ‘Yes’ to reality – even when they fear and flee – the human being is the ‘Naysayer,’ he is an *ascetic of life*; he is an eternal protester against all mere reality.”<sup>42</sup>

It is easy to see that non-reductivism is at a relative disadvantage when it comes to describing and interpreting the structures and meaning of “mere” life, for it is no longer a matter of simply “modifying” – paring down and peeling away – the contents of our own lived-experience to arrive at “the worldhood of the animal.” Rather we must attempt a procedure which is more akin to Bergsonian intuition than Husserlian *epoché*. Whereas for Jonas the reality of life is laid bare by “progressive ontological subtraction” from the “maximum of concrete ontological completeness” which is man, for Scheler the essence of life can only

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<sup>39</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2003), p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> Scheler (2009), pp. 31-2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

be glimpsed by means of something like what Foucault will later call “limit-experiences” – an attempt to neutralize or “inactivate” spirit. “If we try to place ourselves into the everyday state of an animal’s being,” Scheler writes, “we would have to think of very rare human ecstatic states – as they occur, for instance, during the receding stages of hypnosis, or during the intake of certain drugs, and we would also have to think of techniques that inactivate spirit, such techniques as are used by orgiastic cults.”<sup>43</sup>

Much hay has been made of this interpretation of animal consciousness (the experiential content of life in general, in fact) as akin to drugged, doped, orgiastic, or hypnotized human consciousness, life as a rhapsody of impressions. It is true that both the later Heidegger and Scheler describe the living being as driven around within its “environment ring.” Scheler’s claim that living beings “are ecstatically immersed in their environs,” whereby “[the] structure of the environment fits exactly to, and is ‘fixated’ in, the physiological peculiarity of an animal,” such that everything it experiences “in its environment is securely embedded in the frame and *boundary of its environment*,”<sup>44</sup> is perfectly echoed in Heidegger’s own claim that “[being] open in captivity is the *essential possession* of the animal,” such that the animal’s “being held captive to the disinhibiting ring” is “*a having of that which disinhibits*.”<sup>45</sup> But here we should be sensitive to the full difficulty of the task at hand. The point is not to *deny* things to life so much as to circumscribe what belongs most properly to life. Thus just as Heidegger suggests that the openness of life may be so rich and abundant that “the human world may have nothing to compare”<sup>46</sup> it with, so too Scheler goes so far as to claim that “[gifts], readiness to help, reconciliation, and similar observable facts one can find already among animals.”<sup>47</sup> The problem is not the potential experiential richness of life but how this richness is to be interpreted – how, in other words, to think a kind of primordial Fichtean “resistance” of things which would be anterior to any “hermeneutic” disclosure, that is, any givenness of things *as the things that they are*, and still less *as beings* as such. This is what Scheler is getting at when he says that a living being “does not experience its drives as *its* drives but as dynamic attractions or rejections coming from *things* in its

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<sup>43</sup> Scheler (2009), pp. 29-30.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

<sup>45</sup> Heidegger (1995), pp. 269-70.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>47</sup> Scheler (2009), p. 25.

environment.”<sup>48</sup> “Things” in this sense are not *beings* but rather something like *nodes of resistance*, densities of attractiveness and repulsiveness *simpliciter*; the idea is that something can manifest itself not as an attractive or repulsive being but merely *as attractive* or *as repulsive* as such.

Heidegger floats a similar view in his Aristotle lectures from the mid-1920s (technically still carried out within the framework of a continuity theory of being-in-the-world, but there is nothing here that, in principle, the post-1930 Heidegger could not agree with). In these lectures, animal life is defined not by νοῦς, a pure observation or theoretical knowing, but rather by ὄρεξις, “desire” as a yearning or longing going-out-toward an ὀρεκτόν, a “desirable” *simpliciter*. Desire indicates the way in which the world *matters* to animals; it takes the form, not of an insatiable restlessness vis-à-vis the ineliminable provocations of non-being, but rather and simply of a δίωξις or φύξις (or φῦγή), a pursuit or avoidance (or flight), vis-à-vis what is disclosed and engaged as διακείμενον and ἀντικείμενον, the “disposed-to” and “opposed-to” *as such*. There exists, in other words, an entirely *sui generis orectic* form of manifestation: things can stand unconcealed, indeed can stand in a certain kind of “truth” (ἀλήθεια), and yet not “be” anything at all *sensu stricto*. Through ἀφή, “contact,” life orients itself to what discloses itself *as* favourable or threatening, *as* desirable or undesirable, *as* διακείμενον or ἀντικείμενον: an animal crawls up a tree trunk “so that it has the trunk in a certain way *as its obstacle*, so that the trunk with which it is there is nonetheless there for it *as διακείμενον, ἀντικείμενον* for the animal through ἀφή, through ‘contact.’”<sup>49</sup>

This attempt to think resistance without being is what separates the “deepest and darkest dullness” predicated of primitive or “mere,” that is, *qualitatively reduced* or *subtracted*, life from the “benumbing” (*Benommenheit*) which Scheler and the later Heidegger posit as the essence of life taken as a mode of being in its own right. The latter represents not a lesser form of life but rather how life is destined to appear to *us* when we try to *deactivate* or *step outside* the source and substance of our very humanity.

### 3. Conclusion: The Case for Non-Reductivism

What I wish to suggest, in closing, is that non-reductivism has the upper hand not only theoretically but above all ethically. Phenomenologically speaking, life

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger (2009), p. 220 (emphasis added).

is the mode of being concomitant with the spontaneous opening up of a zone of solicitation and repulsion. It is originary *movement* in the form of a ceaseless drawing-toward and pushing-away-from things – things which give themselves not as “beings” to pursue or to avoid but as the pursuable and avoidable as such, as it were. To live means simply to dwell in the midst of this zone, *in the manner of* such a movement. Conversely, what we call human existence is not just a more sophisticated manifestation or expression of such movement but rather a mode of being in its own right – one defined, at the most elementary level, by the experience of *time*. The immediate upshot of this is that we obviate entirely the kinds of problems that seem inevitable for reductivism (whose *reductio ad absurdum* is the existential angst of plants and protozoa). The “fundamental incompleteness” and radical “experience of dispossession”<sup>50</sup> which reductivists such as Barbaras claim to discover at the heart of life are essentially *temporal* phenomena. As Levinas puts it, “in Desire there is no sinking one’s teeth into being, no satiety, but *an uncharted future before me.*”<sup>51</sup> The negation of the world is here not mere logical not-being but rather the deeper, existential *non-being* of *unfulfillment*. This means that Barbaras’s effort to “think existence in terms of life” ultimately fails; his “‘additive’ anthropology” does not “replace the privative zoology”<sup>52</sup> of the early Heidegger and Jonas but rather smuggles it in from the start as its silent presupposition.

The problem with non-reductivism, on the other hand, at least as we are inclined to see it today, is that it appears to be *ethically* dubious in the way in which it cannot avoid “denying” certain things to non-human living creatures, such as the capacity to truly *die* as opposed to merely “perish” (Derrida, for one, famously addresses this issue in works such as *Of Spirit* and *The Animal That Therefore I Am*). Indeed, Jonas’s own life-phenomenology was motivated mainly by ethical concerns insofar as he thought that our technological transformation, now bordering on annihilation, of nature was due in large part to our failure to understand life in the context of the continuity and interconnectedness of the totality of being.

As I see it, however, this is to get things backwards. Our technological domination and decimation of nature – the whole monstrous techno-capitalist juggernaut which now threatens us with collective destruction in the form of the

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<sup>50</sup> Barbaras (2008), pp. 14-15.

<sup>51</sup> Levinas (1969), p. 117 (emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup> Barbaras (2003), p. 161.

climate emergency, and the will to power that underpins and fuels it – stems *precisely* from that constitutional restlessness, unsatisfactoriness, and anxiety which reductivists are so eager to discover in life itself. This is why there is always something slightly sinister in the blind urge to demote the human to a mere animal and to “elevate” the animal to a human being (formally, if always to a lesser extent). The problem is not merely that the animal is *presumed* to *lack* something vis-à-vis the human – not simply, in other words, that the thing which is left out is assumed to be something *inherently good* such that its omission *in itself* entails a kind of violence to the animal. The problem is instead that this purportedly good thing of which the animal is deprived is precisely that which, if present, would implicate it in the most obscene forms of violence – just as, by the same token, the human being’s own singular responsibility for such violence would be correspondingly blurred, muted, redistributed among life as such and as a whole. For if the radical, constitutional insatiability which compels the will to power is a product of the restlessness *of life as such*, then man no longer owns it – it is simply “the way of Nature.” The difference between an animal catching its prey on the one hand and the will to infinite, exponential growth on the other becomes one of *degree*, not of kind. The animal is gripped by the same will to power as that which drives, say, the typical Wall Street banker or the board of directors of Exxon Mobil; what it lacks is merely the “intelligence” necessary for implementing its will more “efficiently.” Conversely, and for the same reason, bending, crushing, and ransacking Nature is rendered justifiable and acceptable on the grounds that “Nature is cruel” – that is, Nature’s principle is the general one of which the main principle of human social interaction under the conditions of late capitalism (“Every man for himself”) is only a local and limited instance. If human beings are undoubtedly brutal, it is only because Nature itself is brutal, and we are, after all, a part and product of general Nature. Such are the problematic (if hidden) implications of reductivism.

We should, I claim, be quite dogmatic on this point. Even if it could be shown that animals (above all, the so-called “higher” animals) exhibit some behaviours or capacities that appear to confirm the thesis of reductivism, nevertheless such a thesis should be *withdrawn and withheld on principle and entirely a priori*, *not* in order to reduce living beings to the status of objects to be manipulated and tossed aside by power, but rather so that they are *absolved in advance* of any responsibility for the consequences of power, or more precisely, for the effects of that sense of radical neediness and unsatisfactoriness that elicits and propels the

human existent's insatiable lust for power. The surest sign that plants and animals are not like us is not that they do not speak but that they do not *produce* – that is, produce *like us*, in conformity to the inexorable, all-consuming logic of the will to more..., of *desire*. The way of Nature, Bataille pointed out a century ago, is growth followed by exudation, waste. Of all the known beings in the universe, only human beings reinvest their waste for the sake of ever more growth *ad infinitum*, with catastrophic consequences. If we thus deny plants and animals the word or the capacity to die, this is only in order that we might secure their innocence by denying them any complicity in the crimes which the beings in possession of those faculties have thus far been powerless to stop themselves from committing. The rampant devastation we are presently witnessing all around us is not merely an exacerbation of phenomena we encounter everywhere in Nature, but rather the profoundest expression of *what we are*. The ethical advantage of non-reductivism lies precisely here, namely, in that it both makes it possible and invites us to own up to our own actions.

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