

Introduction

At the close of the 17th century, John Locke, reflecting on the misuse and abuse of words, came to the following conclusion:

Life is a term, none more familiar. Any one almost would take it for an affront to be asked what he meant by it. And yet if it comes in question, whether a plant that lies ready formed in the seed have life; whether the embryo in an egg before incubation, or a man in a swoon without sense or motion, be alive or no; it is easy to perceive that a clear, distinct, settled idea does not always accompany the use of so known a word as that of life is.¹

What was true in the 17th century may still be true today. For what is life but a concept that resists definition? An object so close to us that we can't even comprehend it.

To be sure we all live our lives, but we would be hard pressed to define what *living* means, let alone what *living* is. Which came first, the pulse or the thought? Paul Valéry perhaps quite aptly wrote: “tantôt je pense et tantôt je suis,” intimating that one either lives or thinks, but to try and do both at the same time might well be folly or hubris.² If the life of the mind is distinct from the life of the body, are we condemned to live double lives? Valéry's hypothesis—either I think or I live, two distinct moments corresponding to two distinct activities and realities—may be the key to thinking about life: deposit life on the operating table to dissect it and think about it, or else think about the lives of others.

Current debates on the beginning of life—at conception or at birth?—are further testimonies to the complexity of the object and the ethical consequences of its definition. Whatever one's convictions, life can be defined as an interval between birth and death, be they biological or symbolical. One reads in Richelet's *Dictionnaire françois*, in the entry on “life,” that books, like animated beings, have a life of their own. All things

¹ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Understanding*, III x 22.

² Paul Valéry, « Discours aux chirurgiens », in *Variété V*, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1957, I, 916.

have a duration, which constitutes their lives and in turn defines them. By extension, a life, “une vie,” is a chronicle of all that happened to a person between his or her birth and death.

If life can be given at birth and taken at death, it can also be automated. Artificial life, with its better-known subset—artificial intelligence—have become a reality. Can the life simulated in a lab by a machine be called “life” at all? Or can life be created by living organisms only? As new as these questions may sound, they were debated in the 17th century.

Most early modern attempts to define life were indebted to Aristotle. One recurring question, although formulated in many different manners, turned on the distinction between the living and the dead. In the Aristotelian tradition, it is form and its three faculties (vegetative, sensitive, intellective), not just matter, that defines the living body. While the activity of one or all of these faculties may account for the biological difference between a living body and a lifeless one, it does not provide a solid argument for the specificity of human life. What makes a living organism human? A soul. For many philosophers, the soul is more than an attribute of human beings, it comes to define life itself. The early modern conceptual imbroglio between life and soul has survived in the equally complicated modern union of life and psyche.

The early modern “life sciences,” as they are known today, were dominated by another approach to the living world, it too inherited from Aristotle: taxonomy. The classification of forms of life offered a mosaic of the great diversity of living organisms. Taxonomy orders life into categories, organizes living beings and their living parts into classes. In doing so, it recreates a whole from its many different parts. Yet it may not help us understand the nature of life itself. Instead, an increasingly careful taxonomy and scientific nomenclature shed a new light on the innumerable organisms that constitute the living world. Life takes on then a kaleidoscopic quality.

In the 17th century, life was also a measure of a person’s physical needs and of their moral character. A person *de grande vie*, for instance, had a great appetite for life, according to Richelet, while a person *de petite vie*, would be satisfied with little. Life as a measure of one’s moral compass served to appraise the sum of one’s deliberate actions and personal decisions. In moralist portraiture, life came to define a person and their qualities, interchangeably so. “C’est une personne de mauvaise vie,” is a moral sentence on someone’s way of life, on their life and person; in this

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example, also excerpted from Richelet's dictionary, life, person and conduct are conflated.

Biologists, taxonomists and psychologists will agree that life is the property of all living things. Even such a rudimentary definition raises more questions than it yields answers; it shows that of all concepts few, if any, are larger than life itself. But, as a concept, life has a history. It is a moment, or rather a succession of moments, of that long history that this volume presents. How did 17th century naturalists, philosophers, playwrights and clergymen understand life? By looking at specific manifestations of life, be they experienced, imagined or speculated, early modern men and women of letters, and of all walks of life, as the phrase goes, elaborated fascinating, often complex, theories of the living, and concocted great life stories, either for themselves or for others.

The conception of this volume—and we use the term purposefully—took place in the context of the 2012 annual conference of the *North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, hosted at Vanderbilt University. This conference brought together scholars of seventeenth-century French studies, from both the United States and abroad, for three days of collegial discussion on “Life.” As both hosts of the conference and co-editors of this special issue, we are deeply grateful to our colleague Patricia Armstrong (fellow *dix-septiémiste* and former Vanderbilt colleague and Director of Vanderbilt University's College of Arts and Science Pre-Major Advising Program) and April Stevens (Ph.D. Candidate in French, also at Vanderbilt) for their extraordinary insights and focused help in making the conference a success. We extend thanks, as well, to the Florence Gould Foundation, Vanderbilt University's College of Arts & Science, and Vanderbilt's Department of French & Italian for the assistance, both in-kind and financial, that they provided. Following the conference, all presenters were invited to submit substantially expanded and revised manuscripts for consideration in the current volume. Each submission was refereed in a double-blind process by two specialists in the field; none of whom having a manuscript of their own under consideration for the same volume.

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