

# Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror

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## 1. AFTER-LIFE

Ever since Aristotle distinguished the living from the non-living in terms of *psukhê* – commonly translated as ‘soul’ or ‘life-principle’ – the concept of ‘life’ has itself been defined by a duplicity – at once self-evident and yet opaque, capable of categorization and capable of further mystification. This duplicity is related to another one, namely, that there are also two Aristotles – Aristotle-the-metaphysician, rationalizing *psukhê*, form, and causality, and Aristotle-the-biologist, observing natural processes of ‘generation and corruption’ and ordering the ‘parts of animals’.

Arguably, the question of life is the burning question of the contemporary era, one in which life is everywhere at stake as ‘bare life’, one in which ‘all politics is biopolitics’. If the question of Being was the central issue for antiquity (raised again by Heidegger), and if the question of God

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– as alive or dead – was the central issue for modernity (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), then perhaps the central question today is that of Life – the function of the concept of ‘life itself’, the two-fold approach to life as at once scientific and mystical, the return of vitalisms of all types, and the pervasive politicization of life.

The question that runs through these brief *disputatio* is the following: Can there be an ontology of ‘life’ that does not immediately become a concern of either Being or God? Put differently, if one accepts that the concept of ‘life’ is irreducible to biology, what then is to prevent it from becoming reducible to theology? Let us be even more particular: To what extent is ‘life’ as a concept always situated between a biology of a non-ontological ‘life itself’ and an onto-theology of the life-beyond-the-living, or ‘after-life’?

But what comes ‘after life’? Is it death, decay, and decomposition, or is it resurrection and regeneration? Is it, in biological terms, the transformation of the living into the non-living, from the organic life of molecules to non-organic matter? Or does it involve a theological re-vitalization of the resurrected, living cadaver? In either case, the after-life bears some relation to the ‘during life’ and the ‘before life’, and it is precisely the ambiguity of these relationships that has shaped the debates on mechanism and vitalism in the philosophy of biology, as well as the earlier debates in Scholasticism on the nature of creaturely life.

There is no better guide to the after-life than Dante. The life of the after-life in the *Commedia* is a political theology, at once rigidly structured and yet coursing with masses of bodies, limbs, fluids, fires, rivers, minerals, and geometric patterns of beatific light. In particular, the *Inferno* gives us

several concise statements concerning the life of the after-life. In the seventh circle, Dante and his guide Virgil come to the ‘burning desert’, upon which a multitude of bodies are strewn about.<sup>1</sup> Among them Dante and Virgil come across Capaneus, one of the seven kings who assaulted Thebes and defied the law of Jove. Capaneus lies stretched out on the burning sand, a rain of fire descending upon him, while he continues his curses against the sovereign. As Virgil explains, Capaneus is one of the blasphemers, grouped with the usurers and sodomites for their crimes against God, State, and Nature. But, as with many of Dante’s depictions in the *Inferno*, there is no redemption, and the punished are often far from being penitential. Their tired, Promethean drama of revolt, defiance, and blasphemy goes on for eternity.

It is easy to read such scenes in a highly anthropomorphic manner. But each individual ‘shade’ that Dante encounters is also associated with a group or ensemble that denotes a category of transgression, and this is especially the case of Middle Hell. Upon entering the gates of the City of Dis, Dante and Virgil are first confronted by a horde of demons, and then by the Furies. Once they are able to pass, they come upon a ‘landscape of open graves’, each one burning and holding within it one of the Heretics. The scene is visually depicted with great drama by Gustav Doré, who, following the prior example of Botticelli, presents the heretics as a mass of twisted, emaciated corpses emerging from their graves. Along the way they also encounter a river of bodies immersed in boiling blood (watched over by a regiment of Centaurs), as well as the ‘wood of suicides’, in

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1. Cf. XIV, 22-24: ‘some souls were stretched out flat upon their backs,/others were crouching there all tightly hunched,/some wandered, never stopping, round and round’ (*Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, Penguin, 1984; all citations refer to this edition).

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which the bodies of the damned are fused with dead trees (watched over by the Harpies). Within many of the circles, Dante encounters nothing but multiplicity – bustling crowds (the Vestibule of the Indecisive), a cyclone of impassioned bodies (Circle II, the Lustful), a sea of bodies devouring each other (Circle IV, the Wrathful), dismembered bodies (Circle VIII, the Sowers of Discord), and a field of bodies ridden with leprosy (Circle VIII, the Falsifiers). The life-after-life is not only a life of multiplicity, but it is also a life in which the very concept of life continually negates itself, a kind of vitalistic *life-negation* that results in the living dead ‘citizens’ of the City of Dis.

Perhaps, then, one should begin not by thinking about any essence or principle of life, but by thinking about a certain negation of life, a kind of life-after-life in which the ‘after’ is not temporal or sequential, but liminal.

### 2. BLASPHEMOUS LIFE

But we’ve forgotten about blasphemy. What is blasphemy in regard to the forms of life-negation found in the *Inferno*? Returning to the burning desert, Capaneus, noticing Dante’s inquiring gaze, shouts back to him: ‘What I was once, alive, I still am, dead!’<sup>2</sup> On one level this is simply a descriptive statement – defiant towards divine sovereignty in life, I remain so in the after-life. But surely Capaneus realizes that, after life, resistance is futile?<sup>3</sup> Or have the terms changed, after life? Perhaps his words do not mean ‘I am still defiant’ but rather, quite literally, something like

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2. XIV, 51. An alternate edition by Mandelbaum translates ‘Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto’ thus: ‘That which I was in life, I am in death.’

3. Virgil notes as much, chastising Capaneus for continuing this tirade, his own words becoming his own punishment.

‘I am a living contradiction.’ Such phrases denoting a living-death recur in the *Inferno*, often spoken by Dante himself.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, then, this phrase ‘What I was once, alive, I am still now’ actually means – in the afterlife – that ‘I am still living, even in death.’ This living contradiction – being *living dead* – is also linked to the political-theological contradiction of a power that at once ‘shuts down’ as much as it ‘lets flow’. There is a kind of Medieval biopolitics in the *Inferno* quite different from the modern, Foucauldian version. The strange conjunction of sovereignty and multiplicity in the *Inferno* does not demand the punishment of souls, but instead requires a mass of animated, sensate, living bodies, in some cases resulting in an almost medicalized concept of the after-life (e.g. the Sowers of Discord are meticulously dismembered, dissected, and anatomized). In tandem with a sovereign ‘shutting-down’ we have also a kind of governmental ‘letting-flow’; indeed, at several points the *Inferno* seems to imply their isomorphism.

Blasphemy, then, can be viewed in this regard as the assertion of living contradiction. But this assertion is not simply a resistance to an authoritative demand to be non-contradictory. In its modern variants it strives to become an ontological principle as well. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ‘weird biologies’ of H.P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*.<sup>5</sup> The narrative describes two kinds of blasphemous life. The first involves the discovery of unknown fossils and a ‘Cyclopean city’ in the deep Antarctic, both of which display ‘monstrous perversions of

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4. Upon seeing the bestial figure of Satan, Dante notes ‘I did not die – I was not living either!’ (XXXIV, 25).

5. To this one might also add the creatures that inhabit William Hope Hodgson’s *The Night Land* as well as weird tales of authors such as Clark Ashton Smith and Frank Belknap Long.

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geometrical laws'.<sup>6</sup> The discovery leads to the remains of an unrecognizable, intelligent species of 'Old Ones' that, in the Lovecraftian mythos, are thought to have lived eons prior to the earliest known human fossilized data.<sup>7</sup>

But this only leads to a further revelation, in which the explorers discover another type of life which they call the Shoggoths and which seem to resemble formless yet geometric patterns: 'viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells – rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile – slaves of suggestion, builders of cities – more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative [...]'<sup>8</sup> In Lovecraft's inimitable prose, the Shoggoths are the alterity of alterity, the species-of-no-species, the biological empty set. When they are discovered to still be alive, they are described sometimes as formless, black ooze, and sometimes as mathematical patterns of organic 'dots', and sometimes as a hurling mass of viscous eyes. Formless, abstract, faceless. In an oft-referenced passage, what the narrator expresses is the horizon of the ability of the human characters to think this kind of 'life':

When Danforth and I saw the freshly glistening and reflectively iridescent black slime which clung thickly to those headless bodies and stank obscenely with that new unknown odor whose cause only a diseased fancy could envisage – clung

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6. *At the Mountains of Madness*, in *The Dreams in the Witch-House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Penguin, 2004), 271.

7. One could easily imagine a re-casting of Quentin Meillassoux's 'arche-fossil' in terms of the findings of the Miskatonic University Expedition. See William Dyer et al., 'A Hypothesis Concerning Pre-Archaeon Fossil Data Found Along the Ross Ice Shelf', *The New England Journal of Geological Science*, 44.2 (1936): 1-17.

8. *At the Mountains of Madness*, 330.

to those bodies and sparkled less voluminously on a smooth part of the accursedly resculptured wall in a series of grouped dots – we understood the quality of *cosmic fear* to its uttermost heights.<sup>9</sup>

What Lovecraft puts forth in his tales of cosmic horror is a form of blasphemy that is decidedly non-anthropomorphic and misanthropic. At the mountains of madness we move from a concept of blasphemy as grounded in human agency (the blasphemy of Capaneus in the underworld) to a blasphemy of the unhuman ('more and more amphibious'). For Lovecraft, 'it' is blasphemous – but also indifferent, incomprehensible, and in many cases unnamable ('the thing', 'the doom', 'the fear', 'the whisperer').

At the center of blasphemous life is this idea of the living contradiction. *Blasphemous life is the life that is living but that should not be living.* This contradiction is not a contradiction in terms of medical science; the blasphemous life can often be scientifically explained and yet remain utterly incomprehensible. If it is a logical contradiction, it would have to be one in which the existence of true contradictions would not only be admitted, but would be foundational to any ontology. In logical terms, the assertion that there are true contradictions is often referred to as 'dialetheism'.<sup>10</sup> But with Lovecraft we have a twist. The Shoggoths are bizarre examples of *dialethic biologies*, contradictions that are living precisely because they are contradictory, or 'blasphemous'.

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9. *Ibid.*, 331.

10. In its simplest form, dialetheism argues that for any proposition  $X$ , both  $X$  and  $not-X$  are true. Dialetheism therefore works against the Law of Non-Contradiction (articulated in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma), but, in order to avoid accepting absolute relativism, it must also accept some form of paraconsistent logic. For more see Graham Priest, *In Contradiction* (Martinus: Nijhoff, 1987).

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Whereas for Dante the blasphemous is the living contradiction – to be living in death, to be living after life – for Lovecraft the blasphemous is the very inability to think ‘life’ as a concept at all. Blasphemy is here rendered as the unthinkable. To account for such blasphemous life, one would have to either compromise existing categories of thought, or entertain contradictory notions such as ‘living numbers’ or ‘pathological life’.

### 3. AMBIENT PLAGUE

The anonymous ‘it’ of blasphemy is also expressed in the hermeneutics of plague and pestilence. Our very concepts regarding the disaster already betray a profound anxiety. That some disasters are ‘natural’ while others are not implies a hypothetical line between the disaster that can be prevented (and thus controlled), and the disaster that cannot. The case of infectious diseases is similar, except that the agency or the activity of this ‘biological disaster’ courses through human beings themselves – within bodies, between bodies, and through the networks of global transit and exchange that form bodies politic. In the U.S., the two-fold conceptual apparatus of ‘emerging infectious diseases’ (naturally-caused) and ‘biodefense’ (artificially-caused) cloaks a generalized militarization of public health. More fundamentally, when it becomes increasingly more difficult to discern the epidemic from the bioweapon, entire relations of enmity are re-cast. The threat is not simply an enemy nation or terrorist group, the threat is itself biological; biological life itself becomes the absolute enemy. Life is weaponized against Life, resulting in an ambient *Angst* towards the biological domain itself.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Cf. my article ‘Biological Sovereignty’, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2006-7).

However, while it has become customary to view epidemics in light of post-germ-theory ‘autoimmunitary’ boundary disputes, there is a more fundamental problem articulated in the pre-modern concept of plague and pestilence, where biology and theology are always intertwined in the concepts of contagion, corruption, and pollution.<sup>12</sup> One of the central concerns of chroniclers of the Black Death was that of causation, and how that causation was interpreted in relation to the divine.<sup>13</sup> As the Black Death spread throughout Medieval Europe, the motif of the ‘angry God’ recurs in many of the chronicles, both fictional and non-fictional. It forms a key framing-tool for Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, is a motif in *Piers Plowman*, and it shapes the sub-genre of plague pamphlets in England.<sup>14</sup> These in turn make reference to the examples of Biblical plague, of which the most well-known is the Ten Plagues of Egypt, in which God sends down ten ‘plagues’ to persuade the Egyptian pharaoh to free the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup>

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12. A great deal of the cultural theory surrounding epidemics has focused on its modern, germ-theory context. Emily Martin’s *Flexible Bodies* (Boston: Beacon, 1994) and Laura Otis’ *Membranes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), provide views from anthropology and literary studies, respectively. Jacques Derrida noted the way in which political conceptualizations of the enemy have, in a post-9/11 era, centered around autoimmune disorders, in which the threat comes from within. See Giovanna Borradori and Jacques Derrida, ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – a Dialogue with Jacques Derrida’, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). However, there is as much to learn from the pre-modern discourse of plague and pestilence, which often de-emphasizes the ontology of interior-exterior in favor of a theology of life and life-after-life.

13. For a survey, see the collection *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, edited by Terrence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14. A particularly good example in this regard is William Bullein’s mid-sixteenth century plague pamphlet, *A Dialogue Against the Fever Pestilence*.

15. *Exodus* 7:14-12:42.

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Here the ‘plagues’ do include epidemic disease, but also rivers that turn into blood, swarms of insects, tempestual storms, and an eclipse. Another, more common reference among the Black Death chronicles is apocalyptic. *Revelations*, with its dense and complex symbology, tells of ‘Seven Angels’ sent forth to deliver ‘Seven Plagues’ that are to be ‘poured’ upon mankind as a form of divine judgment; here again the ‘plagues’ range from contagious disease to aberrations in livestock, the weather, and the destruction of human cities.<sup>16</sup>

In all these instances we see this key element: a divine sovereign who, in the form of a judgment and/or punishment, sends down – or better, emanates – a form of miasmatic life that is indissociable from decay, decomposition, and death. What is noteworthy about the pre-modern concept of plague and pestilence is not only its blurring of biology and theology, but the profound lability that the concepts of plague and pestilence have. In the chronicles of the Black Death, plague seems to be at once a separate, quasi-vitalized ‘thing’ and yet something that spreads in the air, in a person’s breath, on their clothes and belongings, even in the glances between people. As one early chronicler notes, ‘one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone’.<sup>17</sup>

It is tempting to understand the Medieval hermeneutics of plague and pestilence as Neoplatonic – a supernatural force emanating from a divine centre. However this would require that we understand the relation between

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16. *Revelations* 15-16.

17. See the chronicle of Gabriele de Mussis, translated and collected in *The Black Death*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

Creator and creatures as pathological, a divine sovereign that emanates itself through a miasmatic diffusion of decay. But what is being emanated here is not creation itself but rather its opposite, a kind of de-creation that occupies the underside of what Aristotle called ‘passing away’ (disease, decay, decomposition).<sup>18</sup> This strange type of life, that seems to emanate from a Neoplatonic One and diffuse itself throughout creaturely life, cannot be understood without taking into account another element. As varied as the Medieval accounts of plague and pestilence are, one of the common motifs, along with the angry God, is that of plague and pestilence as a divine weapon. The divine sovereign doesn’t simply pass judgment; the sovereign weaponizes life – the pathological life of ‘plagues’ – and turns it against the earthly life of the creature, which is itself a product of the divine will.

Arguably this motif has its roots in antiquity: in Hesiod, for instance, we see how Zeus sends the ‘gift’ of plague-ridden Pandora to Prometheus as a form of retribution; likewise *The Illiad* opens with an angry Apollo sending down ‘arrows’ of plague upon the armies of men for their disrespect towards the gods. There are earthly instances of this as well. An oft-mentioned example in this regard is the Medieval practice of catapulting corpses. The primal scene in this regard is the fourteenth-century Italian trading post at Caffa, on the northern border of the Black Sea. Ongoing skirmishes between Italian merchants and Muslim locals

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18. The motif of decay has been picked up most recently by Reza Negarestani, who discusses ‘decay as a building process’. In a seminar given at Goldsmiths College, Negarestani adopts two approaches to understanding the concept of decay – that of mathematics (derived from Scholasticism as it developed at Oxford) and that of architecture. There is much to expand upon here, particularly in the relation between architecture and resurrection. The ruin may be one conceptual mediation between them.

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led, in one instance, to the catapulting of plague-ridden corpses by the latter, over the fortress walls of the former.<sup>19</sup>

All of this is to suggest that the political theology of pestilence is not an issue of shutting-down or ‘walling’. It is, certainly, that, but only to an extent. For the pervasive, diffuse, and circulatory quality of pestilence – this ‘thing’ or ‘event’ that is at once a divine emanation and yet a source of social and political chaos – raises a more complex problem for sovereign power: *how to control the pervasiveness of pestilence without losing control of the pervasiveness of people.*

But it is not clear in the accounts of chroniclers, or in the texts of Boccaccio, Chaucer, or Langland, if pestilence is that which causes social and political disorder, or if pestilence *is* continuous with this affective fantasy of total chaos. So we have a strange situation in which pestilence, itself supernaturally caused by a divine, primary sovereign power, then elicits a host of exceptional measures by secondary, earth-bound sovereign actors, in order to ward off the pending and pervasive chaos that pestilence occasions – which itself emanates from the primary, divine sovereignty – the *primum mobile* of pestilence, as it were.

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19. Here is De Mussis’ account, which is thought by most historians to be second-hand: ‘The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside [...] And soon the rotting corpses tainted the air and poisoned the water supply, and the stench was so overwhelming that hardly one in several thousand was in a position to flee the remains of the Tartar army. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defense’. In *The Black Death*, 17.

#### 4. NEKROS

However, it should not be forgotten that the weaponized plague always targets a body or bodies. And what, indeed, is the target of the living weapon, if not the living target – that is, the corpse?

The concept of *nekros* has two significant meanings in classical culture. On the one hand, *nekros* is the corpse or the dead body. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, when Odysseus organizes the funeral rites for one of his companions, it is the *nekros* that is burned at the grave site: ‘Once we’d burned the dead man (*nekros*) and the dead man’s (*nekrou*) armour,/ heaping his grave-mound, hauling a stone that coped it well,/we planted his balanced oar aloft to crown his tomb.’<sup>20</sup> Certainly *nekros* names the singularity of the departed life, or of life recently departed from the body, leaving behind a corpse. But this corpse retains something residual of that life, insofar as both the corpse and its armor are together set upon the grave. We might even say that *nekros* not only names the ‘dead man’, but also the thingness of the corpse. In a sense *nekros* oscillates between the body-minus-life and the thingness of the corpse, the latter approaching the domain of the purely non-living (e.g., the armor as the non-living body).

However the *Odyssey* also contains another, more significant usage of *nekros*. This comes in the well-known passages recounting Odysseus’ journey to the underworld. In this scene Odysseus first performs a sacrificial rite that calls to the dead, who then emerge from the underworld in a kind of slow-motion swarming:

And once my vows and prayers had invoked the nations of  
the dead (*ethnea nekrôn*), I took the victims, over the trench I

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20. *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin), XII.13-15.

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cut their throats and the dark blood flowed in – and up out of Erebus they came, flocking toward me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone (*nekuôn kataethnêôtôn*)<sup>21</sup>

Here *nekros* no longer names the corpse, nor even the thingness of the corpse. Instead, *nekros* names something alive, or at least vitalized – but in a way fundamentally different from the life of *zoê*. *Nekros* as the corpse presumes a reliable boundary between life and death, whereas *nekros* as ‘the dead’ are characterized by an ambivalent vitalism. These dead souls are detained souls, they are immaterial yet non-transcendent, a life that at once continues to live on but that lives on in a kind of interminable, vacuous, immortality. *Nekros* is thus not the corpse but rather ‘the dead’, or the existence of a life-after-life.

But what, if anything, ‘lives on’ after life? Paul provides what would become a center of dispute in later theological debates over resurrection. The mortal body, like all living things, displays an infusion of life-spirit as well as processes of growth. ‘But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body [...] So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable [...] It is sown a natural body: it is raised a spiritual body.’<sup>22</sup> The organicist motif of resurrection is that of a seed that is sown in the earth and that grows and is animated (or re-animated) into a new body, the latter being both the resurrection of the person as well as that of the community of the *corpus mysticum*.

There is also a great deal of ambiguity in the Pauline formula. Patristic thinkers differed on what kind of

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21. *Ibid.*, XI.38-42.

22. I Corinthians 15.38, 42, 44, New International Version.

life-after-life resurrection was, and how such a supernatural form of life was to take place.<sup>23</sup> One set of debates centres around the problem of the temporality of resurrection. If the living, mortal, earthbound body was susceptible to the processes of growth and decay, then in what material state would the body be resurrected? What kind of life returns? Would the resurrected body – the life-after-life – live in a state of perpetual stasis (as a kind of ‘living statue’), or does it still undergo transformations, either in the form of higher perfections, or in terms of a beatific hypergrowth? The so-called material continuity debates among Patristic thinkers not only highlights the problem of time in relation to life and after-life, but it points to a problem that cuts across the theological and political domains (for instance, when Paul lays out the basic anatomy of the *corpus mysticum* as constituted both by unity and by participation).

Resurrection could be resurrection of the body, the soul, or more generally of ‘the dead’. But even theories of the resurrection of the soul – as one finds in Origen’s notion of a ‘spiritual body’ – still maintain the minimal necessity of a body-in-flux. The problems of material continuity are also linked to spatial and topological problems concerning the material process by which the formless body of decay and putrefaction is re-assembled and re-vitalized. The mere return of material particles does not constitute resurrection, for those particles must be either ensouled, renewed, or in some way cast anew. And here the almost absurdist debates concerning ‘chain consumption’ come into the foreground. If the corpse undergoes decay and decomposition into so many particles and non-living matter, if the

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23. The most sophisticated account of such debates remains Caroline Walker Bynum’s study *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

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corpse is devoured by worms and beasts, and those beasts devoured by man, how can the parts or particles of the body be re-assembled? (One can imagine a solution to this problem offered by Jarry's *Ubu ...*). One partial resolution, offered by Tertullian, was to shift emphasis from the matter to the form of the resurrected body, so that continuity could exist through change. Cannibalism thus does not negate continuity, and the living dead can also be the eaten dead.

The theological debates over resurrection point to some basic dichotomies: should the organicist model of the growth and decay of the natural world (seeds, plants, animals) serve as the analogical model for resurrection, or are those processes precisely what resurrection aims to correct and to 'heal'? Such questions have to do, in effect, with the nature and the supernature of the after-life, or better, with the relation between life and a 'life-plus-something' that constitutes the early Medieval theology and later Scholastic onto-theology. Insofar as the after-life is related in some way – as analogy, as model, as perfection – to finite, mortal life, it obtains a certain familiarity that enables thinkers such as Origen to talk at length about growth and decay in a theological context. But insofar as the after-life is a supernatural phenomenon, a divine and sovereign action, it remains outside the scope of philosophical and even theological inquiry.

How can life – something that is presumably *lived* – be situated at such a point of inaccessibility? Discussing the role of the supernatural in the eighteenth-century gothic novel, literary critic S.L. Varnado suggests that the aesthetics of the gothic novel revolve around a confrontation with the divine as an experience of horror. Varnado uses the theological term 'numinous' to describe this experience, the

limit-experience of ‘absolute otherness’. In gothic fictions, the numinous is ephemeral; it can either be revealed to have natural and rational causes (as in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), or the supernatural can be affirmed, and its horror sublimated into an affirmation of faith (Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*) or a descent into damnation (Lewis’s *The Monk*).

The concept of the numinous is etymologically associative to the Kantian concept of *noumena*. Kant’s own re-affirmation of the split between *phenomena* (the world as it appears to the subject) and *noumena* (the inaccessible world-in-itself) tended to draw his analyses towards the former and away from the latter. Indeed, there is a sense in which Kant’s antinomies of pure reason – God, the universe, the soul – are pushed so far away from *phenomena* that they begin to occupy a space not that far from *noumena*.<sup>24</sup> And yet it is precisely this domain – the anonymous ‘there is’ – that has for so long remained a point of attraction for ontology.

Let us consider a conceptual portmanteau, comprising the gothic ‘numinous’ (the horror of the divine as absolute otherness) and Kantian *noumena* (the unhuman, anonymous ‘in itself’). In what sense is the *nekros*, as ‘the dead’, also a kind of *numinous life*? A numinous life would have to articulate a conceptual space that is neither that which is lived and outside of discourse (the gothic ‘numinous’), nor that which is purely reasoned and unlived (the Kantian antinomies). We could call this a ‘horror of life’ if such a phrase did

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24. Kant, in the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, notes the following: ‘God knows all things as they are in themselves a priori and immediately through an intuitive understanding. For he is the being of all beings and every possibility has its ground in him. If we were to flatter ourselves so much as to claim that we know the modum noumenon, then we would have to be in community with God so as to participate immediately in the divine ideas [...] To expect this in the present life is the business of mystics and theosophists [...] Fundamentally Spinozism could just as well be called a great fanaticism as a form of atheism’ (trans. Allen Wood and Gertrude Clark, Cornell University Press, 1978, 86).

not bring with it undue anthropomorphic and even existentialist connotations. Perhaps we can say that, if the life-after-life is a noumenous life, it is because it elicits a *noumenal* horror that is the horror of a life that indifferently ‘lives on’.

### 5. THE SPIRIT OF BIOLOGY

The relationship between theology and horror in the West invites a number of superficial comparisons: in the Eucharist there is both cannibalism and vampirism; in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions the realization of the City of God always entails resurrection of the dead; and in numerous instances the New Testament portrays the various demons and demonic possessions that elicit the healing powers of the Messiah. Indeed, considering the extent to which genre horror deals with the themes of death, resurrection, and the divine and demonic, one could argue that genre horror is a secular, cultural expression of theological concerns.

If we look more closely, however, we see that in many instances it is a concept of ‘life’ that mediates between theology and horror. We can even imagine our theologians carefully watching the classics of early twentieth-century horror film: the relation between the natural and the supernatural (Aquinas watching *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*); the distinction or non-distinction between human and beast (Augustine watching *The Wolf Man* or *Cat People*); the coherence or incoherence of the *corpus mysticum* (Paul watching *Revolt of the Zombies* or *I Bury the Living*); the problem of the afterlife (Dante watching the Italian silent film version of *L’Inferno*). But one need not imagine such scenarios, for many so-called art-horror films deal with such issues, from David Cronenberg’s early ‘tissue horror’

films, to Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, to Dario Argento's now-complete 'Three Mothers' trilogy.

If both theology and horror deal with the concept of 'life', then what exactly is this 'life' that lies at the limits of the thinkable? Aristotle gives us one clue. In the *De anima* Aristotle explicitly thinks the question of life as an ontological question, through the concept of *psukhê*: 'It must be the case then that soul (*psukhê*) is substance as the form of a natural body which potentially has life, and since this substance is actuality, soul will be the actuality of such a body.'<sup>25</sup> There is, to borrow terms that Scholasticism would favor, an 'ensoulment' or animation that thus takes place in hylomorphism, a process through which life is literally formed (or in-formed ... and sometimes de-formed).

However Aristotle gives us a slightly different picture in the *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Here the central question is not about any principle of life, but rather about the problem of morphology. Aristotle asks, how are 'coming-to-be' and 'passing-away' different from alteration in general? Are growth and decay merely examples of the larger genre of change in itself? This in turn leads to a more fundamental question regarding the domain of the living: 'What is that which grows?'<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle's approach is to distinguish between different modalities of change. There are, first, the processes of alteration, which are qualitative (one thinks of a tree sprouting branches or an animal growing fur – the tree or animal remains the same kind of tree or animal).

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25. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin, 1986), II.1.412a, 157.

26. Trans. Harold Joachim, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), I.5.321a.30, 489.

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There are also the processes of coming-to-be and passing-away, which are substantial changes (as when one animal is eaten by another animal, the former undergoing modification in substance). Finally, there are the processes of growth and decay, which can involve changes in magnitude (growing larger or smaller).<sup>27</sup> Now, while the first two are general processes of change that occur in the living and non-living, Aristotle implies that growth and decay are exclusive to the domain of the living. Why is this? One of the reasons Aristotle provides is that growth and decay, though exclusive to the living, fundamentally have to do with changes across the substance of the living and non-living, changes that may be due to ‘the accession of something, which is called food’ and is said to be ‘contrary to flesh’, and that involves the ‘transformation of this food into the same form as that of flesh’.<sup>28</sup>

To Aristotle’s example of nutrition we might also include the processes of decay and decomposition, the reverse passage of *nekros* into non-living matter. Food for worms ... But might we also include another passage, that of *nekros* into the life-after-life? What sort of change would this be – alteration, coming-to-be/passing-away, or growth/decay? Would this constitute a kind of biology of spiritual transformation, or would it constitute the ‘spirit of biology’?

What horror explicitly thinks, theology implicitly admits: a profound fissure at the heart of the concept of ‘life’. Life is at once this or that particular instance of the living, but also that which is common to each and every

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27. ‘We must explain (i) wherein growth differs from coming-to-be and from alteration’, and (ii) what is the process of growing and the process of diminishing in each and all of the things that grow and diminish’ (Ibid., I.5.320a.9-12, 485).

28. Ibid., I.5.321b.36-322a.1-3, 490.

instance of the living. Let us say that the former is ‘the living’, while the latter is ‘Life’ (capital L). If the living are particular manifestations of Life (or that-which-is-living), then Life in itself is never simply this or that instance of the living, but something like a principle of life (or that-by-which-the-living-is-living). This fissure between Life and the living is Aristotelian in origin, but the fissure only becomes apparent in particular instances – we see it in the Scholastic attempt to conceptualize ‘spiritual creatures’, we see it in the problem of the life-after-life of resurrection, and we also see it in natural philosophy and the attempts to account for teratological anomalies and aberrations.

However, the most instructive examples come from classical horror film, in particular the ‘creature features’ of film studios such as Universal or RKO. The proliferation of living contradictions in horror film constitutes our modern bestiary. Let us consider a hagiography of life in the relation between theology and horror. The living dead, the undead, the demon-beast, and the phantasm. Each of these are *repudiations* of life, but not their full negation. Life is repudiated in favor of an ambivalent and ‘numinous’ after-life. Each also takes up a certain relation between life and the political, centered around a key concept that structures its own genre conventions. The table overleaf provides a brief summary.

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	LIVING DEAD	UNDEAD	DEMON- BEAST	PHANTASM
Exemplar	The zombie	The vampire	Demonic possession; lycanthropy	The ghost, the specter
Allegory	Working class, the mob, mass	Aristocratic, Romanticism	Bourgeois, the therapeutic	Divine- religious, the spirit, the soul
Avatars	Multitude, contagion	Blood, rats, bats, mist	Beast, animal, monster, chimera	Mediums, portents, signs
Ontology	Flesh	Blood	Meat	Spirit

Tables such as this obviously have their limitations. But one thing to note is that in each case we have a form of life that at once repudiates ‘life itself’ for some form of after-life. Each of these figures are literally living contradictions. The zombie is the animated corpse, the vampire is the decadence of immortality, the demon is at once a supernatural being and a lowly beast, and the specter exists through materializations of its immateriality. And, in each case, the form of after-life works towards a concept of life that is itself constituted by a privation or a negation, a ‘life-minus-something’; the basic Aristotelian (and Hippocratic) concepts of flesh, blood, meat, and spirit are paradoxically living but without life. In this sense, *horror expresses the logic of incommensurability between Life and the living.*

## 6. UNIVOCAL CREATURES

One of the peculiarities of Aristotle's *De anima* is that, while it opens with the stated aim of inquiring into the 'principle of life', it quickly bypasses this aim in favor of detailed analyses of the natural world, the senses, and the intellect. What ostensibly begins with an investigation into the ontology of *zoê* ends with a rather opaque meditation on *nous*. It is almost as if Aristotle discovers that the question of 'life' can only be ontological if it ceases to be a question of life-as-such. This has also coloured later glosses on the text, such as those by Averröes and Aquinas, whose commentaries are themselves characterized by this shift.<sup>29</sup>

In Book II, however, Aristotle makes some important distinctions. After having offered the concept of *psukhê* as the life-principle, Aristotle distinguishes between different types of *psukhê* – that is, that *psukhê* is itself manifested in a range of specific forms. As is well-known, Aristotle distinguishes between plants, animals, and humans, based on the manifestation of *psukhê* or the life-form that governs them. While plants are characterized by a nutritive *psukhê*, animals are characterized by a sensory and motile *psukhê*, and humans by a reasoning or intellective *psukhê*. This forms an ascending order, for whereas plants are governed by nutrition, they can neither move nor think. The same follows for animals, since they lack reason.

The Aristotelian distinction was, of course, surpassed by the growth of natural history and, later, the emergence of a separate field of biology. But while the modern life sciences have analyzed the domain of the living down to

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29. Averröes' notion of the 'material Intellect', as well as the Thomist distinction between existence and essence, can be regarded as attempts to smooth over the transition in the *De anima* between the question of 'life' and the question of thought.

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the smallest molecule, the Aristotelian concept of a 'life principle' remains contested terrain.<sup>30</sup> In particular, one issue left unresolved in the *De anima* has to do with the concept of *psukhê* itself. Is there one, univocal *psukhê* that cuts across different domains of the living? Does *psukhê* in effect emanate from its ideal center towards the multitude of individual life forms? Or is there a *psukhê* that is proper to each individual, constituting a kind of propriety to *psukhê*?

The Scholastic reception of Aristotle offers a number of responses, and, ironically, forms an important chapter in the philosophy of biology. However, before Aristotle's 'biological' works make their appearance in the twelfth century via Arabic translations, there were already attempts to indirectly think Life as a name of the divine. The creature, emblematic of the domain of the living, is always a symptom. It is an effect, a product – as Bonaventure would put it, a *vestigium* or 'footprint' of the divine. The world of the living is a *liber creaturae*. Life is precisely that which is symptomatic of the divine, though it is not of the divine itself.

But it is Aquinas who both synthesizes the various positions on the creature and emphasizes that the concept of the creature revolves around the relation between Creator and creature, supernatural and natural, light and mud. In his attempts to wed Aristotelianism with Christian doctrine, Aquinas offers a neat summary of what we might call the 'creaturely triad'. What is the relation between the creature and Creator, between the living and the divine Life that make the living possible? Aquinas first sets up a dichotomy

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30. The differing positions of genetic determinism, biocomplexity, developmental systems biology, and the various branches of cognitive science today raise these questions.

between two approaches, that of *equivocity* and that of *univocity*. In the first, there is no relation between creature and Creator, and the divine remains forever outside the possibility of being thought. In the second – univocity – there is a relation of continuity between creature and Creation, such that, in extreme cases, the latter can be said to be co-existent with and immanent in the former. The problems with each, from Aquinas' position, are easy to see. While equivocity forecloses any possibility of thinking or experiencing the divine, univocity makes it too easy, in effect flattening the divine onto nature. As is well-known, the solution offered by Aquinas is that of *analogy*. Between no relation (equivocity) and pure relation (univocity), there is partial relation, or analogy. Thus the creature is analogous to the Creator, their difference articulated in the form of degrees of perfection ('proportion' and 'proportionality'). The creature is the life that is less-than-divine, the Creator is the life that is more-than-the-living.

Might we also then say that, for Aquinas, the living are analogously related to Life? Aristotle's question of 'life' and the life-principle cannot be asked of Life as such. It can only be asked of the living, of something 'beyond' the living or that forms the living. But then we would have to consider 'life' in general as a kind of negative concept, a concept that at once asserts its asking as it recedes into the background of this question.

This negative concept of life is ontologized along two axes. The first is predicated on ontological difference. It posits a distinction, as we noted previously, between 'Life' and 'the living'. The *De anima* posits *psukhê* as a general life-principle, but at the same time distinguishes it from particular instances of the living in plant, animal, and human

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life. Everything hinges on the relation between Life and the living. In the period of high Scholasticism, the spectrum of creation, from monotheism to pantheism, from orthodoxy to heresy, illustrates the way in which the question of Life is never far from the question of the nature of the divine. In this sense the *De anima* is ontologically prior to texts such as *De Partibus Animalium* and *Historia Animalium*.

The non-concept of life is also aligned on a second axis, on which it is predicated on a distinction between a 'principle of life' and its corresponding 'boundaries of articulation' (this is its essence and existence, substance and accident). The principle of life may vary quite widely, from *psukhê* to a theological soul, to modern mechanism and/or 'vital spirit', to contemporary concepts of molecule, gene, and information. But it always makes possible one or more boundary relations that, when applied to the domain of the living, re-affirm the principle of life as essence. Such boundaries include, first and foremost, that between the living and the non-living. Secondary ones include the division between the organic and inorganic, and between human and animal.

### 7. PATHOLOGICAL IMMANENCE

Arguably, the modern concept that has done the most to steer the question of life away from ontology has been that of the organism. Only when the relation between Life and the living can be encapsulated in the architecture of the organism, can the question of life emerge from its Scholastic hiding place into an epistemologically-rooted 'life science'.

But even in the life sciences there are innumerable instances of life-beyond-life, instances of 'the living' that turn back upon the hidden ontological question of Life.

For example, the emergence of a science of pathology – what Foucault, discussing pathological anatomy in the early nineteenth century, describes as the study of ‘pathological life’ – already points to the complicated way in which the question of *what* life is quickly folds onto the notion *that* life is. Foucault identifies several aspects to pathology – is it the study of the disease-in-itself, the disease as it is manifested in the patient, or the disease within a set of environmental conditions? Pathological anatomy signals an innovation because it not only posits that decay and decomposition are themselves processes of life, but that they exhibit characteristics that make them more than simply the inverse of growth, development, or the healthy state.

With the emergence of modern germ theory (Koch, Pasteur), the concept of immunity (Metchnikoff), and an epidemiology driven by political economy (Snow’s cholera maps of London), the question becomes even more dense: not only are there distinct processes of after-life (decay, decomposition, putrefaction), but these are abetted by a host of life-forms that themselves resist easy classification within biology.<sup>31</sup> The concept of pathology is an after-life, in so far as it asks us to think Aristotle’s distinction between growth and decay, coming-to-be and passing-away, in a single thought. Today, the study of pathology is often divided along sub-disciplinary lines that betray interesting assumptions: while virologists bracket the roles of environment and transmission, focusing on the pathogenic organism, epidemiologists black-box the pathogenic organism, emphasizing environment and a statistical approach that is biopolitically tied to public health.

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31. For example, in modern debates over whether viruses are living. For a perceptive overview, see Lynn Margulis’ book *Symbiotic Planet* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

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This last dichotomy is instructive, for it suggests to us several forms of after-life. As an organism, as a member of ‘the living’, the pathogenic organism (viruses, bacteria, fungi) can be situated broadly within the post-Darwinian *liber creaturae*. But, as we know, it is the very nature of such organisms to pass between life forms – to pass through, to pass between, and even, in cases of genetic mutation, to pass beyond. The means by which this is achieved are through processes that innately question the autonomy of the living organism – infection, transfection, parasitism, symbiosis. This in turn opens onto another, quite different form of after-life, one where the locality of ‘the living’ tends to become unlocalized, diffuse, distributed, and even invisible, tending towards an abstract domain in which ‘the living’ comes to overlap with ‘Life’.

This is precisely the terrain explored by Deleuze, and the point of reference here is the Scholastic concept of the creature. *A setting of the creaturely life within an ontology of immanence* – perhaps this is the tension at the heart of Deleuze’s own, peculiar form of vitalism. Deleuze’s emphasis on the nonorganic life that altogether bypasses biological categorisation is often coupled with an equal emphasis on that which is alive, and not simply on that which exists. Though Deleuze, in his own writings and with Guattari, does make frequent references to the history of biology (e.g. the Cuvier-Geoffroy debate, Jacob and genetics, animal ethology), it is really in the context of Scholasticism that this type of Deleuzian biophilosophy can be identified.

In his lectures at Vincennes, Deleuze will often re-cast the Scholastic triad of analogy-equivocity-univocity in terms of another triad, that of transcendence-emanence-immanence. While Deleuze’s admiration for Spinoza is well-known, it is

Duns Scotus who plays a pivotal role in the passage between the Neoplatonic emphasis on emanation and ‘participation’, and Spinoza’s assertion of immanence, encapsulated in his famous phrase *Deus sive natura* (‘God or nature’).<sup>32</sup> The very problem of creation, and of the relation between Creator and creature, must presuppose a relation of continuity, even though a ‘formal objective distinction’ can still be made between the two: ‘In the concept of a creature, however, no notion or species will be found to represent something proper to God which is wholly different in nature from anything pertaining to a creature.’<sup>33</sup> For Duns Scotus (in the ‘strong’ reading via Deleuze), nothing can be thought through the creature which is not univocally thought of the divine; the natural always implicates within itself the supernatural, life the after-life.

For Deleuze, the central ontological issue is thus not that of transcendence *vs* immanence, but rather of a different tension: that between *emanence* and immanence. The former produces immanent effects, but such effects emanate from a source that remains above and beyond those effects; emanence of effects implies an eminence of cause. Not surprisingly, Deleuze favors immanence, in which the effect is immanent in the cause. Deleuze expands the term ‘expression’, borrowed from Spinoza, to describe this creaturely immanence, essentially flattening out the

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32. Scotus, in the *Opus oxoniense*, notes that ‘a species which can be multiplied in more than one individual, is not of itself determined to any certain number of individuals but is compatible with an infinity of individuals. This is evident in the case of all perishable species. Therefore, if the perfection of necessary existence can be multiplied in more than one individual, it is not of itself restricted to any certain number, but is compatible with infinity (trans. Allen Wolter, in *Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings*, Hackett, 1987, I., dist.II, q.iii, 88).

33. *Ibid.*, I, dist. III, q.i, 29.

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‘divisions of nature’ first formalized by Eriugena into a single, univocal, immanent expression: ‘In the limit Nature as a whole is a single Animal in which only the relations between the parts vary.’<sup>34</sup>

If this notion of expressive immanence is, as Badiou notes, a ‘vitalist ontology’, is it vitalist because of what it says about ‘Life’ or for what it says about ‘the living’? What, indeed, does vitalism come to mean in Deleuze’s biophilosophy, if not a kind of subtractive vitalism, one that posits a creature-without-creation, an emanation-without-center, a decay that is growth, and a collapsing of ‘Life’ and ‘the living’, a distinction that structures both the Aristotelian and Scholastic concepts of life? If pathology broadly names one kind of life-after-life (growth-in-decay, coming-to-be in passing-away), a pathological immanence would name one of the central – unresolved – problematics of Deleuzian vitalism: that of the relation between ‘life’ and ‘immanence’. If the former presumes some level of dynamic change (even if that change occurs immanently), the latter requires the existence of a fully actual, non-dynamic diffusion, enmeshing, or blanketing. The limit-point, the pathological turn, is at that point where immanence becomes so absolute that it becomes ambient and pervasive, itself receding into a zone of non-life.

### 8. LIFE AS NON-BEING

What is striking about many of the attempts to ontologize life is the way in which ‘life’ becomes an always-receding horizon. If we accept the Aristotelian distinction between Life and the living as structuring the philosophy of life in

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34. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone, 1990), 278.

the West, then it would seem that Life is always receding behind the living. This is the limit of natural philosophy, beyond which one must have recourse to either natural theology or what Kant calls onto-theology, the system of knowledge of the ‘being-of-all-beings’.

But, in the tradition of Aristotelian natural philosophy, Life is not simply the absent center to every instance of the living. The relation between Life and the living is that, while the former conceptually guarantees the latter, in itself it is never available to thought. This, however, does not mean that Life is a concept of negation because it is privative, for its lack of ‘thisness’ is precisely what exceeds any particular instance of the living. If Life has a negative value, then, it is because of its superlative nature, because it exceeds any instance of the living. Any critique of life would have to begin from this presupposition of the superlative nature of Life. Life is ‘nothing’ precisely because it is never some thing.

In this sense, philosophical thinking about life borrows heavily from the tradition of mystical theology – and in particular from the tradition of negative theology. Before Anselm offers his famous ontological proof for the existence of God (God as ‘that beyond which nothing greater can be thought’), the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena provides one of the most elaborate theories of the divine as ‘nothing’ (*nihil*). Eriugena’s *Periphyseon* is deeply influenced by the apophatic approach of the Pseudo-Dionysius. But the *Periphyseon* applies a dialectical rigor not found in the latter’s works. In Book III, Eriugena puts forth a notion of the ‘divine darkness’, in which the divine is *nihil* precisely because of its superlative nature: ‘For everything that is understood and sensed is nothing else but the

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apparition of what is not apparent, the manifestation of the hidden, the affirmation of the negated, the comprehension of the incomprehensible [...]<sup>35</sup>

To what extent can we say that Life is *nil* in this sense? Once the ontological difference between 'Life' and 'the living' is collapsed, life subtracts from itself any possibility of an affirmation. What remains is a kind of negative theology, or better, a negative theo-zoology, whereby life always displays some relation to the negation of life. Hence the after-life is not about the dichotomy between life and death, but about a more fundamental relation – that between Life and Being.

One problem has to do with what happens once the concept of 'Life' detaches itself from 'the living'. This is a problem implicit in the *De anima*, where the concept of *psukhê* is sometimes a life-principle, and sometimes a stand-in for the being of form itself. In a modern context, process philosophy (Bergson, Whitehead) and process theology (Chardin, Steiner) likewise reach a zone in which 'Life' becomes convertible with Being – even if the name of Life is process or becoming.

For many, however, all of this is a false problem. The opening sections of *Being and Time* provide what is perhaps the clearest statement on this point. There Heidegger effectively glosses over the fields of anthropology, psychology, and biology as fields which must presume being in order to begin their inquiries about man, mind, and organism. While each of these fields, according to Heidegger, deals in some way with Life, none of them are capable of posing the

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35. Book III, 633A, from Iohannis Scotti Eriygenae, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae), Liber Tertius*, ed. and trans. I.P. Sheldon-Williams with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981).

question of Life as an ontological question:

[...] in any serious and scientifically minded ‘philosophy of life’ (this expression says about as much as the ‘botany of plants’) there lies an inexplicit tendency toward understanding the being of Da-sein. What strikes us first of all in such a philosophy (and this is its fundamental lack) is that ‘life’ itself as a kind of being does not become a problem ontologically.<sup>36</sup>

This ‘missing ontological foundation’ is itself what grounds these fields. The question *that* Life is, is displaced by the question of *what* Life is – or, more accurately, what the domain of the living is. The anthropological category of man, the psychological category of mind, and a general biology of the organism all presume a Being of Life. Where Heidegger leaves off, however, is at the question of whether Life is a species of Being, or whether the ontology of Life in effect transforms Life into Being. His last words on the topic are at once suggestive and opaque: ‘Life has its own kind of being, but it is essentially accessible only in Da-sein.’<sup>37</sup>

One point of entry is to think about non-Life (a non-Life that is not Death), and by extension, non-Being (a non-Being that is not Nothing). Put another way, the challenge would be to think the relation between Life and Being as mediated by negation. This is, to be sure, an ancient problem, one posed by the presocratics, in the attempt to secure a conceptually-sound concept of the One or the Many. At its root is the problem – really, the profound ambivalence towards – the concept of non-Being. As Levinas notes, in a language not too far removed from Eriugena:

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36. *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), §10, 43-44.

37. *Ibid.*, 46.

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When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence [...] But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer this or that; there is not 'something'. But this universal absence is in turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence [...] There is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the problem of non-Being is not simply that of a fear of nothingness or of the vacuum. Rather, it is the quite gothic fear of a something whose thingness is under question. 'This impersonal, anonymous, yet indistinguishable consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term there is [...] The rustling of the there is [...] is horror.<sup>39</sup> The pinnacle of this type of horror – really a kind of concept-horror – is the evisceration of all noological interiority: 'horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua entity, inside out.'<sup>40</sup>

What is the 'there is' of Life? Is the concept of Life already a 'there is', and therefore already enveloped in the gothic horror of absolute otherness and pervasive anonymity? If 'Life', as opposed to 'the living', is always receding into the anonymous 'there is', does this then mean that Life is really Life-without-Being?

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38. 'There is: Existence without Existents', in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Blackwell, 1990), 30.

39. *Ibid.*, 30; 32.

40. *Ibid.*, 33.

## 9. ANONYMOUS HORROR

Granted, there is a certain absurdity in asking about the non-being of Life; one might as well inquire into non-existent creatures ... which is, of course, precisely what the domain of supernatural horror does. Horror film is replete with examples of the horror of the 'there is ...' The titles of such films are telling: *The Being*, *The Creature*, *The Entity*, *It's Alive!*, *It Lives Again*, *Monster Zero*, *The Stuff*, *Them!*, *The Thing*, and so on. In these films, the site of horror is not simply that of a physically threatening monster, for at least these can be given names (Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, Wolf-Man), and thereby included within the sphere of moral and theological law. This also means they can be destroyed. But what of the creature that cannot be named, or that is named in its unnamability? The unnamable creature is also the unthinkable creature. This would be the B-horror version of Beckett's *L'innomable*. In some cases the unnamable creature is without form, the intrusion of a raging, inverted hylomorphism. Cold War films such as *The Blob* and *Caltiki the Immortal Monster* exist in a state of oozing, abject, borderlessness. In other cases the unnamable creature is without matter, existing as pure (demonic) spirit, an inverted theophany. In *Fiend Without A Face*, human beings are besieged by immaterial, brainstem-like entities, suggesting telepathy as a form of contagion.<sup>41</sup>

These films represent a subtle subversion of the classic creature-feature by shifting the criteria by which a monster is made. Whereas the creature-feature films define the monster as an aberration (and abomination) of nature, the unnamable creature is an aberration of thought.

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41. In postmodernity this tradition is extended in films such as Mario Bava's *Planet of the Vampires*, Cronenberg's *Scanners* and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cure*.

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The classical creature-features still retain an element of familiarity, despite the impure mixture of categories (plant + human) or differences in scale (giant reptiles, ants, leeches, etc.). Films featuring unnamable creatures, by contrast, contextualize the monster in terms of ontology (form-without-matter, matter-without-form) or in terms of onto-theology (the spiritual abject, the oozing abstraction). They point towards a form of life-after-life that highlights conceptual aberrations.

Let us pause for a moment and gather together our propositions concerning this concept-horror, or, granting ourselves some poetic license, what we can also refer to as the ‘teratological noosphere’:

- The question of an ontology of life is traditionally predicated on a fundamental distinction between Life and the living, or, between that-by-which-the-living-is-living and that-which-is-living.
- This distinction is deployed along two axes: One which requires a ‘principle-of-life’ to structure all manifestations of the living, and another in which the living is in turn structured according to various ‘boundaries of articulation’.
- In the context of Scholasticism, the ontology of life continually oscillates between a natural philosophy of creatures and an onto-theology of the divine nature.
- The structure of the concept of life is most often that of negative theology.

Each of these propositions structures the basic way in which ‘life’ as a concept is thought as such. Each of these also contain one or more fissures, one or more ‘heretical’ strands

of thinking. To this we can offer another proposition:

- In its traditional onto-theological formulations, Life is what is denied of Being. While the latter is the domain of the transcendent, the eternal, the infinite, the spiritual, and the fully actual, the former is subtracted from this – the immanent, the temporal, the finite, the material, and the virtual.

Life therefore bears some minimal relation to non-Being. But this can take several forms. The non-Being of Life can be situated either ‘above’ or ‘below’ the scale of the human – on the one hand there is the strata of Thomist ‘spiritual creatures’ or the strata of Aristotelian creaturely life, while on the other hand there is the strata of demonic multitudes or the strata of subhuman plague and pestilence. This non-anthropomorphic and even misanthropic quality of Life sustains these strata with a certain inaccessibility. Even as Life, in conditioning the living, is able to assert its self-evident character, it also puts forth its noumenal qualities. Kant’s statements concerning the teleology of the natural world would have to be qualified: *it is because Life is noumenal that it is teleological*. But this then means that the ‘ends’ of Life are also ‘anonymous’.

Any question of the possibility of an ontology of life would have to consider ‘life’ as a particular intersection between a biology of a non-conceptual life itself and an onto-theology of transcendence, emanence, and immanence. The problem is that the concept of Life has remained tenaciously non-conceptual, even as it continues to function in a conceptual, even ontological way in contemporary scientific fields such as network science, swarm intelligence, and biocomplexity. The issue is not that Life cannot think its own

## COLLAPSE IV

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foundationalism, its own decision. Indeed, this is arguably what post-Darwinian biology obsesses over. Rather, the issue is that Life as a concept must always presume a further question concerning Being. The infamous question ‘What is Life?’ appears to be always superseded by the question of ‘What is Being?’ And yet the very idea of Life-without-Being would seem to be an absurdity for philosophy – though, as we’ve seen, not for horror.