

Life: Facts, Fictions and Leaps of Imagination – Fauzia Rahman-Greasley

THESIS: All attempts to answer the *metaphysical* question “What is Life?” are based on the *assumption* that Life is explicable, rather than simply saying that it is a brute fact. By “brute fact” I mean “a fact that has no definition or something that cannot be explained”. Nonetheless the question is philosophically interesting because of what attempts to answer the question show about human agency and imagination.

Is there a scientific answer to the question “What is Life”?

It is certainly true that science has provided *alternative* and *credible* explanations. BUT it does not follow that it is possible for science to provide a *complete* explanation of Life.

Explaining vs Explaining Away

Before we can answer the question “What is Life?” we must answer the question “What does the word ‘life’ mean?”

Nomological Fallacy: It is a mistake to believe that the name (Life) provides knowledge about the nature of the phenomenon.

“The faculty of imagination is a blind but indispensable function of the soul without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely conscious” (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B104| A78)

Reductive abstractionism: The idea that there is a difference between living and non-living things is an unproved and unprovable assumption.

We *learn* from others to name and categorise: X belongs to the group we call “living things” and not to the group of “non-living things”: Objects do not name themselves and Nature does not categorise.

The identification of a particular entity as belonging to the group of living things, rather than of non-living things, turns out to be purely arbitrary. The objects can be divided however we *want*, or according to whichever theory we *want* to promote.

Therefore ‘Life’ is a word that derives its meaning by social communication and not from nature.

“[T]he familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood. The commonest way in which we deceive either ourselves or others about understanding is by assuming something as familiar, and accepting it on that account [...] such knowing never gets anywhere, and it knows not why.” (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 18)

“Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

“There is a two-way movement in philosophy, a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts.” (Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*)

The Problem of the Post-truth Era

Subjective / psychological Truth (Belief): What an individual or group happens to accept as true. Even if there is widespread consensus that a belief is true, it does not follow that the belief is true or even approximates with truth. A belief, however strongly held, can be objectively false (although it cannot be subjectively false).

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Fact: Objective Truth: What is true independently of whatever an individual or group happens to believe.

There is a correct and publicly verifiable answer to the question “How many cocktail sticks are there?” But it is not consensus that makes the answer correct.

We can be mistaken!

It is sometimes very clear when there is a greater number in one set than another – we do not need to count. This suggests that we have an innate concept of numerical difference (more and less): it is **not something our mind abstracts from nature**.

Do we have an innate concept of life?

Three theories of knowledge:

1. Classical Tripartite Theory of Knowledge (Plato)

- I know p *if and only if* I believe p *and* have reason to believe p *and* p is true independently of whatever I happen to believe.
- Implies: I accept p independently of whatever others happen to say.

2. Social Theory of Knowledge (Foucault)

- I know p *if* social forces compel me to accept p

According to this view, objective truth is not a necessary condition for knowledge. The belief of a social group (eg. a scientific community) is sufficient for knowledge.

Normative or orthodox view.

3. Preference Theory

I accept p if p is preferable to not-p.

“The idea of ‘objective reality’ [...] undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to the ‘world described by science’, but in relation to the progressing life of a person.” (Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*: 25)

We can literally see and point to a human body BUT ‘a person’ is more than a body. A person is a body *with* inner experiences: not (*pace* Descartes) a body + inner experiences.

Argument from Certainty

1. I can doubt the existence of my body (Descartes: senses are not always reliable) but not my inner experiences.
2. I am certain of my inner experiences but not of what others tell me my experiences are (they might be mistaken).
3. I am certain I experience sequences of observations and feelings that *appear* ordered in space and time.
4. Sometimes I speculate (imagine alternative truths) about the nature of my experiences. When I speculate I create possible truths (not objective facts).
5. Therefore (from 4) imagination must be possible. BUT: I do not need argument to prove my experience of imagining alternative truths!
6. Therefore, (from 4 and 5) I am certain that (a) there are possibilities and (b) more possibilities than I can imagine. (I have an innate concept of more and less).

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7. It is possible for me to choose whether to speculate and whether to attempt to actualise a possibility.
8. I am certain that I can choose to speak or to be silent: it is not necessary for me to put my thoughts into words unless I *want* you to know my thoughts.
9. I can know what you mean when you use the word “life” *if and only if* you tell me: I do not have epistemic access to your thoughts or experiences.
10. I experience being an entity embedded in a network of language-users with the capacity to choose from a finite but changeable number of possibilities.

Speculation: By “life” I mean “a finite but changeable number of possibilities, some of which are possible to actualise”.

Whether that definition rings true for you, and what follows if it is, is for you to decide!

Our actions either increase or reduce available possibilities for others.

We are co-creators (not creators) of possibilities.

Conclusion

In doing philosophy we must inevitably use words. Yet, words are the source of misunderstanding and confusion.

It is clearly true that we can theorize about Life; but theories are not facts: they are fictions which we might be persuaded to accept as facts.

Given that we experience numerous moral dilemmas, what matters is answering the ethical question “on what grounds ought I to act?”

Therefore, the metaphysical question ‘What is Life?’ is not only unanswerable, it is also irrelevant.