

The Concept of Life as Principle of Difference in Meister Eckhart and Husserl

The concept of “life” is virtually omnipresent in present-day scientific and societal discourse. Its precise meaning, however, varies greatly from one context to another. Modern Life Sciences tend to understand “life” exclusively as an empirical-biological fact, while contemporary philosophy and theology focus more specifically on human life and the ethical problems related to it. Certain contemporary phenomenologists, in turn, consider “life” in an almost mystical way, i.e. as absolute indistinction that precedes all conceptual differences and can therefore never be scientifically “known” but only directly “experienced”.

The present project intends to examine the concept of “life” in Meister Eckhart and Edmund Husserl in order to prove that, far from being synonymous with irrationality, it has a precise and differentiated meaning. Both Eckhart and Husserl take into account the biological dimension of “life”, as well as the question concerning the specifically human “life form” and the “life of consciousness” in its absolute sense. Our guiding hypothesis is that this multiple meaning of the concept of “life” in Eckhart and Husserl is the result of their reception of Aristotelian philosophy and that Husserl’s specific understanding of “life” has also been influenced by his reception of Eckhart’s writings.

In a first step, our project will examine the philosophical-historical situation in which Meister Eckhart and Husserl develop their respective approaches to this topic. In a second step, we shall analyse the systematic function that the concept of “life” plays with regard to their whole thought. We shall pay particular attention to the way in which they use the various meanings of “life” in order to bridge the trenches between the different scientific disciplines. As a result, “life” is not only an objective topic of research, but scientific knowledge as a whole appears as a living and yet differentiated unity.

Our project is innovative in that it does not reduce the topic of “life” to only one of its possible meanings (biological, ethical, etc.) but intends to show how these various aspects are intrinsically related to one another. In particular, we shall challenge the thesis according to which “life” and “knowledge” are mutually exclusive. By contrast, Eckhart’s and Husserl’s philosophical approaches are based on the conviction that human life in the world is always already structured in a way that points towards possible scientific knowledge without being completely absorbed by it. Based on this insight, our project will attempt to lay a new foundation for the present-day debate between, on the one hand, empirical Life Sciences, and on the other hand, the various approaches to the problem of “life” in the domain of human sciences.