

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

The concept of “life” plays a key role in present-day academic and societal discourse. While modern Life Sciences tend to reduce “life” to its medico-biological dimension, contemporary philosophy and theology focus on its specifically human, ethical meaning. Several exponents of contemporary phenomenology, in turn, refer to Meister Eckhart to support their claim that “life” refers to an absolute reality above and beyond any conceptual differentiation (subject-object, immanence-transcendence etc.). Philosophy, therefore, would have to abandon the main tenets of classical Husserlian phenomenology in order to acquire a true understanding of “life” in its pre-theoretic, pathic immediacy.

The present project intends to put into question this speculative absolutization of “life” by contemporary phenomenology, as well as the almost equivocal fragmentation of its meaning in the different scientific disciplines. Our main hypothesis is that, far from being synonymous with pre-rational indistinction, the concept of “life” functions as a principle of difference in both Meister Eckhart’s and Husserl’s thought, and that the latter’s approach to this topic has been influenced by his reception of Eckhart’s writings. To confirm this hypothesis, we shall re-examine Eckhart’s and Husserl’s differentiated use of this concept with regard to the various domains of reality, i.e. the realm of living organisms, the sphere of human life forms, and the sphere of pure consciousness as breakthrough point of original spontaneity. Our project contends that these three dimensions of “life” in Eckhart and Husserl mirror the Aristotelian differentiation between *psychê*, *bios*, and *zoê*. At the same time, we shall attempt to show that the polyvalent understanding of “life” enables Meister Eckhart and Husserl to conceive the different branches of scientific knowledge (natural sciences, human sciences, ethics, theology etc.) not as a static schema but as an organic unity that is ultimately rooted in the sphere of human life in the world.

Our project is innovative in that it intends to integrate the biological aspects of “life” in Meister Eckhart and Husserl with its ethical and speculative meanings while avoiding the pitfalls of any naturalistic reductionism. In a first step, we shall contextualize Meister Eckhart’s and Husserl’s approach to this topic against the backdrop of 13th/14th century Aristotelianism and Averroism, and 19th/20th century “philosophy of life” respectively. In a second step, we shall examine the systematic role that the notion of “life” plays in their philosophical approaches and point out its multidimensional empirical and transcendental meaning.