

Proposal for the “Philosophy of Life” Project

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We are planning to propose “philosophy of life” as a new academic research field in the age of advanced medical technology and global environmental crisis. In recent decades, new disciplines such as “bioethics (medical ethics),” “environmental ethics,” “sociology of medicine,” and “ethical, legal, social implications (ELSI) studies” have been established. But we perceive that “philosophy of life”, i.e. a comprehensive philosophical approach to contemporary issues surrounding human life, death, and nature, is still missing.

There are various branches of philosophy such as “philosophy of language,” “philosophy of mind,” “philosophy of religion” and so on, however, surprisingly, there is no entry for “philosophy of life” in, for example, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the Encyclopedia Britannica, or the Iwanami Dictionary of Philosophy and Thought. If anything, “philosophy of life” is associated with “philosophy of biology,” with outmoded fashions of philosophical thought such as French “philosophie de la vie” or German “Lebensphilosophie”, if not with personal musings about the meaning of life. However, we perceive the need for a comprehensive approach dealing with human life and death in contemporary society, our attitudes toward nature and non-human lifeforms, and the changing meaning of life in an age of science, capitalism and globalization. The word “life” in such a comprehensive approach should

refer to human as well as non-human life, the question of an essential differentiation between these being one core objective of discussion.

Masahiro Morioka, one of the authors of this proposal, has been very frustrated with the discipline “bioethics,” because in that discipline people frequently ask questions like, “Is it right or wrong to survive by harvesting organs from brain dead patients?,” without discussing issues such as “What is the meaning of our life that is being maintained at the sacrifice of other forms of life (including brain dead patients, or, more generally, animals and plants)?,” “What is the essence of desire that lurks behind modern medicine?,” and “Does the well-being with which technology provides us mean real happiness to humans?”

Christian Steineck sees the pressing need for a genuinely philosophical response to the challenges of scientific and technological progress. New developments in the life sciences change our view of human life. New technologies give us new possibilities to act upon human and non-human life. But science itself cannot translate its findings into propositions concerning what it means to be human, or what it means to be alive as a human being. Furthermore, the changes in science and technology need to be addressed as changes in human life, themselves.

These are only some of the topics for a new “philosophy of life.” Under this heading, we would first like to undertake a

systematic survey of such issues for discussion. Various themes that should be discussed in terms of “philosophy of life” can be found in disciplines such as bioethics, environmental ethics, disability studies, religious studies and so forth. We would like to welcome contributions from philosophers in various countries and regions, and through discussion we would like to measure the extension of “philosophy of life.”

Concurringly, we propose to excavate knowledge and wisdom about life from the history of ideas from ancient to modern times, and to critically examine the relevance of them in the light of our present knowledge. Such research is not undertaken for the sake of philology, or for the sake of affirming philosophical traditions, but as part of an endeavour to identify "blind spots" within our present view of the world. Through this research we will also be able to cut across various philosophical traditions from East to West, from Africa to Latin America, forming what we hope will be an interesting pilot study for a future, more internationally informed philosophy.

The goal of this project is to create a foundation for a “philosophy of life,” not as a

new doctrine, but as a discipline in which we philosophers reflect upon and discuss the topics of life. To that end, at an early stage, we also must discuss methodological questions. As sketched out above, we think a combined approach will be necessary that studies (a) the implications of recent scientific findings, (b) past philosophers and traditions about the idea of life (history of ideas), and (c) present thought and images about life (anthropology). Based on such a broad foundation of knowledge, we hope to advance our own philosophical investigation and reflection concerning contemporary topics of life. Methodological issues should remain an integral part of this research.

Finally, in pursuing this project, we want to add that we hold no special affiliation with any religious group or political party. We envision an international research platform for free and rational discussion guided by methodological rigour, not by any religious or political allegiances. If you are interested in this project please feel free to contact us through our webpage: (www.lifestudies.org/projectmail.html), or send email to info@lifestudies.org.

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