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## Books Forum

### Life's afterlives

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Ten years ago, a *Nature* editorial asked that, after the vitalist assumption that living organisms differed fundamentally from non-living things had been thoroughly discredited, if not by Friedrich Wöhler's synthesis of organic urea from inorganic components in 1828 then by early 21st-century synthetic biology, "we might now be permitted to dismiss the idea that life is a precise scientific concept." (Anonymous, 2007, p. 1032). This Books Forum discusses two books—one by anthropologist Stefan Helmreich, the other by philosopher John Dupré—which dismiss the dismissal and continue to think about this metaphysical notion.

Helmreich's *Sounding the Limits of Life* is a collection of essays, which responds directly to *Nature's* plea for the elimination of life as an all too loose concept. It looks ethnographically at three groups of life scientists—students and creators of Artificial Life as well as marine and astrobiologists—who did not constrain the category of life until it all but vanished, but rather expanded it to the as-yet unknown, comprising life forms and enabling forms of life that nineteenth-century biologists could only have imagined. Our reviewer Joan Steigerwald

emphasizes Helmreich's discomfort with new materialist anthropologies that claim to honor the agency of other species without critically analyzing and historicizing the formalisms and abstractions that do not suffocate but give form to life. As a historian, however, she takes issue with Helmreich's own abstraction from the times and places that provided the changing conceptions of life with their thick texture.

John Dupré's *Processes of Life* could be read as developing Ernst Haeckel's (1899) late nineteenth-century monist ersatz religion into an early twentieth-century pluralist metaphysics that seeks to correct popular misconceptions about life rather than doing away with the concept. But Sophia Roosth does not historicize the author's understanding of life. Instead she doffs her hat as historian and dons the hat of theoretician, engaging the philosopher on his own terms. She lauds his anti-reductionist attacks on gene-centric evolutionary psychology and other forms of Neo-Darwinism, much despised among posthumanities scholars, although she wonders about the wisdom of mobilizing metagenomics as yet another gene-centric perspective for this purpose. While Roosth shows herself largely sympathetic to Dupré as a philosopher of the life sciences, she finds his philosophy of the human sciences to lag behind politically progressive interrogations of gender and biology when he reinstates a difference between the human sexes beyond the dictate of local conventions, and when he potentially pathologizes queer couples relying on assisted reproductive technologies by suggesting that the abnormal environment of an

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embryo developing in vitro might lead to epigenetically based diseases.

Whether or not we *should* abandon the concept of life, the publications reviewed in this Books Forum show that its semantic crisis has not resolved, but might even be cranking up the production of new meanings of life.

## References

- Anonymous (2007), Meanings of 'life'. *Nature* 447 (7148): 1031–1032.
- Haeckel, E. (1984/1899), *Die Welträtsel: Gemeinverständliche Studien über monistische Philosophie*, Stuttgart, Alfred Kroener Verlag.