LIFE HAS BECOME A PROBLEM. We can find this problem at the heart of our global political and social debates over abortion rights, right to die movements, questions related to environmental damage, the manipulation of the genetic structure of plants, non-human animals, and human beings, to say nothing of ethical issues related to war and economics. Addressing the problem of life is then of critical importance, but there is another reason to do so; one of simple curiosity. Life presents itself as weird, even in terms of its seeming cosmic rarity, and this weirdness attracts our attention. In the late-20th century and over the past decade the problem of life has become a defining problem, at once a site of political struggle and a captivating weirdness: “If the question of Being was the central issue for antiquity (resurrected in the twentieth century by Heidegger), and if the question of God, as alive or dead, was the central issue for modernity (Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche), then perhaps the question of ‘life’ is the question that has come to define our contemporary era…”1

Eugene Thacker’s *After Life* is a masterly work that does not claim to provide a new conception of life, but to give some clarity to the problem, to provide a critique of life. According to Thacker the three dominant forms of philosophical engagement with life (affective-phenomenological, bio-political and politico-theological) remain ‘under the spell’ of the framework of an Aristotelian ontology of life passed through history by way of the Scholastics in the Middle Ages. Thacker does not organize the book around these three dominant modes, but he nonetheless argues convincingly for the dominance of this Aristotelian framework that requires we think “life in terms of something-other-than-life”\(^2\) because it is in Aristotle that the problem of life is first split between “that-by-which-the-living-is-living” and “that-which-is-living.”\(^3\) That is, in all contemporary ontologies of life there is a separation between Life and the living and this split along with all contemporary responses to this separation are found in some form in post-Aristotelian Scholasticism.

Thacker traces this separation through four of the chapters of the book, leaving the final chapter to set up the planned sequel, *Darklife*, that will look at the fundamental shift in ontologies of life that occurs after Kant. Though the book begins with Aristotle and his *De Anima* and ends with Kant and his *Critique of Judgment* it is not primarily a work in the history of philosophy. Thacker’s focus is primarily on those thinkers we would normally group under the category of ‘scholasticism,’ but it also includes contemporary philosophers like Badiou and Deleuze whose work, while clearly post-Kantian, remains under the spell of post-Aristotelian Scholasticism. It is, more than a work exploring the historical development of the idea of life in philosophy, a work of contemporary interest that dares to ask what naively lies behind our thinking when we claim to think of life.

The contemporaneous character of the book begins with the first chapter which reads Aristotle’s *De Anima* through

\(^2\) Ibid., x.

\(^3\) Ibid., 17.
characters and motifs found in the ‘weird fiction’ of authors like H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. For it is Lovecraft’s conception of the ‘nameless thing’ that is outside the logic of the monster (which requires a normal by which to judge the aberrant) that is the common paradigm for Aristotle’s concept of life and our own, before which our categories of thought flounder. This is because in order to think of life as life we must not simply reduce it to its manifestations (biology) and yet we also can’t simply remain in silence about what life is as we would have to if we proposed to think life as the totality of experience (theology). And so this third nameless thing is the call to think life as Aristotle attempted to; outside the limits of biology and theology.

Yet Aristotle’s original attempt requires the split or separation between Life and the living already mentioned above. Reconciling this split becomes the focus of ontologies of life after Aristotle. Through the proceeding three chapters Thacker traces three responses: raising life to the level of a superlative by the means of negative theology, thinking the Creator-creature relationship as univocal, and a thinking of the divine nature, analogous to Life-in-itself, as a pantheism. Though each response is given its own chapter there is a circulation of common themes, like the question of immanence, that makes each chapter feel as if it has been enfolded into or unfolded from the others. This can lead to a feeling that Thacker is repeating himself, but this repetition is both necessary because of the relatedness of the material and appreciated because of the difficulty of the material. This is true of the last chapter, which focuses mostly on Kant, which suggests that, even if after Kant the attempts at an ontology of life are fundamentally changed, this is an immanent change that is really a mutation of the post-Aristotelian Scholastic framework. Whereas the other three chapters pursue thinking life-as-time, life-as-form, and life-as-spirit, the Kantian approach re-formulates the problem of life so that “the major challenge for any ontology of life lies in being able to think its very conditions of being thought at all.”

4 Thacker, After Life, 250.
It is in the final chapter's discussion of the limits of Kantian philosophy that Thacker connects the book directly to work collected under the moniker ‘speculative realism,’ though Thacker's interest in thinkers like Brassier, Laruelle, and others is present throughout. Before I speak about this connection I have to first discuss the place of theology in the book, for the originality of the book is Thacker's connecting this recent speculative work to that of scholastic theology.

The book begins with Aristotle, casting him as a philosopher whose thought can be read as a kind of biohorror. But the horror present in authors like Lovecraft, who is celebrated by a group of philosophers that take the question of ‘decay’ and ‘the weird’ as a particularly interesting challenge for philosophy to think, is linked directly to theology by Thacker. In a discussion of the creatural he writes, “Such examples [like the Wolf Man or psychic ‘thought creatures’] are worth taking seriously, for they suggest that the creature, as that which is not-quite-animal, is also that which is not-quite-spiritual. The modern avatars of these ‘spiritual creatures’ demonstrate the ways in which horror and theology are always intimately connected with one another.”5 The question of thinking life as life, without reducing it to either biology or universalizing it through theology (mirror images of the other), requires that one think alongside both scientific and mystical thought but we must do so because in this instance thinking the weird-ness of natural reality goes hand in hand with the weirdness exposed by theology.

While the deflationary elements of speculative realism pivot precisely around a response and often a rejection to the ‘theological turn’ in Continental philosophy, I read Thacker’s book as a warning against the hubris of such deflationary tact. It isn’t simply that one form of philosophical discourse is beholden to a quasi-theological framework, as a reductionist might accuse a vitalist, but that all three dominant ontologies of life are reliant on that quasi-theological framework. Even contemporary forms of naturalism appear to operate via a

5 Ibid., 97.
form of pantheism, in so far as the philosophical nihilism of naturalism repeats the theological nihilism of superlative or negative thought that religious mystics used to think God as such. None of this means that philosophy, namely contemporary speculative philosophy, need become theological in itself or acquiesce to religion (as, after Meillassoux’s After Finitude, one is often accused of tarrying with the spectre of creationism if you engage with religion in any serious way at all), but it does require at least a careful consideration of theology lest we simply remain pious but do not know it.

Thacker’s book goes beyond mere consideration, though, to an active mutation of theological thought that matches what I have elsewhere called ‘non-theology.’ Thus, in each chapter Thacker takes the theological material engaged with therein, derived equally from ‘Doctors of the Church’ like Augustine and Aquinas, quasi-heretics like Duns Scotus, Eriugena, and Nicholas of Cusa, and mystics outside the Christian tradition like Suhrawardi (Sufi Islam) and Dōgen (Zen Buddhism), and stretches that material to its limit. Thus theology, already for Thacker a “void at the heart of philosophical thinking itself,”⁶ becomes both subject to the critique of correlationism and material that may be radicalized under that critique. So, the superlative method of negative theology becomes a thinking of life as luminous void; the relationship between Creator and creature moves from one of univocal immanence (everything in relation) to equivocal immanence (no relation); and pantheism becomes dark pantheism or the conjunction of life and immanence under the sign of the negative.

Thacker takes his readers effortlessly through a minefield of difficult material by systematizing the various forms of post-Aristotelian Scholasticism and providing new ways to conceive of that material through contemporary notions like horror. Because of the skill with which Thacker develops his argument in relation to close readings of a wide range of difficult texts, the book should stand as a model for how to do creative genealogical work. But more importantly, Thacker’s

---

⁶ Thacker, After Life, 262.
Anthony Paul Smith – Review of After Life

*After Life* is a really remarkable work of philosophy. Not because it offers a convincing conception of life that finally gives us a true contemporary ontology of life, but because it clears up the question and poses it anew so that we might finally begin to answer it.