

# LIVING BEINGS AS DIFFERENCES

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction: Philosophy of life or philosophy of biology? 2. Thinking life or thinking the living being? 3. Living beings as differences. 3.1. Constitutive and comparative differences. 3.2. The unity of differences in the final difference. 3.3. The intelligibility of the final difference. 4. Conclusion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE OR PHILOSOPHY OF BIOLOGY?

**B**ETWEEN the smallest subatomic particles that we know of and the observable universe as a whole there are many orders of magnitude, around fifty in the metric system. Around the middle of this scale of magnitudes, more or less between  $10^{-6}$  and  $10^7$  meters, we find the phenomenon of life. The fact that the Earth is a living being is debatable, and certainly above the size of the Earth we don't know anything that we could call "alive". Even below the size of the smallest cells it is impossible to find something alive. Although it is found only within this dimensional space, in small regions of the universe, and perhaps only for brief periods of time, life sets our intelligence and emotions in motion, attracts our attention like nothing else, and awakens a profound curiosity in us. In addition to the fascination that the phenomenon of life awakens in us, it turns out that without understanding it, we cannot properly understand the universe, nor what the human being is.

Through art, religion, sciences, traditions, common sense and daily experience, we have attempted to capture, in one way or another, the phenomenon we call life. Philosophy has also made valuable contributions to this task. Philosophers have primarily approached the phenomenon of life from two perspectives: a direct and an indirect one. We can call the first perspective *philosophy of life* (PhL) and the second *philosophy of biology* (PhB). The former is a subset of the philosophy of nature, while the latter is a subset of the philosophy of science. PhL started with the birth of philosophy, while the second was established in the 1970s.

Many philosophers have tried to think directly about life, employing all the resources available to philosophy. Despite their attempts to use information coming from biological sciences, some of which were scientific while some

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others were popular, their focus has been primarily directed towards life itself, and not towards the sciences of life. Along this line, we can position the contributions of many ancient and medieval philosophers, from Anaxagoras to Thomas Aquinas, and of some modern ones, such as Descartes, Leibniz and Kant, only to cite a few of the most important. Some of them, such as Aristotle and Descartes, personally undertook an empirical research about living beings. The case of Aristotle is particularly interesting since he is not only one of the fathers of philosophy, but he is also seen as the founder of scientific biology.

These philosophers have passed onto us a treasure of wisdom about the phenomenon of life that should be welcomed in the contemporary debate. Without this precious heritage of knowledge, our current research on life would be irretrievably impoverished.

Various other thinkers have wondered about life in a direct way. For instance, the Romantic *Naturphilosophie* started in the wake of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Other authors in the German world, each one in his own way, have also tried to think of life in philosophical terms; these include Driesch, Uexküll, Vollmer, Jonas, Bertalanffy and Schrödinger, to cite only some of the most outstanding. In addition, we must recall the contributions to PhL, in the Francophone world, by authors such as Bernard, Bergson, Teilhard, Bachelard, Canguilhem, Morin and Prigogine, among others.

The second above-mentioned perspective avoids any direct philosophical investigation on the phenomenon of life, and limits itself to the reflection on natural sciences that study the phenomenon, especially biology. In this perspective, the main topics come from various biological theories, and especially by the Darwinian theory of evolution. Thus, the so-called PhB, which originated in the 1970s, was initially just a philosophical reflection on the Darwinian theory of evolution.

In fact, the first promoters of this new field of study were evolutionary biologists like Francisco Ayala and Ernst Mayr, a Spaniard and a German respectively, who were pursuing their academic careers in the U.S. These two prestigious biologists were soon joined by American and British philosophers, such as Michael Ruse, Elliot Sober and David Hull, among others, who saw in the Darwinian theory of evolution a kind of ultimate metaphysical truth. The agenda of PhB in those early years included dealing with reductionism and with problems internal to Darwinism. Fortunately, PhB has been more and more open to other biological theories. In recent years, it has embarked on an intense research program concerning the philosophical implications of systematics, molecular biology and genetics, the implications of the theories of development, ecological theories, synthetic biology, artificial life, and many more.

The poor communication between the philosophical perspectives mentioned above has made the philosophical study of life more difficult. For this reason, their convergence seems now inevitable. On the one hand, PhL does

not exclude the information provided by the biological sciences. *Philosophers of life* take into account – as they have always done – the information that contemporary biology can provide them. On the other hand, the rejection of the study of life using a directly philosophical method does not imply a complete rejection of the study of life itself. Even though indirectly, contemporary PhB also wonders about the phenomenon of life and seeks to understand it. In recent years, with the progressive loss of prestige of positivism that downgraded philosophy to a second-order field of knowledge, PhB has opened itself to problems that are already very close to PhL, problems that deal with the ontology of organisms, the causality in living systems and teleology.

The study of life, then, requires the cooperation of both traditions. A possible form of collaboration consists in the review and application of the legacy of classical authors, who are equally respected by PhL and PhB. The paradigmatic case is that of Aristotle. It is well known that Darwin praised his biology and that it has recently been included among the pioneering works of English-speaking authors such as Balme, Lennox and others. On the other hand, the continental philosophy that started in the Middle Ages has also paid attention to Aristotle in all his facets, including his works with a great bi-philosophical content, such as the treatises *On the Soul* and *Metaphysics*.

As a modest contribution to the connection between traditions through the work of Aristotle, I will reflect on the concept of *difference* (*diaphora*) and use it to think about the ontology of the living being. It is a key concept in Aristotle's biological and metaphysical works, as it is in contemporary continental philosophy, from Heidegger onwards, as well as in current developmental biology. The notion of difference, in addition to connecting traditions, is crucial to understand the ontology of living beings, their development, individuality and identity, which are generated precisely by *differentiation*. It also has an immediate application to anthropological questions as well as to issues of practical philosophy.

## 2. THINKING LIFE OR THINKING THE LIVING BEING?

Before discussing the notion of difference, let me make a necessary terminological clarification. So far, I have used for simplicity the term "life". We have seen that philosophy can investigate life directly (PhL) and indirectly via biology (PhB). But is it really life that philosophy should reflect upon? In my opinion, the entity philosophy must focus on, directly or indirectly, is not life per se, but rather the *living being*, that is, the concrete living being. Life can be either a mere abstract concept, i.e. what all living beings have in common, or it can be something concrete, i.e. the set of functions performed by a living being, or by a group of living beings, or by the totality of them. In both cases, i.e. whether we see life as an abstraction or as a set of functions, the existence

of something that we can call life depends on the most basic existence of living beings. Life does not exist, as such, at the margin of concrete living beings. Our moral duties, for example, primarily concern these beings and not life in general. Accordingly, the focus of philosophy must be, first of all, to find out what a living being is. Indeed, from an Aristotelian perspective, living beings are substances to the highest degree.<sup>1</sup>

We could look for other terms, but I believe that they would all be less precise. For example, for some, biology is the science that studies *living matter*. Similarly, we could speak of a philosophy of living matter. However, as we already know, there is no difference at all between living matter and non-living matter. The carbon that forms part of the atmosphere is not different from that which forms part of a tree. The only thing that differentiates matter is its integration – or not – into a living being. Therefore, the notion of matter depends strictly upon that of the living being. Thus, the living matter cannot be the principal object of study of any branch of philosophy or of biology. The biologist must obtain knowledge about the matter from living beings, and this knowledge is a necessary – albeit not sufficient – condition for knowing living beings. However, it is clear that the biologist's principal object of study is the living being as such, and not the living matter.

Even the use of the expression “living beings” can cause confusion, since we are not speaking of beings to which life is added, that is of beings that exist *and also* live, but rather of beings whose mode of being is to live, which means that in them being and living cannot be separated. For example, a dog that is not alive is not a dog in any way; it might be the representation of a dog or the cadaver of a dog, but it is not a dog. If it is not living, it does not exist. It would thus be more appropriate to talk about “the livings” rather than of “the living beings”.<sup>2</sup> My aim here is, therefore, to clarify the ontology of *the livings* from the point of view of philosophy. We can begin with a brief phenomenological approach to the living being. Living beings can be recognized at first sight because they present us with a series of very special features that their ontology should account for:

First of all, from the perspective of perception, they clearly seem to be unities *that are defined with regards to their environment*, or to their background.

<sup>1</sup> The philosopher of biology M. GRENE argues that «Aristotle's biology may have laid the cornerstone for his metaphysics and his logic, indeed, of his entire philosophy» (*A Portrait of Aristotle*, Faber & Faber, London 1998, p. 32). The Cambridge historian of science, Sir Geoffrey LLOYD, in a talk presented in Madrid, assured his audience that «Living creatures are the paradigmatic and primary examples of substances in the *Metaphysics* [of Aristotle]». Cfr. also G.E.R. LLOYD, *Aristotle: The Growth and Structure of his Thought*, CUP, Cambridge 1968; G.E.R. LLOYD, *Aristotelian Explorations*, CUP, Cambridge 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Having made this clarification, I will keep using the more common formulae “living beings” and “living things”.

ii) A step further in our observation and reflection will help us recognize that all living beings have a certain unity; they are *individual unities* and, in many cases, they are also indivisible.

iii) The separation of the living being with regards to its environment, as well as its individual unity, makes an inner side appear, in the most diverse senses and at various degrees. The living being seems to have, in all cases, a certain degree of intimacy. When an internal realm appears, an external environment inevitably comes into being too. Wherever there is a living being, there is *an interior and an exterior*, as well as a set of *relationships* that the living being creates between these two realms.

iv) Living beings, in addition, seem to have a *more objective existence* than any other entity, be it artificial, natural or conceptual. The limits of a certain mountain are conventional and seem to depend on the scale that we decide to adopt. We might hold that any artifact or concept that we might construct ceases to be what it is outside of the cultural realm in which it is produced and employed. However, without any reasonable doubt, it seems to us that living beings exist in themselves, independently of our categorizations of reality. When dealing with concrete living beings, any separation from the common sense realism becomes particularly difficult.

v) A non-deformed contemplation of living beings leads us to see them as beings that exist not just in themselves, but also *for themselves*. They are self-referred, autonomous and self-moving. Their parts and processes maintain themselves and require one another, and they show a beautiful and functional harmony.

vi) The functional or teleological aspects of the living being are related to their capacity of *anticipation*. A living being does not merely react, as it is for any other physical being, but it also acts, takes the initiative, anticipates.

These characteristics make up a description—certainly incomplete—of the intriguing phenomenology of the living beings. They are all produced and explained by their particular ontology.

### 3. LIVING BEINGS AS DIFFERENCES

#### 3. 1. *Constitutive and comparative differences*

We can now apply the concept of difference to the study of the ontology of the living being. The biological texts of Aristotle apply the term *difference* (*diaphora*) to each trait of a living being. Viviparity, being an herbivore, possessing wings or a biliary vesicle are all differences. Indeed, the biology of the Greek thinker is based on differences, not species. For example, since they are both viviparous, one can find in the same passage references to dolphins and horses. Aristotle also investigates the mole because it has two differences, blindness and viviparity, which rarely appear together. His biology deals

therefore with the condition of viviparity, blindness or being herbivorous, rather than with this or that species.

However, the notion of difference has, for the Greek thinker, at least two meanings that should be distinguished. Difference can be understood in a *logical sense*, as a trait that differentiates, distinguishes and separates one class from another, or it can be understood in its *physical sense*. This second meaning refers to a trait that is constitutive of a concrete living being. We can find uses for both senses in our language. According to the first meaning of the word, we say that two entities are different with respect to specific characteristics. In this case, the difference *compares*. When we attribute the second sense to the word “difference”, we are referring to the process of differentiation of a living being, which is equal to its ontogenesis, its development, the genesis of the heterogeneous on the basis of the homogeneous and, indeed, the constitution of the entity itself. Here the difference *constitutes*. In this same way, we use today the concept of differentiation in embryology and in developmental biology to indicate the process by which cells and more differentiated tissues appear from less differentiated ones. The first interpretation of the term is more classificatory, comparative and static, while the second is more dynamic and constitutive. The first is primarily logical while the second is physical. We could say, then, that the comparative differences are, in reality, a byproduct of those which are constitutive.

In the contemporary *philosophy of difference*<sup>3</sup> we can also encounter an idea of constitutive difference that is very close to that of Aristotle. Deleuze’s philosophy is characterized by the deliberate attempt to swap the notions of identity and difference. Traditionally, difference was taken as something secondary and derived from identity. In order for differences to exist, there must be identical entities (each one identical to itself) for which differences may be established. For Deleuze, it is the reverse, with differences generating identities. Now identity takes a secondary role, being a by-product of differences. Indeed, the identity of an entity would be made up of an indefinite set of differences, which at the same time define it internally and distinguish it from other entities.

The two senses of difference also point to two distinct ways of understanding. Having established a difference from a logical standpoint, the resulting knowledge is classificatory, and one attempts to define a living being by comparison with others and by its location in a specific conceptual domain. Difference in the physical sense, however, makes us look at the organization of

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. M. HEIDEGGER, *Identität und Differenz*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1955-57; J. DERRIDA, *L’Écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris 1967; G. DELEUZE, *Différence et répétition*, P.U.F., Paris 1968; J.-F. LYOTARD, *Le différend*, Minuit, Paris 1983; J.A. BELL, *The Problem of Difference*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1998.

a living being, at its internal constitution and at its real relations with others, i.e. at its individual form.

The reference to an individual form – the *form of life* in the case of living things – might seem unusual. However, I believe there are good arguments in favor of this description. If we take into account recent research into his biology, Aristotle can be perfectly interpreted as defending a form that is quantitatively and qualitatively individual.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless we are still concerned with the question of the unity of the living thing, since we are still considering *differences*, in plural. Will it be possible to integrate all of them into a single one?

### 3. 2. *The unity of differences in the final difference*

The constitutive difference can only be one and unique, since it constitutes a living being that is one and unique. Even more, the constitutive difference is, in reality, identified with the very substance that it constitutes. Various texts in *On the Soul* and in the rest of the biological works of Aristotle point in this direction. I will now focus on one of them, perhaps the most significant one. There is a passage in the treatise *On the Parts of Animals* in which Aristotle affirms that «the difference is the form (*eidōs*) in the matter».<sup>5</sup> For some scholars this assertion might sound odd.<sup>6</sup> It is odd indeed if we look at it from a logical point of view, but not if we do so from a physical point of view: it is the difference that is closer to the matter. The difference is the form in the matter, the form in the concrete individual substance, and, actually, this same substance,<sup>7</sup> since there are many texts in which Aristotle reaffirms the unity of matter and form.<sup>8</sup> It is the form, understood as difference, which here plays the role of the principle of individuation in an undifferentiated or generic matter. As a result, the constitutive difference is not an abstract form, but rather the form

<sup>4</sup> In this interpretation I follow contemporary authors such as Pierre PELLEGRIN and David BALME. I have presented a detailed argument in favor of this position in A. MARCOS, *Postmodern Aristotle*, CSP, Newcastle 2012. Cfr. also P. PELLEGRIN, *Aristotle's Classification of Animals: Biology and the Conceptual Unity of the Aristotelian Corpus*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 1986; D. BALME, *Aristotle's biology was not essentialist*, in A. GOTTHELF & J. LENNOX (eds.) (Eds.), *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology*, CUP, Cambridge 1987, pp. 291-312; D. BALME, *Matter in definition: a reply to G.E.R. Lloyd*, in DEVEREUX & PELLEGRIN (eds.), *Biologie, Logique et Métaphysique chez Aristote*, CNRS, Paris 1990, pp. 49-54.

<sup>5</sup> ARISTOTLE, *De Partibus Animalium*, 643a 24.

<sup>6</sup> There are even editors and translators of the texts of ARISTOTLE who have tried to modify it (cfr. I. DÜRING, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition*, Almqvist & Wiksell in Komm, Stockholm 1957; P. LOUIS, *Les parties des animaux*, Budé, Paris 1956). Nonetheless, it appears only in this way in all manuscripts except one. See, in this regard, R. BARTOLOMÉ and A. MARCOS, *Aristóteles: Obra biológica*, Luarna, Madrid 2010, p. 113, n. 166, in [www.fyl.uva.es/~wfilosof/webMarcos/textos/Textos\\_2013/Aristoteles\\_Obra\\_biologica.pdf](http://www.fyl.uva.es/~wfilosof/webMarcos/textos/Textos_2013/Aristoteles_Obra_biologica.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See, in this regard, F. INCIARTE, *El reto del positivismo lógico*, Rialp, Madrid 1974, p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* VIII 6; *De Anima* II 1; *De Partibus Animalium* I.

in the matter, that is, the concrete living being. This reading is not exceptional, but it links in a natural way to other Aristotelian texts from the Book II of the treatise *On the Soul* and the *Metaphysics*, Books VII and VIII.

From a physical point of view, it is therefore clear that the constitutive difference is unique and that it is identified with the living being, thus constituting its *identity*. Martin Heidegger offered some of the most profound and influential insights on this topic, i.e. the relationship between difference and identity. A lecture given in 1957, together with another text from the same period, were published with the title *Identity and Difference*. The book is interesting both for its content and for the influence that it had. During the period of Postmodern philosophy, this text was well known and was seen as marking the beginning of the so-called *philosophy of difference*. «The close relation [*zusammengehörigkeit*] of identity and difference – says Heidegger – will be shown in this publication to be that which gives us thought».<sup>9</sup>

I believe that reassessing the notion of difference, dynamics and vital aspects of reality and denouncing the excesses of an identity reason should be judged positively. We hear the philosophers of difference against a background of Bergsonian resonances leading us to the mobile, the fluid, the concrete, the diverse, the living. Nevertheless, we should ask ourselves if, from the basis of differences alone, we will ever be able to understand living beings. In short, forgetting differences distances us from the real world and from living beings. If reason forgets difference, then it becomes separate from life and from experience, from development, from time, from the diverse, from the plural, from the concrete and from the real. However, the unilateral focus on differences is not useful either because it leads to fragmentation, deconstruction, relativism and, ultimately, to nihilism. For all these reasons I believe that Heidegger was right in inviting us to think of identity and difference *together*, as closely related, as belonging to each other (*zusammengehörigkeit*). We need to mitigate the tendency to relativism also by appealing to the pole of identity and to the stability of substances. We think identity and difference together when we come to realize that the final difference is the substance itself, the concrete living being; it is the final difference that grants identity and individuality to the living being. Can we then somehow capture this difference through our concepts? To answer this question we need to discuss the intelligibility of the difference.

### 3. 3. *The intelligibility of the final difference*

Aristotle tries to close the gap between our conceptual frameworks and the final difference in two different ways. He first tries a reform of the theory of

<sup>9</sup> M. HEIDEGGER, *Identity and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002, p. 21, trans. by J. STAMBAUGH.



definition, but he fails. He then looks for another form of knowledge (*alle gnosis*<sup>10</sup>), this time via a new constellation of ideas, including analogy, metaphor, similarity, prudence and practical truth. Current philosophy of difference has noted the failure of the first path, that of the definition and of the univocal *logos*, but it does not know how to value the potential of the second approach.

What does this other form of knowledge (*alle gnosis*), that brings us closer to the final difference, consist in? First of all, for this knowledge to exist, we must acknowledge the formal nature of the difference as the principle of individuation of the living being. Only if we recognize this formal aspect of living individuals, they become intelligible. One can interpret the philosophy of Aristotle in many ways and, over time, many readings have been offered. However, as we have seen earlier on the basis of a close study of the biological texts of Aristotle, a reading is currently emerging according to which the form is individual. It is present quantitatively in each and every living being, and it is also qualitatively present in a gradual manner. That is, the qualitative individual differentiation admits some degrees; thus, a bee, whose behavioral plasticity is meager (its behavior is genetically regulated in a rigid manner), shows few differences with respect to other bees, while a dolphin, who can learn more, shows more difference with respect to other dolphins. Accordingly, there are cases where what we learn about a species can practically exhaust what we can learn about each individual, and other cases where, even once we know the traits of the species, there is still much more to learn about each individual, which means that we are still far from the final difference that identifies it.

The distinction between the logical (*logikos*) and the physical (*physikos*) points of view<sup>11</sup> is tantamount to the distinction between a general point of view, i.e. of conceptual systems, and a point of view that is focused on the living being itself, real and concrete. This distinction would be meaningless if *being* and *thinking* were indeed one and the same. Affirming the total identity of being and thinking means forgetting or denying their difference, as well as the differences between living beings of the same species. Acquiring knowledge requires effort, mistakes and a certain degree of inaccuracy. The fallible, contrived and unpredictable nature of human knowledge makes us realize the difference that exists between being and thinking. At the same time, achievements and acquisitions, moments of lucidity and even our very survival clearly indicate that the gap between being and thinking can be closed. Reality is not concept. Nevertheless, the two can be linked thanks to the creative work of humans. Nature is not identical to the concept, but it is intelligible, in a contrived, unpredictable, not algorithmic, fallible but reviewable critical way.

<sup>10</sup> ARISTOTLE, *De Generatione Animalium*, 742 b 32.

<sup>11</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Physica*, 204b 1-12. Cfr. also *Metaphysics*, Z and H.

It is therefore possible that the very relationship between being and thinking may be better described through the concept of similarity.

The similarity we are referring to cannot be a dyadic relationship between individuals, available in the world to be used and consumed by science. It is rather a triadic relationship between two individuals and an active subject. It is one of those triadic relationships that Peirce talks about.<sup>12</sup> Without a creative subject there would not actually be any similarity. Both in Aristotle and in Peirce, similarity is understood as a relationship between three poles. The third pole is a human subject who creatively actualizes a similarity that exists as a real possibility between concrete individuals. Similarity is not one of those relationships that Peirce calls relationships of “brute force” among pairs, but it is instead a triadic relationship. Nevertheless, that character does not prevent similarity from having an objective nature. If similarity did lack an objective basis, we could establish relationships of similarity between any individual and we know from experience that this is not the case. Indeed, sometimes reality says no to our desire to connect beings or processes, our classifications are sometimes erroneous, laws do not always predict correctly, theories, models and metaphors with which we try to understand reality are not always satisfactory. This is due to reality having its importance too. Indeed, similarity has an objective basis since it is rooted in reality.

Given how we have characterized similarity, its discovery will always be creative. Indeed, a metaphor can be understood as a creative discovery.<sup>13</sup> For Aristotle, metaphorization is a privileged way of creatively discovering similarity.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Aristotle said that metaphor is more than anything what lends clarity<sup>15</sup> and what puts the object before our eyes and makes the similarity clear.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to similarity, we can ascend from the game of physical identities and differences to the game of concepts and representations. We do so by actualizing the similarities that exist as possibilities in reality, thus creatively discovering similarities.

It is true that our knowledge of reality does not exhaust it, and that there will never be an absolute identity between being and thinking, between what we know about living beings and the concrete reality of each of them. However, metaphorization, as an active grasping of the similarity and as an analogical interpretation of life sciences, is the form of knowledge – another form of knowledge (*alle gnosis*) – that brings us the closest to the concrete reality of each living being, to its identity, to its final difference.

<sup>12</sup> C.S. PEIRCE, *Collected Papers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1932-1935, vol. 5, p. 484.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. A. MARCOS, *The Tension between Aristotle's Theories and Uses of Metaphor*, «Studies in History and Philosophy of Science», 28 (1997), pp. 123-139.

<sup>14</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetica*, 1459a 5-9. Cfr. also ARISTOTLE, *Rhetorica*, 1410b 10-20 and 1412a 10-12.

<sup>15</sup> *Rhetorica*, 1405a 8 et seqq.

<sup>16</sup> *Rhetorica*, 1411a 25 et seqq.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Life provokes our curiosity, amazes and disconcerts us with its intriguing properties. To begin with, it always presents itself in the form of living individuals interacting with each other and with their environment. In each one of them, as Aristotle says, «there is something natural and beautiful». <sup>17</sup> Their study is therefore worth the effort and historically it has been attempted in numerous ways. Philosophy has greatly studied the living being from two perspectives, which I have labeled PhL and PhB. Communication between them has not always been optimal, but in recent years there has been a certain convergence that can only result in a better comprehension of living beings. I have attempted here to sketch a phenomenology of the living being, as well as an ontology compatible with that phenomenology, which is inspired by both PhL and PhB.

In particular, I have investigated the possibilities that the use of the concept of difference opens. This concept has been, and remains, the object of attention for both PhL and PhB, and thus it seems to provide a convergence point. The main thesis that I have defended in this article is that each individual living being *is* a difference. In this context, I employ the notion of difference in its physical and constitutive sense, the sense that it has in the so-called philosophy of difference as well as in developmental biology. This type of ontology certainly presents some issues. For example, it makes us question the relationship between the constitutive difference and the identity of each living being. I have proposed the idea that both faces of the reality of the living being, identity and difference, must be considered jointly and in relation, since, as Heidegger says, they belong to one another. On the other hand, this type of ontology raises a serious epistemological problem, which deals with the doubtful intelligibility of the final difference, which I have sought to address by appealing to the notions of similarity, analogy and metaphor.

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<sup>17</sup> ARISTOTLE, *De Partibus Animalium*, 645a 20.

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ABSTRACT: Philosophy has investigated the phenomenon of life [throughout this article, the word “life” is used in its biological sense, not in its biographical sense] from two perspectives: the philosophy of life (PhL) and the philosophy of biology (PhB). Both perspectives are currently converging (section 1). PhL uses more and more information from biology, and PhB has recently broadened its scope to include problems such as the concept of life and the ontology of living beings. This article claims that the concept of living being is prior to that of life, and that we cannot understand what life is if we do not deal first with the ontological question of the living being (section 2). In order to investigate this kind of problem we need the conceptual resources of both the above-mentioned perspectives. The convergence between these two perspectives needs therefore to be welcomed and fostered. In order to contribute to this convergence, this paper addresses the ontology of living beings via the concept of difference (section 3) which belongs to both traditions. We find that the concept of difference is already present in Aristotle's biological and philosophical works. Today it has appeared forcefully in the so-called philosophy of difference, as well as in the biology of development. The thesis that will be defended here is that each living being is a difference, and that finding out what this is will require metaphorical creativity and the analogical use of biological concepts. These are the conclusions summarized in section 4.

KEYWORDS: philosophy of life, philosophy of biology, living being, difference, metaphor.