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Turning to life: A comment

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Life is a concept that is commonly encountered in ethnographic literature. Most social anthropologists seem happy to live with a broadly uncritical approach to it. In recent years, however, it has come to our notice that if we truly aim to take on interdisciplinarity in any serious way, we cannot avoid dealing with *life* as an analytical tool. In this essay, I examine the notion of life in light of ethnographic theory. I outline three broad families of meaning of the category “life” as it appears in the ethnographic register. Taking recourse to Marilyn Strathern’s inspiration, I conclude that these meanings can be integrated if we see them in terms of “scale.”

Keywords: life, scale, personhood, transcendence, ethnographic theory

Was there ever a time when anthropologists did not speak of life? Over the past few years, some of us have been increasingly concerned to understand the role “life” plays in our theoretical undertakings (e.g., Toren 2012). In particular, it has come to our notice that, if we truly aim to take on interdisciplinarity in a serious way, we cannot avoid having to deal with *life* as an analytical tool (e.g., Thompson 2007). How else can we hope to reach across “the opposition of *physis* and *nomos*, nature and law (or nature and convention) that has been inscribed in Western ontology since it was elaborated by Greek sophists in the fifth century BC” (Sahlins 2011: 7)?

As human lives are part of the greater process of life, our ethnographies cannot afford to be exclusively placed within the realm of *nomos*. As Vicki Kirby puts it, “our corporeal realities and their productive iterations *are* material reinventions. Life reads and rewrites itself, and this operation of universal genesis and reproduction is even internal to the tiny marks on this page, which are effective transubstantiations” (2011: 1). Since the days when Arthur Maurice Hocart wrote his essay on “The lifegiving myth” ([1952] 2004: 9–27), we have known that sociality is both part of life and actively mobilises life. This applies both in organismic life—where, for example, the very atmosphere that we breathe was the product of cyanobacteria—and in human life—where our physical survival is assured by food, cover, and safety that only sociality affords. As Tim Ingold put it, “this life-process is also the process of formation of the landscapes in which people have lived” (1993: 152).

In the pages that follow, I examine the notion of life in light of ethnographic theory. I must start, however, with an initial note of caution: mine is not an argument in favor of biological reductionism. Rather, it is a call to an anthropological outlook that reaches across the biological/cultural divide. This, too, is nothing new in our canonical texts. Let me give you a random example of how such a broad conception of life has always been implicit in the analytical tool box of social scientists. This is how Robert Park—the apical ancestor of all

urban studies—defines *city* in 1925: “The city is . . . a state of mind,” it is not “merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the *vital* processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature” (1925: 1; my emphasis). Much water has passed under the theoretical bridge since the days of Park and Hocart, but their insights into the centrality of life in human sociality remain deeply relevant today. More recently, Fiona Bowie echoes their insights when she claims that a concern with “life force” is at the root of all phenomena that we call witchcraft (2000: 219).

The meaning of life

For a biologist, the meaning of life is a central and never postponed issue. Most social scientists, however, seem happy to live with a broadly uncritical approach to life, as if they were bashful concerning the expression in face of the famous comical take by *Monty Python* (Jones 1983). Not only do we fail to connect to biological approaches to life but also we are often uncertain as to whether the term bears any specific analytical significance for our purposes.

Recently, while discussing with Federico Neiburg his work on Haiti, he called my attention to the central significance in the local worldview of the expression *chache lavi* (making a living for oneself), where the implication of fate or destiny and the sense of struggle are strongly present. The concept of *lavi*, he sustains, is central to an understanding of economic activity in Haiti’s challenging circumstances. In fact, the concept has a familiar ring about it; most experienced ethnographers, I am sure, will find echoes of their own work in Haiti’s *lavi*. One is legitimately led to ask: How does this meaning of life—implying struggle and fate—relate to the broader biological meaning of life as appertaining to entities that are capable of growing, metabolizing, responding to stimuli, and reproducing? Are the two meanings at all related to each other? The matter hardly stops there. *Life* as an analytical category has an important and consolidated role in the history of ethnography to refer to what

Ludwig Wittgenstein called “a form of life” ([1953] 1967, II, xi: 226; §432: 128). It is best typified by the meaning of the word as used in such classics as Henri-Alexandre Junod’s *The life of a South African tribe* ([1926–27] 1962), Melville Herskovits’s *Life in a Haitian valley* ([1937] 2007), or Oscar Lewis’ *Life in a Mexican village: Tepoztlán restudied* (1951).

In the case of humans, this meaning of the word might be succinctly described as people’s effortful confrontation with a *habitus* (cf. Mauss [1935] 2007). Indeed, the tradition of ethnographic studies to which I am referring here (as typified by Junod, Arnold van Gennep, Lewis, or Robert Redfield) is held together by the way in which it values the purposive struggle on the part of the members of the group being studied to engage with historically rooted patterns of behavior. *Life* in this sense does not properly refer to a metabolic process but rather to a distinctive tradition of organizing collectively the sustainability of singular living organisms—and that is why social situations of “limit,” where metabolic life and fertility are threatened (as typically is the case in Lewis’s works) are a central concern of this ethnographic tradition. In fact, such studies are often structured rhetorically around a notion of the “life-course” of persons.

One cannot write ethnography at all without recourse to analytical categories. Similarly, one cannot hope to understand how those analytical categories are related to the local instances of communication observed in ethnographic research without making a reference to a lived world also experienced by the ethnographer. We might satisfy ourselves with a culturalist response to this question by claiming that we should not confuse the emic with the etic meanings of the expressions. Such a position holds that ethnographic theory must limit itself to clarifying the meaning of concepts in each particular instance of usage. Of course, we agree that ethnographers must do that—for that is the allotted task of ethnography—but is it possible to do only that? It is not! Translation depends foundationally on a triangulation with world, as Donald Davidson has shown (2004; see Pina-Cabral 1993).

How can I, then, approach the meaning that something has for someone else if I do not triangulate it with a shared world? How else can I move beyond interpersonal indeterminacy? Ethnography as a method of evidence gathering—particularly when it involves participant observation—is precisely justified by the possibility of triangulating with experiential presence. The intersubjective relations between the ethnographer and her respondents always occur somewhere in the world and always involve at least one living being: the ethnographer.

Three questions arise, therefore. First, is the emphasis on life common to world ethnography? Second, if the answer is positive, what life are we talking about? Third, are the ethnographers and their readers not necessarily alive?

Let us remember Hocart's famous dictum:

Long ago [man] ceased merely to live, and began to think how he lived; he ceased merely to feel life; he conceived it. Out of all phenomena contributing to life he formed a concept of life, fertility, prosperity, vitality. He realised that there was something which distinguished the animate from the inanimate, and this something he called life. ([1936] 1979: 32)

Back in 1986, when I published my monograph on the worldview of the rural population of the Alto Minho (see Pina-Cabral 1986: 1), I was struck by how true this appreciation was about my own ethnographic material and I placed it as the epigraph to the whole book. I saw that once I identified the deep currents running within the *habitus* of the people I studied in upland Minho (northwest Portugal), the importance of a sense of “life, fertility, prosperity, vitality” was undeniably one of the central structuring elements. Back then, I used Redfield's notion of the “view of the good life” as the mode of referring to it ([1954] 2011).

Note how, in the above assessment, Hocart not only conjoins the various meanings of life but also rejects radically the etic/emic distinction—indeed, as many of us do today due to

our explicitly antirepresentationalist stance (cf. Pina-Cabral 2017: 124). He suggests that the continuity that he draws between the different meanings of life is not only a characteristic of the analytical category of life that he proposes, but is also a stochastic recurrence among the various instances of use of proximate concepts that we encounter in the ethnographic and historical literature.

The need to be able to capture the sense of continuity that ethnography suggests between these different definitions of life is an old problem of ethnographic theory. In his famous attempt at solving the problem via his “theory of needs,” Bronisław Malinowski was inspired by Aristotle’s theory of economics ([1944] 2002: 85ff.). Although his attempt remains as unsatisfactory today as it was when he first proposed it, in truth, a better answer has taken a long time to emerge. Most twentieth-century anthropologists settled willingly for a condition in which there was a vast black box between “meaning” and “life”—yet another manifestation of the *physis/nomos* background assumption. Sociocultural anthropologists, on the whole, preferred not to concern themselves with biological life, as it seemed to them too distant from the propositional formulations that characterize people’s fateful struggle for life, *chache lavi*, or “the life of the people of Tepoztlán”—and that is what they saw as their dedicated subject matter.

This condition reproduces the doubts raised recently by some of my Facebook interlocutors, for whom the rooting of personhood in the biological process of life that I propose in *World* (2017) is a source of puzzlement. In one of his recent Facebook aphorisms, Marshall Sahlins comments: “You can step into the same river twice if you just give it a name. The true essentialists are symbol-plying humans who assemble differences into similarities—identities and categories—by the selective valuation of co-existing resemblances. Ever-changing reality is a nice place to visit, philosophically, but no one ever lived there” (Sahlins 2017b). Note how, at the end of the sentence, he equates living with

meaning, as if each one of us who is alive and capable of thinking propositionally about our life were capable of encompassing conceptually all that occurs to us as live beings.

Sahlins is being provocative and we cannot take his aphorism as anything but an encouragement to question our background assumptions; otherwise, this would be a puzzling declaration on the part of someone who continues to consider himself a “historical materialist.” Of course, we all know that the social life of humans who are endowed with propositional thinking depends on a series of reifications that come to acquire a relative fixity over time, forming what anthropologists call “a culture.” Is there anyone who has any doubts concerning that? But if that were all, then we would utterly fail to explain the processuality of history; we would be obliged to reject indeterminacy (as indeed Sahlins suggests we might have to do in a subsequent Facebook message). We would end up in a world of empty structures, a circular world of lifeless meanings.

To the contrary, as Donald Davidson stresses (2014), communication is not carried out in spite of indeterminacy and underdetermination; rather, these are conditions for communication. Stochasticism—to use Gregory Bateson’s preferred expression—that is, “a sequence of events that combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain outcomes of the random are allowed to endure” (1979: 245)—is the only mode through which meaning can be constituted both for life in the broader organic sense and for life in the other two senses outlined above. In conclusion, as suggested by Hocart, *life* as an analytical category must be able to capture the continuity between the different senses of life that we encounter in the ethnographic literature.

In any case, we are encouraged in doing this by Edmund Husserl’s own notion of *lebenswelt* (lifeworld), which he conceived, some commentators claim, precisely in order to clarify the fact that the experiential world is a world of organic living. Husserl specifies:

The life-world, for us who wakingly live in it, is always there, existing in advance for

us, the “ground” of all praxis, whether theoretical or extratheoretical. The world is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world. (from Husserl’s *Crisis* §37, quoted in Føllesdal 2010: 40)

In other words, *life* in the biological sense is always the background upon which all human life in all other senses can be constituted. Contrary to Sahlins’s aphorism, we cannot ever step into the same river twice because our capacities at concept creation are rooted in the processes of communication that characterize human sociality and these, in turn, are based on life’s intentionality—that is, our capacity to address the world purposefully. We always “live-in-certainty-of-the-world.”

In short, therefore, in ethnographic theory, we are bound to treat the analytical category *life* as a continuum, in the way Hocart suggests in the quote above. However, unlike other living beings, human persons are not only engaged in intentionality but also in propositional reflexive thinking. This necessarily involves them in distinct modes of approaching life and their own condition as living organisms—in human sociality, biological life becomes *chache lavi*.

In early ontogeny, when they enter into human modes of communication (thus becoming a person), humans become capable of symbolic manipulation of the world—as Hocart put it, they “cease merely to live, and begin to think how they live; they cease merely to feel life; they conceive it.” Persons transcend (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 31–72)—but who are the agents of transcendence? The answer surely is Husserl’s: persons-who-wakingly-live-in-the-world. Odd as it may sound, persons transcend; not gods, ancestors, or ghosts. We must distinguish living persons from the other hypostatizations of personhood that characterize human sociality and that are made possible due to what Charles Sanders Peirce called

symbolic thinking (Short 2007). So the matter of “animism,” that which Sahlins calls “metapersons” (2017a)—that is, entities to which personhood is attributed but that are not living humans, such as mountains, souls, divinities, sacred animals, ancestors, etc.—is certainly relevant. It is, however, important to realize that human persons (persons-who-wakingly-live-in-the-world) are a condition for the existence of metapersons, not the other way around; thus, for humans, life in its broader continuity is never separable from *chache lavi*.

This is a matter of great relevance to ethnographic theory. Ethnographers are duty bound to develop analytical referents to allow for ethnographic comparison and, in time, contribute toward anthropological theory. But they can only undertake that role because they themselves are persons-who-wakingly-live-in-the-world; sacred mountains, sacred crocodiles, divinities, or ancestors are not ethnographers. Some engagement with life in all of its diverging meanings is a condition for the practice of ethnography, not only because without living-ethnographers ethnography could not be written but also because the complex continuity between the different meanings of life is necessarily part of what the ethnographer will have to capture in his writings, as Hocart clearly perceived and our contemporary colleagues corroborate. Life, therefore, presents itself to the ethnographer as a matter of scales; differentiated but interdependent *strata* of life. I propose here, therefore, to outline three broad families of meaning of the category *life* that unavoidably constitute bays for ethnographic description. Let us distinguish them as *life*¹, *life*², and *life*³.

Three scales of living

*Life*¹ is the life of organisms—that is, the process of self-organization of systems that maintain their sensory states within physiological bounds. This, however, assumes communication. This is how Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses the idea: “The phenomenon of life appeared . . . at the moment when a piece of extension, by the disposition of its

movements and by the allusion that each movement makes to all the others, turned back upon itself and began to express something, to manifest an interior being externally” ([1942] 1963: 163). Whether biological self-organization emerges spontaneously as the inevitable product of the interrelation between bounded systems, as presently seems most likely (Friston 2013), or life’s purposiveness has another origin (e.g., Kirby’s quantum anthropology [2011] or Andy Pross’s chemical account [2012]), it remains clear that biological life is a characteristic of systems that are (a) *bounded*, (b) internally *differentiated*, and (c) *autopoietic* in the sense of engaged in dynamic adjustment to their environment (see Thompson 2007).

*Life*² is the life of sociality—it refers to the way in which *life*¹ gives rise to “forms of life.” Like *life*¹, *life*² is also characterized by boundedness and is also engaged in a dynamic relation with the environment. There is in it a deep element of purposiveness, in the sense that it involves a constant attempt at the maximization of life—no longer at the level of the organism but rather of the group. The collective element is central to this acceptance. *Life*² is not restricted to humans: bees, birds, fish, and mammals have “forms of life” that are clearly identifiable. It makes sense to speak of the “life of sparrows” or “the life of bees” in the same way that it makes sense to speak of “the life of Tepoztlán” or “the life of a South African tribe.”

When we speak of life in this second acceptance, we are not primarily referring to specific gestures undertaken by living organisms (although that is surely part of it) but to collective modes of doing, to a habitus, to stochastically emergent properties inherent in a certain social environment. This shared purposiveness is the ground upon which kinship is built: as Sahlins himself puts it, “kinsmen are persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose *lives* are joined and interdependent” (2011: 11; my emphasis). This typically involves a sense of embodied cosustenance. What Peter Gow states of the Piro is indeed true across most of the

ethnographic record: “Native communities focus on the relationships in which food is produced, circulated, and consumed, such that for native people, to live with kin is life itself” (1991: 119). There is a collectivist implication to this second meaning of life, therefore, but one that always depends on a focus on the intentional efforts of the singular living organisms that remain alive (be they animals or persons).

This sense of life, however, is breached by a major line of differentiation. While bees and birds engage intentionally with world, they do not possess propositional, reflexive thinking; only humans who have become persons (persons-who-wakingly-live-in-the-world) possess it. Persons hypostatize their own forms of life and, thus, they can symbolically manipulate them and treat them as objects of contemplation and of fabrication. Persons do not only live, they conceive life, as Hocart prophetically stated. Thus, in the case of humans, *life*² assumes a “richer” form of purposiveness than it does with other animals—to use Martin Heidegger’s terms (cf. [1929–30] 1995). Typically, it assumes forms of purposiveness that are dependent on the way in which persons, when they become persons, become capable of transcendence; that is, they become capable of seeing the world as if they were outside of it. This means that human sociality is deeply inscribed by the metapersons (see Sahlins 2017a) that humans postulate and reproduce and that, in turn, come to affect the persons-who-wakingly-live-in-the-world that are a condition for the existence of metapersons. No person ever was the first-person. The *habitus* is a central aspect of personal constitution (see Pina-Cabral 2007: 99–134), which means that transcendence is as much a product as a condition of personhood—much like oxygen is both a product and a condition of most forms of life. Therefore, animism—in the sense of a propensity to hypostatize metapersons—is a function of personhood, not some primitivist trait (see Pina-Cabral forthcoming).

*Life*³ is the use of life that concerns Federico Neiburg when he queries the implications of the Haitian expression *chache lavi*—the Portuguese *fazer-se à vida* or the

English *making a living* would constitute similarly related examples. This third meaning must be differentiated from the earlier two, for it involves a repeated symbolic (propositional) engagement with the world in the face of incompleteness. *Chache lavi* is not only about managing to eat, dwell, and reproduce, it is also about having an honorable life, being a moral person, aiming at “the good life.” Curiously, the sense of singularity that was characteristic of *life*¹ but not *life*² is again a feature of this third acceptance of life.

“Making a living,” as exemplified in the eponymous first film of Charlie Chaplin (Lehrman 1914), is something of a personal pursuit and it has to do with the person’s own sense of moral sustainability in the face of the need to thrive. Chaplin’s tramp perfectly exemplifies the pathos that is involved in the ultimate incapacity to achieve “the good life” in spite of the constant efforts to achieve it. *Life*³ is the *life of destiny* in that it involves the impossibility of complete transcendence.

The three distinct meanings of life that we encounter in the ethnographic record were treated here as “scales.” Therefore, let us at this point focus briefly on the meaning of *scale* by taking Marilyn Strathern’s inspiration (2005). According to her, a “scale” involves “switching from one perspective on a phenomenon to another, as anthropologists routinely do in the organising of their materials” (2005: xiv). The notion of scale implies relative distance to the object—that is, relative separation. Therefore, it assumes the existence of separable entities—a feature of life’s intentionality, the capacity to address the world by relation to a part of that world (see Hutto and Myin 2013). This is how Strathern puts it: scale “is made possible by a modelling of nature that regards the world as naturally composed of entities—a multiplicity of individuals or classes or relationships—whose characteristics are in turn regarded as only ever partially described by analytic schema” (Strathern 2005: xiv).

What is at stake here is not the mere sideways shifting of position, as it were. “Perspective” refers here to “the cultural practice of position-taking” (Strathern 2005:

121n2). As Strathern goes on to explain, “the idea of perspective suggests one will encounter whole fresh sets of information as one moves through various scales—from organism to cell to atomic particle, from society to group to individual” (2005: xix). This latter part of the sentence smuggles in a central aspect of Strathern’s cosmovision that we cannot fail to highlight. See how she classifies the scales: namely, the way she breaks them into the two parallel series (organism / cell / atomic particle // society / group / individual).

The identification of persons with atomic particles involves a major conceptual shift that demands expression by the breaking of the series. As it happens, persons are not atomic particles: they are organisms. Clearly, what does separate the two modalities of scaling—creating at a higher level yet another scale effect—is personal emergence: the fact that, in human sociality, organisms are constituted as persons endowed with propositional thinking. That way, they constitute a new scale of life. We may conclude with Strathern, therefore, that after the emergence of the organism that the intentionality of life implies, the emergence of the person is the single most important perspectival shift in the world of humans.

Metaphysical pluralism

Personal ontogeny—the constitution of persons who are capable of transcending their organismic condition—is the unique characteristic of human life. Faced with other living beings, transcendence is the privilege of persons; it is what allows us to see the world as creation, a world that includes us (see Pina-Cabral 2017). Yet, although persons transcend, they can only do so partially. Persons (whether ethnographers or not) remain bound to life both in the organic and in the collective sense and, to that extent, they are bound by a condition that presents itself as a fatality, a loss of freedom. None of the three scales of life suffices, either for the ethnographic task or for the experience of life itself, in as much as they interact as scales in the experience of any person-who-wakingly-lives-in-the-world. *Life*³ is dependent on *life*¹ in terms that are constituted inside and outside the person by *life*². The

three scales of life do not simply coexist in personal experience; they are also in constant interaction.

In short, organic survival, habitus, and personal destiny are not only built one on top of the other, they interact across scales. Life is complex in that persons inevitably form what mathematicians have been calling since the 1980s non-well-founded sets. These are sets that contain themselves as members, thus forming an infinite sequence of sets, each term of which is an element in the preceding set. Furthermore, this is the very quality that, according to Jagdish Hattiangadi, allows for the emergence of entities: “Though a whole is always composed of its parts, sometimes the types of things that constitute the parts cannot be fully described in all causally relevant respects without describing how they interact with the types of things that are wholes as wholes that are composed out of them” (2005: 89).

As Strathern has taught us, scales interact through “domaining”—that is, the constitution of separate areas of relevance—but also through “magnification”—that is, the increase or reduction of approximation (Strathern 2005: xvi). The complexity resulting from this interaction of the scales of life gives rise to a condition that I have called elsewhere “metaphysical pluralism” (2017). That is, while persons transcend, they never do so absolutely. This means that all human ontologies will necessarily be both incomplete and complex. Therefore, from an ethnographic perspective, the ambivalence of the world that Heidegger identified (its uncertainty, its fuzziness, its indeterminacy) cannot and should not be resolved by the anthropological endeavor; it must remain with us as a challenge, for it is a central conditioning feature of the emergence of persons in the world.

I conclude with ethnographic theory. No human communication can dispense of its historical inherence and it will always involve metaphysical pluralism. In short, no anthropological knowledge can rise above the historicity of the ethnographic encounters that it depends upon. As Husserl identified, the lifeworld of humans involves necessarily the

interaction of the three scales of life. And as Hocart identified, ethnography is not only duty bound to capture the particular modes of integration of the three, but is not even possible without the ethnographer's own immersion in life in its three major senses.

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