

Introduction

Calibrating Limits

Martin Eggen Mogseth and Fartein Hauan Nilsen

Life has always escaped the terms we mobilize to make sense of it. This is even more the case now, we might observe, with the ruptures and shifts thrust forth by the developments of modern technologies. Today, life has become reconstituted in digital and microbiological realms, invisible to the naked eye, yet presented through various media. Procreation has come to take place *ex vivo* and *postmortem*, and new organisms are generated *in silico* (Helmreich 1998, 2001). Meanwhile, human bodies lie frozen in crypts to be awakened (Mercer 2017; Rievman 1979; Romain 2010; Soloviev 1995), cyberspace sustains the dead (Nansen et al. 2014; Ryan 2012; Bennett and Huberman 2015; Huberman 2017, 2018), and molecules connect families and constitute selves (Pálsson 2003; Melhuus 2012; Klotz 2016; Finkler 2017).

Encounterable organic bodies are just one among many manifestations of life, and it is in the name of discerning some of these manifestations that we ask: in the wake of new technoscientific advances, is life redefined? Are its limits rearranged? If so, where do they appear, and may we identify some as preserving their place through technoscientific intervention? Which limits lose their meaning and whence do new meanings appear? Through these and related inquiries, in various disciplines, we identify and explore in the following chapters new modes of being, new modes of mutuality and entanglement, and we locate the limits of life as they may shift under the swaying lantern of technoscientific innovation.

Arguably, the modern fascination with science has historical roots in religious pursuits of transcendence and salvation. Some

Limits of Life

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early drivers for science were the calculation of when the imminent end-of-days would occur and the reclaiming of lost knowledge from Eden (Noble 1999). Furthermore, technology and the spiritual have a long history of mutual entanglement (e.g., Davis 2015; Swatos 1990; Tambiah 1990; Luhrmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010). Such connections are reflected in the chapters of this volume, even more so because the sacredness of life and death may be seen as taking on different forms under modernity, or emanating from different spaces, both hidden and overt, in an ever intricate, interweaving play with the profane. The latter manifests as animality, mundanity, and other antithetical terms that in a world of infinite possibilities may even appeal to us in their stability or subversivism.

This volume leans heavily into digital and transhumanist prospects of longevity, transcendence, and immortality, and even though it begins with an exploration of the biological, there are notable thematic omissions, especially regarding recent breakthroughs in microbiology, virology, and (post-)genomics. This is largely due to the origins of this volume: a two-day seminar at the University of Bergen, of which the following chapters are a result and thus dependent on the interests of the contributors present at the seminar. A follow-up volume would lend more attention to the virus especially, both as an empirical reality and a concept, not just because of the recent global pandemic, which involved both a governmental (in terms of sanctions and shutdowns) and physiological (in terms of illness and lasting health degeneration) delimiting of life, but because the virus itself provokes challenges to life's elemental definitions (Cohen 2011; Fassin and Fourcade 2021). A second volume would also demand deeper considerations of microbiologically constituted selves and entanglements (e.g., à la Ingold and Pálsson 2013). Such wants notwithstanding, this volume involves considerable topical diversity, and we are confident that the problems explored here are both intellectually provocative and thematically timely.

Fixing their gaze on the intersections of life and new technologies, the authors in the following pages engage with a diverse array of topics, beginning with the beginnings of life. In each chapter, life is approached from a different perspective, though

sometimes life is more or less immanent to the perspective employed. To provide some navigation in the vastness inherent to any such exploration, the volume is divided into four parts, and though each part considers limits of life in some form, it varies what kind of life this is and what limits are at stake.

The first of our four parts begins an exploration of life from its conception and growth in the womb, where it is thought to acquire a force and will transcending the body. From here, the volume considers life in its narrative construction and its embodiment in DNA, whence a way is inferred to life as immanence. An exploration of the Islamic cosmogony of man and the infusion of God's breath then prompts a recalibration of the sacred. Following this, the second part begins a consideration of two distinct imaginaries of the human future, and through this bifurcation, a politics of the sacred is discerned. The religious overtones of such endeavors are not only implicit, and we shall also see how the digital presence of the dead provokes reassessments of overt religious praxis. Then, sticking with the digital, we move to explore how ancestors are digitally facilitated. The possibilities introduced here are then reconsidered and challenged in part three by a return to the body and its limits in the face of mechanically constructed love robots. The body, it is argued, contains elements that obstruct the possibility of flesh-to-machine love. Thus, before we explore various technological enhancements of this very body, we examine what kind of body it is we are speaking of at all. Its history, its politics, and its very enmeshment in the world are brought forth as necessarily constitutive of future imaginaries. Finally, body modifications, implant technologies, and other alterations through art and capitalist projects make up the two closing chapters.

Transhumanist imaginaries often involve a view of the body as having served its evolutionary purpose, and the idea of leaving it behind to escape cumbersome biology, and with it aging, for a life beyond. In this view, life, by its internal hauntings, as if jettisoned beyond the limits of the body, may be seen as shot through millennia of evolution like an ancient arrow into the imminent future where infinity awaits—undaunted, it would also seem, by the many lives actually delimited by such a trajectory. Certainly, transhumanist imaginaries often involve a machine-human sym-

biosis of an excellence we are yet to behold, but implantation technology is, even in our humble present, a booming industry, and a creative and sometimes quite subversive enterprise. Throughout this volume the human often appears as if haunted by its biology, by its animality, by death, in need of technological assistance or even salvation. Yet, animality is also sometimes longed for, both as a moral delimitation and as a liberation from the imposing limits of techno-capitalism.

Famously, and perhaps in a performative effort to repress the very animality that haunts him (Adorno 2005: 105), Descartes posits animals as “automata.” The animal is (repeatedly) transformed into a thing—a machine—so as to distinguish it from the human (Lippit 2000: 168–69), yet in some forms of transhumanism the animal is not made into a thing to be removed or devoured but is rather literally incorporated, becoming part of the human body in metamorphosis through technological implementation. In such moves, however, the animal goes from “figure to flesh” (169), it disappears, “stops its stirring,” and indeed it is, we might say, becoming-thing. In the human techno-becoming animal, then, the animal escapes itself and, with it, the human that seeks it, instead taking on the very thingness we have long demanded of it. Here, the animal is literalized and incorporated as technology, and as if turning toward the magnetic face of the haunting other, the human grabs this phantom bull by the horns—or the insect by the antennae, the fish by the fins—and, in the effort to become, overcomes it. Perhaps, in transcending its limits, the human reproduces a distinctly human (all-too-human) quality: mortality?

It may seem thus, if the human is haunted by the animal, the animal is haunted by the thing. And as for the thing, are we its looming specter? Throughout the following chapters, things are employed to enhance, represent, embody, and transcend life in various forms. Such things may be understood as *means* in (moral) need of a *deactivation* to a state of “pure use” (Agamben 2007: 31)—like the cat playing with the ball of yarn, the child with the crucifix—opening for something we indeed might call becoming-animal. Nonetheless, and such pleadings aside, not least due to the structural production of such ideas (some of which are explored in these pages), many crucial questions

remain pertaining to how new imaginaries emerge, and how they reveal and shape us.

How and from where, in our technoscientific world, are the categories of life, death, and the sacred created and circulated? And through whose politics are such questions (implicitly) posed and answered? In a world as multifaceted as ours, what shape does life and dying take, and what redefinitions characterize their limits? Together, the chapters of this volume explore various dimensions of life, the impact of digital technology on our understanding of life and death, and the ways in which the body continues to be a significant factor in our existence and how we imagine this existence unfolding. Throughout these explorations, the authors invite us to ponder new limits of life and the futures of various figures of the human, whatever shapes they may take. In scrutinizing the implications and possibilities inherent to our relationships with technology, animality, and the body, and by examining both mainstream and sidelined perspectives, this collection of works highlights the complexity of our ever-changing world and the intricate ways we continue to tinker with the limits of life.

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