

## What is Life? Theology, Science, and Philosophy

*Cracovia – 24-28 June 2011*

Perhaps as the conference co-ordinator, I am too close to innerworkings of this conference to provide a ‘spectator’s account; however, being as close to the conference as I was afforded me a very wonderful experience at the Centre of Theology and Philosophy’s (CoTP) fourth semiannual conference. This year, it took place in Kraków, Poland over the course of five days, and its major theme was asking the question, ‘What is Life?’

One of the striking things about these CoTP conferences is the wide multiplicity of voices present – both invited and attending voluntarily through the Call for Papers. The very ethos of the concerns articulated by the CoTP is one that aims to intentionally call the typical academic and structural boundaries into question, for the retrenchment of theology and philosophy into their own ideological ghettos has been seen to be both theologically and philosophically unhelpful at best, and at worst both boring and harmful to thinking. It is in this vein that the various approaches to this question ranged across a myriad of perspectives: scientific, philosophical, theological, medical, and often a combination of many of these disciplines. Keynote speakers were invited to speak from a variety of perspectives within these fields: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Atheist and Agnostic alike, and those in attendance (who mostly also presented) were representative of this diversity as well. The majority of those in attendance, however, do come from within one of the various Christian traditions, so there were many Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestant thinkers in attendance. John Milbank and Conor Cunningham, respectively the director and assistant director of the CoTP, have always striven to invite as many people from as many different perspectives as possible, and, as their own theological work is well known in their own areas, they are both always eager to invite people with whom they disagree in order to foster a friendly spirit of debate at each conference gathering.

With over 110 papers to present, each day consisted of a very busy schedule culminating in a keynote panel. The first day, for example, begun with a parallel session followed by two special panels. The first was a panel consisting of five speakers to present on their forthcoming (or recentlyreleased) manuscripts in the *Interventions* series of books published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing. This series is one of the featured series of the CoTP and aims to embody the shared goals and sensibilities of the CoTP: the question of the relationship between theology and philosophy, the status of metaphysics, analytic and continental

philosophical divides, and therefore the “refusal of the disciplinary isolation now standard in modern universities, a genuinely interdisciplinary series of mediations of crucial concepts and key figures in contemporary thought”. Adrian Pabst spoke on his “Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy”; Karen Kilby presented on her “Balthasar: A (very) Critical Introduction”; Aaron Riches began a discussion of his “Christ: The End of Humanism”; Antonio Lopez spoke on his “Gift and the Unity of Being”; and Conor Cunningham presented a short thematic piece on his already-released “Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong”. After coffee, this was followed by a welcome by John Milbank and then an evening plenary session with John Milbank, David L. Schindler, and Robert Spaemann, chaired by Adrian J. Walker. All three papers were stunningly good, and Adrian Walker helped facilitate the question and answer session with Spaemann as Walker is fluent in German (he himself is the translator of the three volumes of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Theo-Logic* and many of the recent books by the Pope). Before the evening was over most of the conference delegates attended the first two lovely banquets organized by the conference. The first banquet took place at the Pod Różą Restaurant, and the buffet spread was immaculate and delicious. Moreover, the congenial spirit of the conference continued into the many conversations that took place.

The second day was comprised primarily of student papers which, before the plenary speaker in the evening, numbered forty-two papers ranging across a day of parallel sessions. I attempted to attend as many of these as I could, and as a fellow postgraduate myself, I was very impressed with the quality and inspired by the energy of the work I heard. In the morning I attended two sessions. The first, chaired by Jeffrey Hanson was with Elena Bugaite speaking on Levinas; Jarrod Longbons speaking on notions of sustainability and stewardship of Creation; and Joseph Rivera, offering a critique of Michel Henry’s *I am the Truth*. The second session was a panel chaired by Aaron Riches with Matthew Moser speaking on Balthasar and Heidegger on death; David Wilmington on critiquing Adorno’s critique of jazz; and Alessandro Rovati on Alasdair MacIntyre’s work on the virtues. Because of the parallel sessions, I wasn’t able to attend the two other panels occurring simultaneously, but the sessions of note were also one chaired by Brent Driggers of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and another by Karen Kilby of Nottingham University. In Driggers’ panel, Josh Broggi contrasted structuralist (and post-structuralist) accounts of the absence of a text with that of the texts of Christian tradition; Rowena Wilding spoke on feminist biblical hermeneutics; and Justine White remarked on the hermeneutic boundaries of the worlds created and inhabited by texts. And in Kilby’s panel, Huseyin Taha Topaloglu addressed the problem of living in liberal societies for Muslims; Elisa Grimi offered her analysis of the role of Aristotle’s model of practical syllogism in the work of G. E. M. Anscombe’s theory of action; and Michele Paolini Paoletti showed that E. J. Lowe’s very laudable attempts at a critique of physicalist reductionism need to be supplemented with further argumentation in order to be sufficient. I also had the privilege of presenting on this day and had an enjoyable session with my department colleagues. I received some very helpful questions – the kind of questions that an

academic would hope to get which really aimed at clarifying the heart of my paper. Throughout the day, I saw many interactions in a similar spirit. The day closed with a plenary session given by Christian De Duve, the 1974 Nobel Prize laureate in Physiology or Medicine, held at the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The next day on Sunday was very packed, beginning at 9.00 in the morning to a plenary session which included John Betz, Ryan Nash, and Christopher Ben Simpson. Betz has been co-translating Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis* along with David Bentley Hart, and his topic "The Analogy of Life" proved very timely for this conference. This was followed by a second plenary at 11.30 with Philip Goodchild, William Desmond, and Harm Goris. Again, the afternoon had two parallel sessions, one of which was organized around the theme of 'Life and Economics.' The day ended with a plenary session beginning with Louis Dupré, followed by Rémi Brague, and concluded by Agata Bielik-Robson. Dupré and Brague come from the philosophical tradition as Christian thinkers, whereas Bielik-Robson comes to philosophy from a Jewish Polish perspective, and offered a paper entitled "Taking Life Out of Nature" which challenged many of the conceptions of conference delegates who come from other traditions. Unfortunately, by the time this session ended, the day had been too long and so John Milbank decided to postpone the next plenary session until the next day, which came as a welcome relief to many on an already very full day of intense papers.

After some simple reshuffling, the next day on Monday began at 9am with a plenary session comprised of Adrian J. Walker, David C. Schindler, and Fr John Behr, an Eastern Orthodox theologian and the Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York. This particular panel brings together two of the editors of the English-language *Communio* journal who are also Balthasar translators and commentators along with a very well-known Orthodox theologian and scholar (Behr) in his own right having written on the development of the Christian faith in his two-volume *Formation of Christian Theology* series and beautifully summed up in his *The Mystery of Christ*. Walker, speaking on the unity of the living being, articulated an analogical resemblance to the incorruptibility in God through looking at biology in a theologically-saturated lens. Schindler, who is also very indebted to Balthasar (and Przywara) also looked to analogy and polarity to structure his talk regarding the notion of nature which he then employed to critique Schelling's concept of nature. Behr's talk on human response to God illustrated a reversal of death through Christ, that is, Christ "uses" death differently for the ends of life, revealing its undoing through a human participation ("fiat") in a divine intention. Indeed, I heard Behr at times throughout the conference during other question and answer sessions remind people of the importance of death, to not shy away from it as it is a part of the Christian theological story of redemption, how one is born into life through death. After a lively discussion, the rest of the day consisted of parallel sessions from professionals. To give a sampling of the ranges of topics covered: teleology (Simon Oliver), Christoph Schlingensiefel (Johannes Hoff), Lonergan (Steven Cone), Maurice Blondel (Peter Bernardi), Edith Stein and Heidegger (James Orr), the metaphysics of the assumptions behind the 'Historical Jesus' (Ira Brent Driggers), Eric Voegelin (Alessandra Gerolin), the phenomenological

differences between envy and *ressentiment* (Michael Kelly), life as a doxological problem (Kenneth Oakes), religious intolerance (James Mensch), Bruno Latour (Adam Miller), and Alain Badiou (David Deane). I was able to attend most of the sampling mentioned above, but not all (that's the reality of a busy conference with parallel sessions). It was another energetic and widely diverse array of figures and subjects. The day culminated in a plenary session featuring Michel Morange, Lenny Moss, and Michael Heller. All three come to the discussion of Life from scientific and philosophical backgrounds. Morange, author of the recent *Life Explained* approached the question from the history of the question itself ("What is Life?"). Lenny Moss, author of *What Genes Can't Do* gave a very high-level, yet wonderfully accessible talk on the levels of 'detachment' within nature. Lastly, Michael Heller, author of numerous books and winner of the Templeton Prize, spoke on the cosmic historical environment of life itself. Life was looked at in its cosmic environment over the course of billions of years as the conditions for the life 'as we know it' normally looked at under microscopes and observed at the species level. The evening concluded with two events: a Mass conducted by Archbishop of Granada Javier Martínez and the second and final banquet at the Hotel Sary Restaurant. The Hotel Sary banquet event served up another fine buffet of food, wine, and the occasion for continuing the conference dialogue through discussion – and even the joyous songs of many of our Italian delegates!

Tuesday, the final day of the conference, concluded with a series of parallel sessions and a single plenary speaker. The day finished the conference strong with a rich array of papers beginning with a series of papers posing questions to life itself: Stratford Caldecott asked, 'Is Life a Transcendental? And Joeri Schrijvers speaking on Lacoste's latest *être en Danger* asked, 'Is Life as Strong as Death?' While I was not able to attend Schrijver's talk due to the fact that it ran parallel to Caldecott's paper, Caldecott was challenged on his question. While commenters pointed out that Aristotle's and Aquinas's own articulations of life are limited, they did admit that Caldecott was pushing in the good and interesting directions in his work. Next, I was able to attend the panel that included Michael Funk Deckard, Adrian J. Reimers, and Beáta Tóth. This session involved a focus on Kantian themes on the one hand, and analogy on the other (analogy being a very constantly-recurring theme at the conference). Reimers gave a very lucid paper outlining the horns of the dilemma within an 'antinomy' of freedom, concluding that in the end, a concept of self-governance is needed to make the most sense of our everyday experience. For it is not the bare (negative) freedom to choose, but rather, the 'basis of freedom is the power to form habits by altering existing patterns of behavior according to the rational understanding of our ends.' This, of course, also entails that life is intrinsically teleological and ultimately eschatological.

With one more session to go before the final plenary, I attended the 3.00pm panel comprised of scholars from the Edith Stein Institute in Granada, Spain. The speakers here were Marcelo López, Sebastián Montiel, Mátyás Szalay, and Aaron Riches. The swath of papers in this panel were wide-ranging and possessed a theological depth from beginning to end. López's work on Cusa and José Ortega y Gasset was wonderfully erudite; Montiel's paper critiquing Badiou seemed to

me unrivaled as a critical account of the French philosopher's thought; Szalay's phenomenological discussion of *Erlebnis* was marvelously presented and executed; and Riches' paper on the failures of Badiou's humanism, offering up a theologically vision of a properly Christological humanism, was brilliant in every sense. This session was one of my favourites – not only because I knew a couple of the speakers, but for the fact that all four speakers were able to consistently surprise with deep theological insights.

The final speaker of the day and of the conference was Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish, whose own personal story is as profound as it is tragic. I had the opportunity to meet him earlier in the conference and had a brief friendly chat with him then, and had also (by that time) read about half of his book entitled *I Shall Not Hate*, but I was not prepared for how moving, challenging, and engaging his talk would be. Abuelaish is a Palestinian medical doctor from the Gaza Strip who has worked in an Israeli hospital for most of his professional life. However, after losing his wife to cancer in late 2008, an Israeli mortar was launched into his home killing three of his eight children. Yet, despite the generations of rage, revenge, and war, Dr Abuelaish has chosen to rise above his anger and direct it in positive ways to educating and continuing to speak about forgiveness. Of all the papers at this conference, Dr Abuelaish's paper was the one whose heartbeat of hope seemed to beat the most evident amidst tides of hate. Archbishop Martínez chaired Dr Abuelaish's paper and exchanged brief but thankful words in Arabic to the Palestinian doctor. When the conference itself was officially over, Archbishop Martínez held Mass for those willing to attend at a nearby parish. Afterwards, those of us still around retired to an Italian restaurant. There, I had the honour and privilege to share a meal and conversation with Dr Abuelaish as well as the learned Fr Joseph Vnuk and the formidable wit and hospitality of Wayne Hudson. It was a conversation I will never forget, discussing Christian-Muslim relations and the similarities and differences between Christianity and Islam. The beautiful question of, 'How many times does a Christian pray?' asked by Dr Abuelaish spurred an exciting conversation that continued on the 25-minute walk back to the conference hotel and venue when the meal was over. There I continued to have exciting conversations with friends, old and new.

In conclusion, although I was thoroughly exhausted from organizing conference logistics, the actual event itself was wildly fun, congenial, friendly, and instructive. I learned a lot from the conference delegates; the level of discourse in the papers presented was consistently erudite and informed. Graham Ward who was in attendance noted a couple of times that the main thread that ties the wide diversity of people together is the *friendships* made and maintained by John Milbank and especially Conor Cunningham, who invited the keynote speakers and many other of the conference delegates. There is not a single thinker that everybody rallies around: Thomas Aquinas, Gilles Deleuze, Augustine of Hippo, Alain Badiou, Gregory of Nyssa, Michel Henry, Nicholas of Cusa, nor Heidegger are held in universal esteem or universal ill repute. Yet every other year or so, the CoTP invites friends, old and new to come discuss topics and themes and to reflect on them from the wide diversity of perspectives and disciplines represented by anyone

willing to attend. With that in mind, these conferences tend to be rather large (this time around 200 people, 250 in Rome in 2008), yet the 'more-the-merrier' spirit is one which always aims to foster intelligent and friendly debate, whether in the sessions themselves or late into the night.

Eric Austin Lee  
University of Nottingham  
ericaustinlee@gmail.com