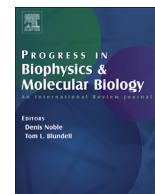




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pbiomolbio

From creativity to perception: The conditions of possibility for a true biology



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 2 July 2015

Keywords:

Barbaras

Category theory

Life

Phenomenology

Whitehead

ABSTRACT

The phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras defends an alternative conception of life against the well-known proposals that view life as self-preserving or seeking to replicate its own means of replication in the form of repetition instead of creation or accomplishment as Barbaras proposes. Indeed, he criticizes the reductive nature of scientific inquiry which tries to define life solely on the basis of the internal constraints, which leads to an impossible true biology. Barbaras' conception is rooted in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty who conceives perception as a subjective act by which the subject enters a relationship with the world. This leads the subject to overcome the Husserlian resources to reach the originary link of the organism with itself and the exteriority. This originary link is expressed in the ambiguity of the verb "to live" in French which designates both being alive and the experience of something. According to Barbaras, desire as life is the infinite exploration of the external world. The movement is due to the nature of perception itself, inasmuch as infinite exploration is in the very nature of the perceptive movement itself, which opens an unfulfillable absence within the exterior world. Then, life as desire is the desire of the world. Life is accomplished only as an unfolding of the world. Then, Barbaras' model seems to preserve the unity of the organism that allows the phenomenal level or the lived experience, the indefinite engagement with exteriority and the positivity of absence created by the movement through its activity. From this, we propose to complement Barbaras' insights on negativity and the expressions of desire with our approach concerning three main points. In the first place, we interpret Barbaras' notion of life as accomplishment within the Whiteheadian framework of creativity, thereby granting the thermodynamic reality of living systems. Secondly, we clarify the meaning of the couple movement/manifestation so that these concepts are as fully applicable to the plant world as Barbaras accords to the animal world. Finally, our theoretical approach uses category theory to give scalability to the model.

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1. Introduction

The demand of knowledge that brings Francisco Valera to the encounter with phenomenology, for instance, and incentivises him to work out his interrogations and hypotheses also urges the encounter between science and phenomenology to pursue the aim of sketching out the conditions for a true biology. Biophysical and biochemical approaches retain their relevance and their functions. Nevertheless, the aim is to approach life and living as they are clearly displayed at least in the so-called higher organisms, namely by taking into account both their objective and subjective dimensions. In other words, it comes to the apprehension of living in

its unity as it becomes self-evident once reductionism is put into brackets. However, the task is far from simple, because one does not come to biology free from the cultural determinations, ideas and ideologies that pervade in the dominant schools of thought of the moment. In order to give a chance for the living to be grasped in its entirety, and despite previously mentioned filters, the intercultural approach is a first initiative to reach a fresh look as it disables certain prejudices and helps to find concepts which are really universal and structuring. The other initiative is the interdisciplinary approach within an intra-cultural context that leads to a different perspective and to the requirements associated with it. In the last paradigm, the encounter of biology with phenomenology presents a certain mutuality for at least two reasons. The first is that according to Barbaras, phenomenology treats the way things appear as a stand-alone problem. Therefore it aims to update

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appearance as such (Barbaras, 2002, 109). More precisely, it purports to apprehend life as an appearance, avoiding any form of extinction of some parts of it by cultural and methodological filters. The second reason is that phenomenology has always been turned towards life, because life is the centre of concerns in phenomenology, as reported by Husserl (*Lebenswelt*), Heidegger (life as facticity), Merleau-Ponty (the structure of behaviour), and Michel Henry (life as self-affection). Nevertheless, Barbaras argues that with these approaches, life is not thought to itself; rather, it is an operative concept, or incantation, including in Michel Henry's concept of self-affection.

In this paper, we work within the intra-cultural interdisciplinary paradigm to stress the insights and limits of Barbaras' approach to the manifestation of the living, with respect to its internal constraints and heterogeneity. Subsequently, we show that this approach may be revised and completed by the notion of creativity provided by the Whiteheadian philosophy of organism, which takes into account the architectural and thermo-dynamical dimensions of the living and its openness to the world. Finally, all these concepts can be articulated into a single representation of the unity of the living in the language of category theory.

2. Barbaras' insights

The unity of life is flush with language itself, says Barbaras, and this is perceived in the fundamental ambiguity of the verb « to live » in French, which designates both being alive (*leben*) and the experience of something (*erleben*) (Barbaras, 2008, 3; 2008b, 367). The original unity, which is expressed in the language, shows that living is deeper than the bifurcation of transitivity (*erleben*) and intransitivity (*leben*). The unity of life is apprehensible in the expressions of an organic totality displaying the unity of the somatic and the psychic which are not constituent parts of the whole, but *modalities of being alive* (Barbaras, 2008, 88). Upon this, Barbaras criticizes the classical approach to biology that takes living organism as its object. The paradox is that biology should distinguish in nature what is living from what is not, in other words, develop a phenomenal knowledge of it, so as to be able to penetrate the object and discover its highly complex physical and chemical processes. However, with these data, biology may not re-enter the phenomenological level that gave access to what is the living (Barbaras, 2008, 4). Therefore, Barbaras' conclusion is unappealing. Biology does not speak about life, but rather refers to a functioning of an organism recognized as such. Therefore, life must not be looking on the side of biology, since life is not biology's object (Barbaras, 2008, 5). Barbaras argues that there is no knowledge of the living that is not already a phenomenology of life. As a result, the living that would be mostly and simply living and to which biology would have access remains unfounded. Such biology is then impossible (Barbaras, 2011, 127–128). In the same paradigm, Barbaras rejects the phenomenological approach to life provided by Hans Jonas, although he nevertheless recognizes the latter's merits. In Jonas' approach, life is apprehended, not on the basis of itself, but from the point of view of what is without life, that is, the material world. Life is viewed under the scope of preservation of itself, under the scope of metabolism, which justifies the necessity of movement toward the external. The living then refers to the fight to remain alive in order to escape from its own negation. Life is thus grasped, not through itself, but through an ontology of death (Barbaras, 2008, 11). Therefore, it is necessary to perform an *epoché* of death to think life from itself. It is necessary, by this *epoché* in the double sense, to achieve a suspension of death to which life is exposed, and a suspension of the naturalistic ontology from which the definition of life proceeds (Barbaras, 2008b, 230; Barbaras et al., 2011, 165).

In Barbaras' paradigm, the approach to the unity of life is

articulated around essential couples, whose relation is each time particular. They are desire/life, movement/*manifestation*, incompleteness/alterity, accomplishment/creation, etc. Life is characterized by its volubility that reveals a fundamental incompleteness at the heart of the living being. The absence is not the absence of something that could be filled by Jonas' notion of satisfaction, but rather, a deficit of being. Absence does not represent a lack in the negative sense of the term, but has a positive meaning. Therefore incompleteness, that is desire, is the very essence of being alive. This vital tension is not psychological but represents an ontological concept. The vital being is therefore desire and this is evident through the movement toward the different and toward otherness. From the start, life is turned towards the world. Movement that characterizes the living being exceeds the circle of needs, and shows that it is not directed to the satisfaction of the needs, but to *manifestation*. Similarly, life is not the metabolic repetition or replication *à la* Dawkins (Dawkins, 2006), but rather, it is creation. Life is not so closed in on itself. Its original incompleteness determines its opening and its relationship with the world through its mobility. From these benchmarks, one can acknowledge the unity of life defined from itself, and one can portray it through categories such as desire, movement, incompleteness, *manifestation*, etc. Thus, movement is neither material nor conscious, neither external, nor internal, because it is another mode of being (Barbaras, 2008, 12–15; 2006, 108–127).

Barbaras appeals to other philosophies of life, such as those advocated by Bergson, Goldstein or that of Hans Jonas that contrast with his own, and overcomes their positions (Barbaras et al., 2011, 169–170). Thus, his approach enables him to specify that life is existence as embodied, i.e. as a mode of being-in-the-world, helping to overcome the corporeality for the benefit of life. According to Barbaras, Merleau-Ponty's approach ends with a phenomenology of the body and does not lead to a phenomenology of life, i.e. the existence from which it arises. Similarly, and probably prisoner of a deficient concept of the body, Heidegger fails to integrate the flesh into existence which then proves to be deprived of life (Barbaras, 2008, 84–85; 2006, 142). This dimension, which is incomplete in Merleau-Ponty (Barbaras, 2008b, 103), remains to be integrated into the *Dasein*, according to Jan Patočka (Patočka, 1988, 97).

By introducing the concepts of desire, originary¹ movement in phenomenological terms, these notions open to transcendence. Barbaras makes sure to specify that it is a transcendence of the world given in the form of a dissatisfaction opened at the heart of the world. However, in Levinas's work, transcendence is given in the form of the desire for otherness, i.e., referring to a metaphysical desire. With Michel Henry, the *archi-life* or the originary becomes metaphysical, even theological. Notwithstanding, in the case of Barbaras, it is a desire of the world, therefore a desire for the same, and not a desire for otherness (Barbaras et al., 2011, 168–169).

3. On movement

The originality of Barbaras' approach is to take the definition of living being seriously. These concepts are almost exclusively part of the *qualia* order such as desire, incompleteness, or manifestation. Movement itself is to be understood as an originary feature of life. Movement is a third and irreducible mode of being. Thus, life becomes a modality of the originary movement (Barbaras, 2008, 14). As a result, the four terms belong to the world of *qualia*. Manifestation itself could be apprehended under this view as far as what

¹ *Originary* is a typical term found in phenomenology and means what is primordial and radically irreplaceable, and remains beyond our calculation or control.

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