

**Seifert, Josef.** *What is Life? The Originality, Irreducibility, and Value of Life.* Editions Rodopi, 1997. 124 pp.

This book is fundamentally a philosophical tome with deep theological overtones attempting to provide an answer to the age-old question: What is life? In this rather short (124 pages), but intensely written volume, the author, Professor Josef Seifert, a well-known European philosopher, states, rather emphatically, that this essay will be an answer to the classical work bearing the same title, *What is Life?* published over forty-five years ago by Professor Erwin Schrödinger, the 1933 Nobel prize winner in physics, for his seminal work in quantum mechanics. This early statement might give the reader the impression that one should have an intimate knowledge and understanding of the Schrödinger book before proceeding to read this text. In reality nothing could be further from the truth, for Seifert soon departs from discussing the allegedly false and imperfect constructs expressed within the framework of scientific reductionism innate in the earlier volume by Schrödinger.

In actuality, this present book represents a summation of Dr. Seifert's beliefs as they relate to the uniqueness of life (in all of its forms) and to human life in particular, and to their irreducibility to natural elements. We could certainly have expected such a thesis based on his previous writings, as well as the carefully worded statement in the preface: "The question (What is Life?) is a philosophical one."

It is obvious the author does not think like a modern day bioscientist, for his concepts concerning life are heavily rooted in the early Aristotelian, Platonic, and Thomistic biological traditions. While, at times, one might feel the author is a Cartesian in disguise, Descartes and his philosophical system are soon intellectually marginalized. Still, scientists such as Jacques-Lucien Monod and Francis Crick, totally committed to materialistic reductionism, are completely eliminated from consideration.

A listing of the titles of the five chapters of this book succinctly demonstrates the incredible breath and depth of his bio-philosophical approach to the subject: 1) On the metaphysical essence and absolute irreducibility of life: the many meanings of life—and a brief discourse on method; 2) What is biological life? The irreducibility of vegetative life (bios) to order and chaotic physical systems; 3) The irreducibility of mental life and of its subject (soul) to ordered and chaotic physical systems; 4) Value and dignity of human life; 5) Dialogues with scientists. Be assured that at the end of this superb presentation, the classical Aristotelian thesis "prime matter and substantial form" is still very much intact in relationship to the overall thesis: "What is Life?"

The author does acknowledge the quantum advances in biology, particularly in reference to molecular genetics, in assisting in explaining life processes, but dismisses this scientific revolution in our understanding of life because it is reductionist in its philosophical approach.

For many readers, the most interesting chapters will prove to be the third one entitled: "The Irreducibility of Mental Life and Its Subject (Soul) to Ordered and Chaotic Physical Systems," and the fifth one entitled: "Dialogues With Scientists." It is here that he addresses the issues of the human soul and its location (if any), consciousness, and the concept of the mind-brain-spirit problem. Unfortunately, Professor Seifert displays a lack of understanding, or interest, in the important achievements in neuroscience which have significantly altered our appreciation of our central nervous system and advanced our knowledge relating to the mind-brain-soul issue.

He gives high marks to Sir John Eccles, the Nobel prize winner in medicine and/or physiology, for his studies in neuroscience. This is because, in spite of his experimental reductionist background, Dr. Eccles was able to "rediscover ignored evidence for the power of subjectivity and voluntary action

on the brain.” This doctrine was, of course, contained within the philosophical system—the three worlds—developed in association with Sir Karl Popper, the noted philosopher of science. Professor Seifert seems unable, or unwilling, to incorporate the latest scientific findings in cognitive neuroscience in his basic concepts of consciousness or the mind-body relationship.

Yet, the reader must always remember that he is unwilling to localize a physical relationship (even in a dualist sense) of the soul to the neural substance of the human brain. Nor is he willing to acknowledge that the death of the human person has taken place when the brain has been irreversibly destroyed as a neurological functioning organ. In other words, Seifert does not believe that the death of the brain equals the death of the human organism. While the issue of death, obviously intrinsic to the concept of life, is not discussed at any length in this present volume, the author indicates that it will be studied in a future work.

This reviewer has a professional interest in the unique problem of brain death for he is referenced twice as the senior editor of a volume entitled *The Determination of Brain Death and Its Relationship to Human Death*, published by the Pontifical Academy of Science, and is the author of an article entitled “Brain Death—Actual Death?” which appears in the same volume. Here, he rejects the concept of brain death as medically ambiguous and, philosophically, as an absurdity.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this book are the last four pages, under the subtitles “Mental Life Cannot Be Identified with the Brain” and the “‘Can’ and ‘Cannot’ in Philosophical Knowledge.” Here, Seifert reviews the fascinating concept of the isolated brain in relation to learning. He argues that we would require a new phenomenological method to explore emergent aspects of brain, and insists that the individual brain is insufficient to explain the concept of thought. The book concludes with an excellent series of footnotes for

each chapter and a most appropriate bibliography.

This work is not a bioethical text, per se. Rather, it is a solid, researched, but dated offensive against the popular view that scientific reductionism and determinism can explain all life processes, even the specialness of human life.

Robert J. White, M.D., Ph.D  
Professor of Neurological Surgery  
Case Western Reserve University  
Cleveland, Ohio

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**Thomasma, David C., Thomasine Kimbrough-Kushner, Gerrit K. Kimsma, and Chris Ciesielksi-Carlucci, eds. *Asking to Die: Inside the Dutch Debate about Euthanasia*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998. 584 pp.**

This book addresses the debate about euthanasia in the Netherlands as it is currently formulated among Dutch physicians, policy makers, academics, lawyers, and bioethicists, as well as families and patients. The book is divided into three parts.

Part I deals with viewpoints from policy-making professionals in government, law, medicine, and academia, and includes papers overviewing twenty-five years of the Dutch experience (by Johan Legemaate); comparing the Dutch experience with the experience in the USA (Kimsma and Evert van Leeuwen); and looking at the practice of euthanasia in psychiatry, where there have been several controversial cases (Sjef Gevers and Legemaate).

Part II tries to provide more philosophical commentary, and includes a religious argument in favor of euthanasia (Harry Kuitert and Evert van Leeuwen), and an essay on Catholic health care and the Dutch national character (Martien A.M. Pijnenburg).

The second part of Part II contains a series of accounts based on case histories. These