

This paper appeared in Brazilian as "A vida em si – filosofia da vida e conservadorismo", in H.E. Olinto og K.E. Schøllhammer (eds.) *Literatura e Critica*, Rio de Janeiro 2009: Letras, 49-64

Life Itself

Philosophy of Life and Conservatism

Frederik Stjernfelt

The fact that the close connection between philosophy of life and vitalism on the one hand and strands of more or less radical conservatisms on the other has not been much researched has several reasons. One is the ill defined status of "philosophy of life". Initially, this may mean only "world view" or "idea of living" – taken in this meaning "philosophy of life" is something any actor, CEO or other people appearing in lifestyle magazines may entertain. This is not the meaning of "philosophy of life" which interests me here. It is rather, more technically defined, that type of philosophy which claims that life holds absolute primacy over other philosophical subjects so that core philosophical issues like truth, ethics, aesthetics, politics, etc. may and should be reconsidered and criticized on the basis of the role they play in life.ⁱ Very often, philosophy of life taken in this sense is also called "vitalism".ⁱⁱ The currents involved in such ideas range from academic philosophy over literature and art to youth movements, politics and religion, and they are often articulated in mixed discourses involving several of these fields. This implies, in turn, that philosophy of life does not belong to any single well-defined academic field. It does not have its automatic domain and may be studied (and practiced!) by literary authors, philosophers, sociologists, biologists, politologists as scientists of religion. Thus, we can pinpoint core vitalist authors in each of these domains. Take for instance philosophers like Nietzsche, Bergson, Scheler, Heidegger, Sartre, take vitalist sociologists like Simmel, political scientists like Schmitt, theologians like Kierkegaard, biologists like the anti-Darwinists Uexküll and Driesch or Darwinists like Haeckel, scientists of religion like Eliade, comparative literature scholars like (the younger) Lukacs or Benjamin, and literary authors of many kinds, from Hamsun, Gide and Jünger to Hesse, Brecht, and Lawrence, to take handful among many. For that reason, vitalism and philosophy of life tends to fall between all these chairs – each of the academic disciplines mentioned tend to assume that the other disciplines take care of it if they do not entirely overlook it because it remains this amphibium difficult to pinpoint. Persons as these rarely *call* themselves philosophers of life or vitalists – the word has a pejorative ring and is not thought well of as a profession name – and Heideggerians, e.g., will frown at seeing their fundamental ontologist master placed in this hardly flattering company. This is connected to the fact that the doctrine of the primacy of life often despises the scholarly, discursive style and rather prefers to appear in a more fragmentary, imagery-loaded *Dichterphilosophie* which appears more lively, more living, more in line with "life itself" as it often, characteristically, is called. It is no necessary implication of philosophy

of life in this definition that it must negatively take a stance against enlightenment, against science, against technology, against modernity, against democracy – but for some reasons it is very often the case. We shall look further into these reasons.

In the series of examples given above, a concentration about the first half of the 20. Century will be obvious, just like a penchant towards the political right. It could, a bit parodically, be said that the prototypical philosopher of life is a German right wing militant from the 1920's. But what merits the broader interest of the subject, also for more than a purely history-of-ideas study, is the fact that the support for philosophies of life is hardly less today than in the 20s, even if maybe more invisible because of its omnipresence. Add to this the fact that the tie to the political right with which it displays at first glance, must, by closer scrutiny, be complemented with an equally large prominence on parts of the political left wing. In the following I shall try to outline the genealogy and structure of the philosophy of life and approach the issue of its relation to conservatism.

A genealogy of vitalism

In a certain sense the issue of any absolute origin of the philosophy of life remains – as all genealogical issues – absurd. Vitalist themes have always been around, Diogenes, Augustine, Montaigne, Pascal, but the strong, modern tradition for vitalism begins as an aspect of Romanticism's attack on Enlightenment. In a German context, Jacobi is often mentioned as the first vitalist with his criticism of Kant, but Herder's emphasis on the specificity of the lifestyle of the single people – as opposed to universal reason – may count as an early philosophy of life. In the general picture, Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy paved the way for philosophies of life. The subjectivist aspect of Kantianism teaches that all ontological issues may be translated into epistemological issues – all questions about being may be translated into questions about aspects of our status as cognizing beings. But this basic idea immediately opens up for a deluge of counterarguments – but arguments which are moulded in the very same shape. For we are not only cognizing beings. We are *living* beings, and this in a certain sense even before we think. Epistemology must thus be complemented or even replaced by more primitive characteristics of life itself. We are historical beings, we are aesthetic beings, we are temporal beings, we are carnal beings, we are phantasizing beings, we are gendered beings, we are linguistic beings, we are deadly beings, we are willing beings, we are choosing beings, we are norm-constructing beings, we are powerseeking beings, we are meditating beings, we are writing beings, we are fighting beings – all these properties, and more, are aspects of life itself, before we cognize, at least before we do it in the scientific use of the term.ⁱⁱⁱ This is why all these properties may negatively be used as arguments against science and enlightenment as dry and inauthentic discourses remote from life itself, discourses only serving to constrain and suppress life. The claim of the fundamentality of all these “living” properties before epistemology is the basic credo of any philosophy of life and at the same time it provides the multiplicity of its doctrines. For it is possible now to pick out your own version of philosophy of life by emphasizing the special, intensive process in life which you find decisive. Then, in the same movement, that process may be used in a critical stance against thought (and, just like

Kant, also against ontology and reality which are presumed to have already been reduced to thought).

Philosophies of life just have a special and remarkable inner architecture. They are relativist as regards thought and reality, because our knowledge about the world does not really pertain to what we think but rather aims at satisfying a deeper need in life itself. But at the same time, being itself receives a direct access with no skeptical filter into vitalism. For while it is assumed, with Kant, to be impossible for us to reach out to things themselves by means of knowledge, the different philosophies of life assume that it is not impossible for us to gain insight in the structures of life, because we ourselves are living. By observing ourselves living we receive a direct possibility for access to being itself. The first philosopher who cultivates this idea is probably Schopenhauer for whom the inner experience of the will provided a royal road to the *Dng an sich*. Let us take a closer look at Schopenhauer's argument – because its structure repeats over and over and in many different variants in versions of vitalism. The idea is – contra Kant – that we *do* in fact know the thing in itself very well, albeit not in science and knowledge, and also not from ethics – but from our own inner life, because we, as living beings, participate directly in being. Our body is, at one and the same time, both subject and object. As object it forms part of the phenomenal world – but at the same time, the body is subject, and this gives us a direct access to the inner being of the body. By means of introspection, Schopenhauer believed to be able to grasp the direct connection between will and action as basis for his idea that our inner life is dominated by *will* – from his notes we even know that Schopenhauer pointed to the crucial role played by will in erotic experiences: in orgasms we experience the will in its purest form streaming through our bodies. Schopenhauer becomes a strange sort of dualist – as is indicated by the title of his seminal *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*: the will as opposed to representations. His concept of the will, however, is no individual, subjectivist notion, the will is located not only in the single individual – it is the thing in itself, the world as such, which consists in an ever streaming current of will, and single phenomena, subjects, and objects are but parts of the will which have branched out to partial wills on many different levels. This also implies, however, that the will has a multitude of forms and constantly enters into conflicts with itself. The will thus already flows through the physical world – in this doctrine, Schopenhauer provides a sort of negative version of the idea of universal romanticism about deep forces uniting subject and object. In him, the subjects and objects of representations are a result of the strivings of the will. Their desires and strivings to maintain themselves are individuated versions of the general striving of the will – they necessarily conflict with other such wills and are forced toward ever greater objectification as the result, in a sort of negative dialectics. Human passions in general can be seen as the result of the many-sided strife of the will against itself – a corollary naturally is that these conflicts may not be solved, no ethics or politics may ever settle their dispute. This constitutes Schopenhauer's famous pessimism: the subject fools itself into believing the driving force of high ideals, the leading role of reason and the like – but below them always remains blind will, egotist, groundless and unmotivated which may never be satisfied. This doctrine thus forms the basis for a disillusioned criticisms of ideologies which finds blind will behind all sorts of seemingly beautiful and noble aims of the mind. The subject remains slave of the will; even death only frees will from its individuation in the individual, but does not kill it. Schopenhauer's philosophy of

aesthetics drew the consequence of asceticism: Schopenhauer inherits Kant's idea about aesthetics as defined by non-interested pleasure – in the disinterested contemplation, the subject gains access to a sphere of pure knowing, leaving individualized will and with it subjectivity behind. The happiness in this aesthetic, objective contemplation of ideas may soften the ties to the constraints of the will – but only momentarily. A more radical utopia lies in the idea that this experience might be eternalized – but this is only possible if will itself might die away. Here, Schopenhauer famously imports ideas from Buddhism – if you can tear away “the veil of Maya” and realize that one's own will is only a momentaneous part of the large stream of will, then ethical action becomes possible. Now access is possible to go beyond the egotism of the will and engage in compassion with other wills, just like myself trapped in their incarnations without exit possibilities.

The structure of Schopenhauer's thinking is recurrent in philosophies of life: some process in life allow us to gaze directly into the deep well of Being: it is will (Schopenhauer), it is history (Hegel), it is power (Nietzsche), it is sex (Freud), it is heterogeneity (Bataille) ... or which list of properties of life you may prefer (you can amuse yourself by putting authors on such different properties). As regards aesthetics particularly, Schopenhauer also forms the matrix for a series of different vitalist strategies: instead of letting the will die away Buddhistically, you may intensify it, refine it, liberate it – the decisive thing is that aesthetics is seen as deeply connected to which definition of the depths of life you prefer, so that it holds primacy over epistemology. Finally, Schopenhauer's import of Eastern mysticism forms a tradition: to many vitalisms non-Western traditions become cherished import goods – for the basic reason that they are indeed non-Western and hence can be taken to go against Western enlightenment tradition and its privileging of epistemology.

Philosophy of life thus radicalizes the relativism which may be the result of Kant – at the very same time as it in a countermovement allows for a direct contact to something absolute, namely *life itself*. With this paradoxical structure, vitalism seems to get the best of both worlds: the plasticity of relativism, its annihilating skepticism and its licence to unconstrained negativity in the one end – and the almost theological safeness of pre-Kantian ontology and the direct contact to the absolute in the other end. It even allows vitalism, by this detour, to enter into contact with science, in any case *certain* sciences, namely the sciences of life. Biology, sociology, and theology are prime candidates to the extent that these disciplines describe central aspects of life itself – by this remarkable detour vitalism is able to unite a radically relativist skepticism against knowledge on the one hand with a blind belief in science on the other – that is, if the relevant sciences provide direct insights in life itself as an absolute entity.^{iv} But this notion of the absolute is indeed special: it is exactly *living* and thus changing, streaming, processual and absolutely immanent – and thus inaccessible for traditional ontological or theological categories privileging more static, transcendent entities. The decisive thing is here that this absolute does not refer to static categories but to something which is unlimited processual and endowed with a creativity of ever new forms and shapes. This cult around the living entails that vitalism holds a formidable power of continuing one of Kant's doctrines in a populist version: the criticism of metaphysics. Established doctrines of all sorts may now be attacked for being old, static, weak, powerless, stiffened, lacking of will, ungendered, unmodern, formal, technical but, above all, *dead* – deprived of any of the qualities of life which you may prefer. By this move, you are relieved from deciding

upon the *truth* (or the good, the beauty, the correctness, etc.) of these doctrines, because the qualities of life are assumed to possess primacy over these metaphysical entities. That something has no part in *life itself* is to vitalism the decisive issue – because if so, the doctrines in question are eo ipso untrue.

Vitalism is thus a philosophy which lives from *taking sides*: for life – and against anything constraining it. Vitalism thus also provides a practical schema for identifying friend and foe: Enemies are those which go against life itself (in many variants, these may even easily be killed, because they are, in a certain sense, already dead: they are against life). Depending on variants of vitalism, these enemies of life may change considerably: it may be conservatism, it may be science, it may be enlightenment, rationality, the older generation; totalitarianism, but also democracy; tradition, but also modernity. As is evident, vitalism does not in any way form a coherent doctrine – it is rather a structure of thinking which may accommodate widely differing determinations, as long as they may be interpreted after the distinction between deep, dynamic life and superficial, static anti-life. A tempting step is for vitalism to go against conservatism in the sense of tradition and conservation as that which inhibits the ever streaming sources of life. The distinction between deep, rolling power and superficially stiffened form remains the basic formula for vitalism. So why is it that it has, all the same, a special affinity to conservatism?

Biology and radical conservatism

This has several reasons. After the breakthrough of Darwinism in the 1860s, vitalism tends to get at biological coloring, and the emerging science of biology often is taken to form a sort of scientific basis for vitalism. But biological time is, of course, much longer and slower than cultural time, and biologically conceived vitalism often entails a reference to a biological dawn of time, which becomes a potent means of cultural criticism against actual phenomena of our time. Conservatism and biological vitalism share the intuition that vast spaces of past – and future – times contain deep truths which any culture focused upon the present now tends to forget or suppress. What is more: vitalism's claim to catch life itself as a process predating knowledge makes it critical against the claims to truth of knowledge – which poses as truths are but what momentarily, in the present now, are of utility to life, and this may change in any moment, just like biological life is subject to the tough law of utility in the *survival of the fittest*. Biology thus wins at both sides: the deep inheritance of the past on the one hand, and the utilitarian readiness to adaptation in the present now on the other – both of them opposed to the bloodless constructions of the intellect. This constant critique of knowledge to the benefit of spontaneous life fits well with another basic idea in conservatism: the reference to the unarticulated knowledge inherent in tradition – as against explicit plans for policies, be they socialist or liberalist. A basic belief in the spontaneously existing, unarticulated, before thought, thus unites vitalism and conservatism. But as is evident, this connection does not in any way imply any easy relation between vitalism and political conservatism in the sense of cautious striving for conservation. Vitalism's claim to have found a basis for criticism beyond knowledge and politics makes it a *critical* philosophy, and the version of conservatism which fits it best is consequently a critical, an activist conservatism which does more than conserve, and

which claims an active program for reestablishing or even create conservative values. It is thus a “radical conservatism” – which is present and active to very different degrees in empirically existing conservative programs and policies – which is the natural political pattern of vitalism. This concept is radicalized under influence from communism during the first half of the 20th century and becomes “conservative revolution”. This concept is marked by Hugo von Hoffmannsthal and Thomas Mann^v – and during the 20s it becomes popularized and when Ernst Jünger’s secretary Armin Mohler after WWII collects his mixture of documentary and apology for the group of German radical conservatives of the 20s, he baptizes the whole current “conservative revolution”. The special set of thoughts which this concept refers to is not, however, a complete novum in the history of ideas which is evident from the dynasty of ancestors which the German radical conservatives erect: from Heraclitus and Plato to Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Burke, Joseph de Maistre, Donoso Cortés, Schopenhauer, Thomas Carlyle, Baudelaire, Nietzsche. The idea is that the true, basic state of things has been disrupted by development, by naive modern projects, especially liberalism – and that only radical action may bring things back in their true shape.

This seemingly *contradiction in adiecto* – radical conservatism – displays another important consequence: that vitalist conservatism is no privilege for the extreme political right, but that is – extremely evident in Weimar Germany – may function as a critical substrate also for the unorthodox left, that is, the parts of the left which did not support the Leninism of the 3rd International (even if the activist parts of Marxism, the famous “child disease” of communism, Trotsky’s “permanent revolution” can not at all be said to be without vitalism. The person who most conspicuously incarnates the spreading of vitalism over both political wings is probably the rather fantastic figure of Ernst Niekisch, “national bolshevik” in the 20s and 30s who thought that Germany should turn against Enlightenment Europe, realize it formed part of Asia and seek partnership with the Soviet Union – and who later was jailed by the Nazis and ended up as a leading DDR politician and finally, again, dissident in the East German Republic. But also the Nazi ideological conglomerate of critical ideas from both political wings – cf. the hybrid name National Socialism – displays this tendency. Vitalism thus demonstrates that communism and social democracy as primarily economical doctrines (and their many compromise forms) are not alone in furnishing the critical basis of the left, just as both Marxists and their critics have had a tendency to assume. The Danish Stalinist Hans Scherfig from the mid-20th century saw this and attacked this unorthodox left in his hilarious novel “Idealist”, a satire over ridiculous vitalist doctrines of the left, from barefoot walking and Reichianism over attempts to abolish money economy to vegetarianism, astrology, and alchemy. Such idealists may position themselves on both of the political extremities, lately even with a preference for the left. On the softer left wing, one has a broader taste than the Stalinist Scherfig – rather, the emphasis on wages and economics in doctrinary Marxism seems to be less sensitive to the suppression of the masses on many other levels which are easier addressed by the constant import of vitalist ideas. In the period between the Wars there is thus a deep connection between the two political extremes in their regionalism, anti-enlightenment, anti-technology, nature romanticism, occultism, anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, anti-bourgeois and anti-democracy. Conservatism back then was a decidedly anti-liberal and anti-capitalist and thus easily contained different combinations of these vitalist criticisms aimed against bourgeois society. It could easily share such ideas with

the left because both parties agreed about the enemy: bourgeois society far from life itself. Of course, the basis of criticism was differently conceived: the right wings's race, nation, people as against the left wing's class, economy, party – but the specific vitalist idiosyncrasy against the emerging bourgeois society was the same.

68 and radical conservatism

Here my hypothesis is that these widespread critical vitalist ideas were to a large extent driven out of the Western right wings in the wake of the defeat of fascisms in WWII. It is well known that e.g. eugenics thrived over a broad political spectrum before the war – and was resolutely rejected after the discovery of the terror of Nazi annihilation camps. But the same thing also happened with a series of less conspicuous, vitalist positions. The conservative parties, in order to survive, had to purge themselves of large contingents of vitalist ideas which they had shared with fascism and nazism – they must reposition themselves on the safe ground of political liberalism and democracy and they developed into parties with a somewhat traditionalist and socially conscious version of center-right liberalism, they became those colorless middle parties we know today. They now saw themselves as “bourgeois parties” – but the adjective “bourgeois” stems from the French Revolution and indicates something rather different from “conservative”.

In this development, large parts of the vitalist cultural criticism became homeless in the political spectrum after WWII where the left wing was dominated by social democrats and Soviet oriented communists, both of them oriented towards economical policies primarily. But this free-floating cultural criticism was to strong a set of instruments to remain unemployed for long. When parts of the European left began to express itself against communism around 1960, the critical claims of conservative vitalisms were ready for use again. Vitalism, with its automatic preference for the young over the old had already since the *Wandervögel* of Wilhelmine, prewar-Germany, afforded itself as ideology for youth movements of all sorts – but this connection exploded during the 60s in the many-sided 68-movement where vitalism became a widespread popular religion. After having been basis for critique on the extreme political wings, in the self-understanding of artists and bohemians, and the construction of philosopher, it became popular in wide layers of the baby-boom generation of Western youth. As is well known, 68 was not in any way an attack on capitalism – just like some of its protagonists thought – but it was indeed an attack on bourgeois society, “bourgeois” to be taken in a vitalist, not a Marxist, sense. 68 formed a vitalist rebellion against modern society. The routinely celebration of transgression, of lushness, of constant movement, of dynamics, of creativity, of youth, of the body, of movement for its own sake, of critique of bourgeois values and ways which is commonplace for every new subculture and which still new generations of journalists embrace – all this stem from the 68 rearticulation of conservative cultural criticism. The same goes for the constant attack on norms, rules, forms, habits, codes as something which inhibits and suppresses life itself. The Danish philosopher Løgstrup – no alien to vitalism himself – realized this constant attack against form constituted what he called “the tyranny of formlessness”. 68 icons like Hesse, Tolkien, Marcuse even impersonated the direct connection back to the vitalism of the interwar period. Thus, vitalism has prevailed from 68 and thereafter – not

so much on the level of slogans, political paroles or philosophical schools as that of *versunkenes Kulturgut* in successive youth generations.

Types of vitalism

In the optics of vitalism, many currents in the history of ideas acquire a new and different meaning. Heidegger is not only the phenomenologist developing further his master Husserl's insights – he is also the person who imports into phenomenology vitalist ideas as when he claims that certain experiences in life give a certain access to Being itself (Angst, boredom) - in contrast to the average bourgeois, “das Man”, caught in superficial blabber. Or when he – confronting the Enlightenment philosopher Cassirer in 1929 – refers to the few ecstatic “Spitzenaugenblicke” of life. This is a typical vitalist figure of thought: if the streaming depths of life are covered by the stiffened surface of bourgeois life, just like the growing animal is contained within its skin (this image is due to Ernst Jünger), then there remains only certain privileged experiences and moments which let us, living on the surface, entertain contact with the deep – just like the moments when the animal changes skin. This becomes the formula for a secular doctrine of revelation in the cult of vitalism – as in the tradition from Nietzsche to Deleuze celebrating “intensities” as the proper manifestation of life. Heidegger also makes evident the affinity of vitalism to home-grown paganism when he in his high age articulates his peculiar doctrine about fourness, “das Geviert”, with humans, gods, heaven and earth. The indefinite plural of “gods” goes back to Hölderlin in German tradition, but who these gods are, remain rather obscure – while, on the other hand, their forms of manifestation are pluralized.^{vi} The vitalism outbursts in the 20. century are thus religious manifestations of neo-paganism – which often is occluded with extracts from occult Western tradition as well as imports from Eastern and more “primitive” religions, often taken to be more original and unspoiled by Western enlightenment. A vast, ever-changing syncretism appears where you can mix your own cocktail from different religious sources – paradoxically made possible by the science of religion and its publication of critical translations of the main works of the world religions to Western languages. In the West, this is probably one of the most important recent religious developments – still to a large extent uncharted - and probably part of the reason behind secularization. This owes more to the conversion of massive parts of the population to different variants of homegrown vitalist paganism than it owes to doctrinary atheism. Vitalism is radically immanent and thus critical against religions to the extent that it, like Nietzsche, denies the existence of dreamed-up *Hinterwelten*. You must remain faithful to the Earth, as the central doctrine from *Also sprach Zarathustra* goes: when you turn towards immanent existence and keep the claim that this existence must be worth believing, you construct a doctrine of revelation *within* the immanent world – a doctrine which, like Nietzsche says, claims an aesthetic legitimation of existence.

It is possible to make a whole botanic collection of different intense processes in life which are assumed by different vitalists to give a certain, direct, aesthetic access to life itself: dreams (Freudians, Breton, Jünger), nausea (Sartre, Bataille), rituals (Eliade), mediation (Klages, Zen), violence (Sorel, Bataille), gender (left wing Freudians, Bataille), intoxication (Jünger, Timothy Leary, Bukowski), angst (Kierkegaard, Heidegger), pain (Jünger), hunger (Hamsun), choice (Schmitt, Sartre), will

(Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), death (Heidegger), the “acte gratuit” (Gide), laughter (Nietzsche), art ... this figure is widespread and you may fill in whatever you prefer among ecstatic life processes. The decisive idea is that in certain intense phases of life, truth manifests itself – “hidden doors” to a deeper world manifest themselves (the image is Ernst Jünger’s). You can almost point out vacant slots for vitalists *in spe* who wishes to make a career: who wants to be the prophet for the hiccup as the decisive road to life itself, or dishwashing, or regretting ... The trivial literature of the hippie era holds examples on this generalization (Pirsig: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* – and the growing influence of Buddhism among Western, especially Californian youth should probably be taken to rely upon the fact that it unites the claim of vitalism for immanent transcendence with the claim of liberalism of the personal choice: what releases revelation is individual, and Buddhism seems capable to enter into syncretism with any old vitalism, occultism, or paganism. The price paid, though, seems to be some of the collectivist effect which is otherwise provided by the agreement around a particular form of manifestation of life itself. In any case, in our time philosophy of life has developed into something which very different projects may draw support from. The center-left Danish newspaper Politiken has the slogan “Den levende avis” – The Living Newspaper. But exactly the same implicit argumentation is heralded by the small Danish nazi party: “National Socialist – it is life itself”.

The unnoticed dominance of vitalism in our time lies, however, less in its many explicit versions. It rather lies in its less articulated variant, without paroles, doctrines or reflection, in the spontaneous claim that social form of any kind is a suppressive system which suppresses life itself and which thus calls for the ongoing transgression and demolition of all forms, shapes, and rules. The very celebration of constant change, movement, renewal, evolution – no matter what the process in question leads to – is essentially vitalist, just like its correlate: the constant critique of all kinds of norms, forms, shapes, rules, and habits. It should hardly offend anyone to claim that ideas like these have become ubiquitous since WWII. The maybe most surprising brand of inherent conservatism in these ideas is evident from the many 68ers who have grown rightwingers with age – the only rarely become adherents of political liberalism and the free market, but rather develops into different kinds of radical conservatives, populists, romantics, celebrators of ecstasy: Botho Strauss forms the prominent German example. At the same time, vitalism as form – with its manifold of versions, with its plasticity – fits ironically well into modern welfare and market society. Maybe it is, in its supermarket plurality, the adequate consciousness to the developing capitalist market, forcing new ecologist and critical goods into production? (even if it, on the explicit level, of course remains critical of the market)

To characterize vitalism as a movement of revelation, in spite of its many different, often even contradictory, versions, will see it as Low-Church and antimodern – to this extent, it forms a parallel to radical protestant movements like Pentecostals and the like – also obsessed with the rejection of form and the celebration of personal authenticity.^{vii} It celebrates “the tyranny of formlessness” and even if it may from time to time indulge in rituals, these must be of a kind which may be changed or discarded *overnight*, it despises all forms of more binding cult or systematic theology, any kind of unconditional doctrine or praxis. Routinely, it celebrates the “provocative”, the “transgressive”, that which “challenges known ideas”. Despite the lively ongoing

development of modernity, vitalism is most often anti-modern. The contact with life itself is understood as correctives or even negations of modern society with all its rules and laws, its distinctions between different domains of validity, its compromise-like, debating, unfanatical character. Against this, vitalism wants drama, passion, final decision. There is, of course, examples of compromises between vitalism and modernity, such as futurism or parts of neoliberalism, but in the larger perspective, the antimodern alliance is far more widespread.

Conclusion

Each and every day, very one of us must grapple with the big issue of what – if anything – makes life worth living. The democratic freedom of the individual to “pursuit of happiness” has this constant flip side: tradition, politics, community, religion have ceased to tell us what makes life worth living. As sociologists from Bauman to Giddens never cease to remind us, we construct a series of shifting narratives throughout our life which constitute our own individual declaration of faith on this important point. Vitalism enters through this hole – it might be that life *itself* could communicate to us, that strong experiences as a basis for philosophy might teach us this and connect us into communities around ways of approaching the ecstasies of life ... When vitalism in this way keeps to the private sphere, it is harmless – just like the other flora of different personal preferences. Vitalism, however, may become dangerous when its hatred against institutions and norms begin eroding seminal fundamentals of modernity: science, democracy, enlightenment, civil society, even the ability to act on a market. Then radical conservatism confronts the necessary, structural conservatism claiming that also modern societies contain traditions, values and institutions worthy of preservation. In a certain sense, what makes these two conservatisms clash is the heritage from the liberal revolutions – cf. their contradictory idea of what “bourgeois” means. None of these conservatisms, moreover, are identical with that of actual conservative parties. Those parties rather forms ongoing compromises between these ideological conservatisms.

In a certain sense, the conservatism of philosophy of life is inevitable. It has its base in an ineradicable aspect of personal life. What must be warned against is its tendency to collectively work against science, democracy, and enlightenment with negation as its means. As soon as vitalism believes to be able to attack epistemology as such, alarm bells should sound. This must be a decisive criterion for vitalisms of all sorts. If this precaution is taken, it may even be possible to learn things from parts of vitalism. A vast, comprehensive study ought to be undertaken of the development of philosophy of life and vitalism in Western thought of the last 200 years. This will form a formidable task for the history of ideas, because vitalism grows in and out of philosophy, literature, politics, youth movements, sociology, biology, religion, occultism, sports, journalism, mathematics, and much else^{viii} – thus demanding a plurality of competences in the scholars to map its evolution.

This essay is a translation of the chapter “Livet selv” from F. Stjernfelt and Søren Ulrik Thomsen “Kritik af den negative opbyggelighed” (“A Critique of Negativism”), Copenhagen 2005.

ⁱ The concept of “philosophy of life” stems from the second half of the 18. Century and played a large role in Romanticism, most often as a synonym for “practical philosophy”, that is, philosophy aimed at use like ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, etc. The concept had a renaissance in the latter part of the 19. Century and here receives the technical definition mentioned, characterized by the antirationalist urge to dismount the subject-object distinction by means of non-rational, bodily and intuitive means of knowledge (*Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, article “Lebensphilosophie”)

ⁱⁱ Here lie some terminological complications: “Vitalism” is also used in the history of biology to refer to the idea that biological organisms presuppose a certain “life force”, entelechy, or elan vital which transgresses what may be studied mechanically – an idea which had its last flowering in the biology of the first part of the 20. Century but has since then been given up. This movement in biology was closely connected, however, to ideas indicated by the broader use of the word, and vitalism in this sense refers to philosophies of life which plays a special emphasis on life as a biological process in some sense.

ⁱⁱⁱ It may be argued that life as such, even in its primitive forms, presupposes cognition and signs, thus as is argued in biosemiotics (Jesper Hoffmeyer: *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*, Indiana 1994, Frederik Stjernfelt: *Diagrammatology*, Dordrecht 2007) – an insight which is fit to counterargue the antirationalism which often is the result of vitalism and its criticism of thought for being derivative and suppressive.

^{iv} This double structure gives vitalism the license to pick the sciences and scientific propositions it sees fit - if some scientific claim seems to support the vitalism in question, everything is fine and science is called in to throw its glory on the doctrine, and other, less fitting scientific claims can just be discarded.

^v According to Mohler *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-32* (Darmstadt 1989, 9-10), the concept has been used sporadically since 1848 in Germany and Russia, e.g. in Dostoevsky; Mann uses it in his “Russische Anthologie” but it only comes in widespread use after Hofmannsthal’s speech “Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation” from 1927.

^{vi} In 1995, I had, together with Nils Gunder Hansen, the strange opportunity of interviewing Ernst Jünger on the occasion of his 100 years birthday. Here he darkly claimed that he, unlike Nietzsche, had no interest in the 21st Century, but rather focused upon the 22nd Century – because then the gods would return. (KRITIK, 114, Copenhagen 1995)

^{vii} The fact that such structures may gravitate back and forth between radical protestant sects and vitalisms in the 19. and 20. Century has its background, of course, in the fact that vitalism just like its Christian parallels is a monetheism focused upon the deity Life. Therefore, the two share basic ontological problems – and more specifically, both share the rejection of institutional answers to those problems: you do not look to academic philosophy or the church which are rather seen as stiffened hindrances against the contact with the sacred.

^{viii} Take, e.g., the influential philosophy of mathematics in the Dutch L.E.J. Brouwer from the first part of the 20. Century where vitalism raises its characteristic head.