

## INTRODUCTION

THE CLASSIC FIRST move in the childhood game “20 questions” is asking “animal, vegetable or mineral?” If you haven’t played, the goal of this game is to guess what the other player is thinking by asking no more than 20 yes or no questions. Since they can be thinking of absolutely anything—a vacuum cleaner, a daisy, their pet dog, Cleopatra or the Andromeda galaxy—they first have to categorize their thought: is it an animal or a vegetable or a mineral? That the game starts here speaks to a fundamental desire to categorize things. It also recognizes that these categories—animals, plants or non-living things—are ones into which we can quickly and intuitively sort most things we encounter.

This impulse to categorization helps us make sense of life, ourselves and our place in the universe. We are living things, as opposed to non-living. Among the living things, we are animals as opposed to plants. And among the animals, we are the intelligent ones. Even when we consider where we live, here on planet Earth, our place has the distinction of being the only planet known to us to have life.

However, the frontiers of scientific research across many disciplines call into question which of these distinctions, if any, still hold. The discovery of untold numbers of planets outside our solar system that seem to meet certain requisite biological requirements make it statistically likely that there is, or was, life on other worlds. Even here on earth, humans are not the only creatures that have language and tools, while trees communicate and seem to exhibit some sort of community. We inch ever closer to artificial intelligence. In short, it might appear that we are no longer special, nor even live in a special place. All this has profound implications for our understanding of life, ourselves and our place in the universe and raises questions across world cultures and religious traditions.

On the surface, this blurring of distinction between intuitive categories and this kind of decentering of humanity can be disorienting. To work through some of the implications of these scientific developments, scientists, philosophers and theologians—experts in their fields—gathered at the University of Pennsylvania in the summer of 2022 for an international, multi-day collaborative conversation. The use of conversation here is intentional. Broadly, we set out to discuss the question “What is life?”, but as you flip through the pages of this journal, you’ll see that we divided it into multiple sub-questions. Around each of these subquestions, a scientist and a philosopher or a theologian engaged in conversation with each other, and with all the conference attendees.

What you hold in your hands is fruit of these conversations, but it is not the conference proceedings. We intentionally did not record the entire conference. One of the joys of the conversation is the space it creates for the development of thought, where you can put forward incompletely formed ideas and allow conversation partners to help you shape them. Recording can stilt that, adding an element of artifice to the conversation. So instead of the full conference proceedings, we offer you this correspondence between our speakers. Before the conference, each conversation pair wrote and exchanged their initial responses to their subquestions; we have included those pieces here. During the conference, they briefly presented their thoughts and had a fuller conversation with each other. And after the conference, they wrote about ways their thinking may (or may not) have changed or developed based on their conversations, about what new questions the conversations raised; those final pieces are also included.

In these pieces, you will get a sense of the richness of these conversations. They were by their very nature interdisciplinary, as each member of the conversation brought in their discipline and the expertise of their fields. The conversations were generous and illuminative. Since people were speaking across disciplines, they were intentional in their explanations; I hope you will find these pieces approachable. For many of the attendees and speakers, this was the first in-person conference since the lockdowns in 2020. This

gave a unique energy to the conversations, as people appreciated anew the possibilities of dialogue. These conversations were also constructive. Academia can be increasingly siloed and its not often that we can engage in truly interdisciplinary work. This space for conversation allowed the speakers to grapple with the implications of each other's work and identify how it might shape and challenge their own.

One idea that, while not specifically named, seemed to resonate through many of these conversations is that of emergence. While we can discuss these aspects of life or these possible distinctions between certain kinds of life, life is something that is incompletely defined by these categories, something that emerges from and is greater than the sum of its parts.

Likewise, what emerges from these conversations is something richer and fuller than each individual piece. What that is I will leave it to their writings to reveal and you to discover in the pages ahead.

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