

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page xii</i>
Introduction	1
1 The Enduring Legacy of Aristotle: The Battle over Life as Self-Organization or (Genetic-Based) Reproduction	8
1.1 Overview	8
1.2 Aristotle on the Nature of Life: Nutrition Versus Reproduction	10
1.3 Classical Mechanism about Life: From Optimism to Quiet Desperation	15
1.4 Darwin to the Rescue?	18
1.5 Here We Go Again: Aristotelian Roots of Contemporary Accounts of the Nature and Origin(s) of Life	21
1.5.1 Metabolism-Based Versus Evolution-Based Definitions of the Nature of Life	22
1.5.2 Metabolism-First Versus Genes-First Theories of the Origin(s) of Life	25
1.6 Concluding Thoughts	29
2 Why Life Cannot Be Defined	33
2.1 Overview	33
2.2 Popular Definitions of Life	36
2.2.1 Thermodynamic Definitions	36
2.2.2 Metabolic Definitions	37
2.2.3 Evolutionary Definitions	40
2.2.4 Defining Life as Self-Organized Complexity	43
2.3 The Problem with Definitions	45
2.3.1 Logical Character of Definition	45
2.3.2 Limits of Definition	50
	ix

2.3.3	Diagnosing the Problem: A Defective Theory of Meaning and Reference	53
2.3.4	Why Natural Kinds Cannot Be “Defined”	55
2.3.5	Is life an Exception to the Rule?	59
2.4	Concluding Thoughts	61
3	What Is a Scientific Theory?	63
3.1	Overview	63
3.2	The Syntactic Conception of Scientific Theories	65
3.3	The Semantic Conception of Scientific Theories	68
3.4	Scientific Theories and Definitions	73
3.4.1	Scientific Theories Do Not “Define” Natural Kinds	74
3.4.2	Nonstandard Definitions Do Not “Define” Scientific Theories	76
3.5	Concluding Thoughts	79
4	How Scientific Theories Develop	82
4.1	Overview	82
4.2	How Scientifically Fruitful Ontologies Develop: Content Matters	84
4.3	The Goldilocks Level of Abstraction	88
4.4	The Threat Posed by Premature Commitment to Ontologies	93
4.5	The Monist (Versus Pluralist) Stance	98
4.6	Concluding Thoughts	102
5	Challenges for a Universal Theory of Life	105
5.1	Overview	105
5.2	The Magnitude of the $N = 1$ Problem of Biology	107
5.3	Microbes: The Most Representative and Least Well Understood Form of Earth Life	114
5.3.1	Planet of the Microbes	115
5.3.2	A Brief History of Misunderstandings and Surprises	118
5.4	The Problem of Contingencies and the Origin(s) of Life	120
5.4.1	A Plague of Contingencies (on Both the SM World and the RNA World)	123
5.4.2	The Origin Versus Nature Problem	127
5.5	Concluding Thoughts	130
6	Rethinking the Traditional Paradigm for Life: Lessons from the World of Microbes	132
6.1	Overview	132
6.2	Evolution Viewed Through the Lens of the Microbial World	133
6.2.1	The Concept of a Biological Species and the Tree of Life	134

<i>Contents</i>	xi
6.2.2 Is Lamarck Hiding in the Shadows?	138
6.3 The Living Individual Viewed Through the Lens of the Microbial World	143
6.3.1 Is the Host–Microbiome Complex (Holobiont) a Living Thing?	146
6.3.2 Biofilms: Aggregates of Cells or Living Individuals?	149
6.3.3 Could Rock-Powered Ecosystems Be Living Things?	155
6.4 Concluding Thoughts	159
7 Artificial Life: Could ALife Solve the $N = 1$ Problem?	161
7.1 Overview	161
7.2 Soft ALife: Digital Organisms?	161
7.3 Hard ALife: Living Robots?	164
7.4 Synthetic Biology: Creating Novel Life in the Laboratory?	167
7.5 Concluding Thoughts	170
8 Searching for Extraterrestrial Life Without a Definition or Universal Theory of Life	172
8.1 Overview	172
8.2 A Case Study: The Viking Missions to Mars	172
8.3 The Role of Anomalies in Scientific Discovery	176
8.4 Searching for Anomalies Using Tentative (Versus Defining) Criteria	184
8.5 Concluding Thoughts	193
9 A Shadow Biosphere: Alien Microbes on Earth?	195
9.1 Overview	195
9.2 How Scientifically Plausible Is a Shadow Biosphere?	196
9.2.1 Did Life Originate Only Once on Earth?	197
9.2.2 Could the Present-Day Earth Be Host to a Shadow Biosphere?	201
9.3 If They Exist, Why Have We Not Found Them?	206
9.3.1 Limitations to Microscopy	206
9.3.2 Limitations to Cultivation	207
9.3.3 Limitations to Metagenomic Methods	208
9.4 Potentially Biological Anomalies: Have We Already Encountered Them?	211
9.5 Concluding Thoughts	215
Conclusion	217
<i>References</i>	220
<i>Index</i>	243