

Fact and Theory in Spontaneous Generation Debates

Why did people believe in spontaneous generation, the coming-in-to-being of life from inert matter? Spontaneous generation has one of the longest histories of any idea in the history of science, from our earliest sources for something we might call 'biology' to well into the nineteenth century—it even post-dates the invention of the internal combustion engine. Why is that?

This paper looks at the evidence for, and arguments against spontaneous generation from Aristotle through the Middle Ages and beyond to argue that spontaneous generation was not a theory but a brute fact, and quite a difficult fact for biological theorists to account for within the contexts of their own theories about both the origins of life and of sexual (which is to say, non-spontaneous) generation. That 'facticity' is an important part of the tenacity of spontaneous generation, and also an important part of the very complex set of responses to, and explanations of, how life comes into being that we find in the historical record.