

A Noble Activity

Arthur T. Johnson

Among the issues that I'd like IBE to take up is a definition of life. What is life, and how can it be distinguished from non-life?

Such a question certainly isn't trivial, and many great minds have been brought to bear on the topic. Elsewhere in this issue is an excerpt from *Biology for Engineers* that relates the musings of others. But IBE members are intelligent and knowledgeable. They should be able to craft some sort of definition that works at least most of the time.

We have heard the term "synthetic biology" used at our last couple of meetings. This conjures up images of living things developed from scratch using materials and rules different from those used by natural (unsynthetic) living things. Instead, what are described in synthetic biology presentations are severe modifications of subcellular processes to result in designed organisms to produce certain goals. They are not completely synthetic and it is questionable whether they are biological or biochemical.

A useful definition of life could find its way into the legal, social, and scientific fabric of our society. Coming from an engineering viewpoint, it would be a useful tool directed to solving problems. Incorporating the latest biology research results, it would anticipate shortcomings that could require premature revision. And it would put IBE on the map.