

Précis of “Kant’s Organicism”

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JENNIFER MENSCH | Kant’s Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of the Critical Philosophy | University of Chicago Press 2013

By Jennifer Mensch

It is hard to say where intellectual history belongs at present. It has almost entirely disappeared from the history departments in the USA, and the anti-historical bias of philosophy departments there is of course well-known. Indeed, the sign Gilbert Harman put on his door at Princeton—“History of Philosophy: Just Say No!”—has become the stuff of legend. This attitude on the part of analytic philosophers has perhaps softened in recent years, but it has not changed the fact that scholars doing intellectual history are now more likely to be found in English and German departments than anywhere else. Even in these settings, however, amidst the intellectual energy and fun you generally find among the eighteenth-century studies crowd, the history of science captures only a marginal interest. “You’re doing history of science?”, a friend from the history department once said, “now that’s a *real* ghetto!”

When I began to think about a book on Kant and the life sciences, the idea that Kant would ever have been influenced by the ideas coming out of this field seemed impossible to believe. In fact I spent an entire Summer determined to prove that my thesis was wrong. The problem was, I kept finding evidence in support of it (fully one third of *Kant’s Organicism* is devoted to a glut of historical research filling up the endnotes, research stemming, for the most part, from an initial disbelief in my own hypothesis). The majority of the scholars who had considered this connection before me had had their training in the history of science. My situation was different, I had been trained in philosophy. I knew my Descartes but I had never read Harvey; I had written on Locke but I had never heard of Ray.

The lacunae only grew, once I began to look at the eighteenth century, now with eyes chastened by the faintness of their sight. I was a Kant specialist: I knew all about Kant’s ‘love affair with metaphysics’, his break from Newton and Leibniz, the ‘Critical turn’ in the letter to Herz, and on and on. But I had never heard of Buffon—despite the fact that Kant had referred to him over and over again in his

works—and I had certainly never thought that anything important might be found for understanding the theoretical writings in either his physical geography lectures or the *Anthropology*. It turns out that I was wrong.

The task of *Kant's Organicism* is to open up a new perspective on Kant, to broaden both the scope and the intellectual resources available for philosophers who are working on this period. The starting point for the book is the enormous transition occurring in the life sciences between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries regarding the proper aim of natural history (Ch. 1). The pivotal figure here is Georges Buffon, since it was he who finally managed to wrest natural history from the province of the taxonomists. Under Buffon's hand, natural history became devoted instead to a description of the history of nature, and it advanced a new method of inquiry altogether (Ch. 2). Investigations should be filled with the content of experience, Buffon argued, but they must be led by a speculative gaze. This was all big news in the 1750s, and it certainly reached the ears of Kant. In the chapter 'Kant and the Problem of Origin', I describe the manner in which Kant was specifically interested in questions of origin, in cosmological origin—Buffon too opened his natural history with an account of this—but in theories of biological origin as well (Ch. 3).

Few scholars have noted that Kant owned an exceedingly rare copy of Maupertuis' *Versuch von der Bildung der Körper*, or that he mirrored his physical geography course on the first two volumes of Buffon's *Allgemeine Historie der Natur* (1752, trans. Kästner). These turn out to be important facts actually, for they make sense of the seeming digressions one finds in the *Only Possible Proof* essay of 1763, and they certainly provide a different set of coordinates for understanding Kant's approach to the topography of space in 1768 (in *Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space*).

In Chapter 4, I make the case for Kant's appeal to epigenesis as a model for cognition. Questions regarding the status of this model will be the focus of my exchange on this blog with Angela Breitenbach. My second commentator, Hein van den Berg, joins Breitenbach in questioning the reasons for Kant's turn to this model. In response, I emphasize the epistemic context within which Kant became interested in epigenesis for thinking about the 'original acquisition' of concepts, since only attention to this context will make sense of the continued appeal that epigenesis would have for Kant throughout the 1770s (Ch. 5). In Chapter 6, I outline the difficulties Kant faced once Tetens published his account of cognition, an approach relying on the *Evolution durch Epigenesis* of the soul. Reading Tetens forced Kant to become explicit regarding his own anti-nativism.

The final chapter of the book suggests a rereading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and of the Transcendental Deduction in particular. This account begins with the Architectonic, taking it to be the *Bauplan* for the whole, and proceeds to show the interpretative possibilities opened up by attention to the organic vocabularies in play throughout the *Critique*. Although this chapter is entirely focused on the first *Critique*, I point beyond this text to Kant's later works throughout the endnotes. The book ends with a consideration of Kant's legacy, comparing his cautious approach to the life sciences with the stance taken by his intellectual successors (Epilogue).

In closing, I just want to point to the surprising turn that has recently been taken in the life sciences today. We have, it seems, entered a post-genomic era. Only ten years ago researchers could still rely on the gene, or at least the information conveyed by that name—as Ernst Mayr observed: development may be epigenetic, but inheritance of type depends on the gene—but today the very notion of a 'genetic programme' is under attack, and preformationism in the guise of the gene has been demoted, as researchers turn instead to the supervenient field of epigenetics. It is hard to imagine that Kant would not have appreciated the possibilities for thought opened up by these discussions. The least tenable model has suddenly become the most plausible one for imagining the irreducible quality of the organism, one demanding our amazement not because of the intricate operations of its parts, but because we have been forced to acknowledge the primacy of the living organic context, within which such parts can emerge in order to mechanically function at all. This was precisely the kind of organic model that Kant had in mind when trying to grasp reason, and it is what locates him as a genuine forerunner of the organicism of both his day and our own.

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