

**MENSCH, J. *KANT'S ORGANICISM: EPIGENESIS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY*. CHICAGO AND LONDON: THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2013.**

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In this remarkable book of theoretical audacity and analytical detail, J. Mensch locates Kant at the heart of modern organicism and investigates the analogy between reason and life, arguing that one can understand reason as life, that is, as a self-organizing and self-developmental process. Moreover, the original hypothesis at stake here compellingly states that, from the standpoint of Kant's organicism, reason grasps itself by identifying with an organic being, a self-generative whole, a system perfectly unified and articulated from within. It hence follows that, contrarily to what might be suggested by its title, this book does not concern Kant's biology but rather Kant's construal of the logos of life, and the ways in which such logos of life becomes for transcendental philosophy the very logos of reason<sup>1</sup>. In a word, this research shows how *Critical Philosophy* belongs to the realm of "organic logic", how the critical elucidation of reason presents reason as an organic developmental process, and thereby constitutes a special case of the epigenetic dynamic of life. Unlike common practice in Kantian scholarship, the analogy of life and reason can be elucidated without fully subordinating the first to the third *Critique*.

To begin with, organicism is defined as the philosophical view of nature that recognizes life as revealing the irreducible, inner, spontaneity of nature, and hence refuses the legitimacy of a mechanical explanation of organic processes. For it would reduce life to inert matter, leaving the whole problem of the generation of life forms (including growth with functional, qualitative, differentiation) entirely contingent on the laws of quantitative forces and their communication. In Modern Philosophy, the dispute between matter and life, between efficient causes and final causes, between the mere communication of force and the spontaneous production of force, concerned the very core of reality, substance qua res extensa, and deeply divided the philosophical and scientific community. Cartesian mechanism and Leibnizian panvitalism embody this opposition of the pure geometry of extension against the internal force of first entelechies. Leibniz emphasizes the irreducibility of action and force (vis, nisus,

<sup>1</sup> The equation of life and theoretical reason was brilliantly proposed by Dörflinger (*Das Leben theoretischer Vernunft*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2000), and was also the thread that guided our own work (Jesus, P. *Poétique de l'ipse: Etude sur le 'Je pense' kantien*, Bern, P. Lang, 2008).

conatus) when he reformulates in neo-Aristotelian terms the notion of individual substance as fundamentally inseparable of a self-active principle, the “soul”<sup>2</sup>. As clearly demonstrated by J. Mensch, Kant inherits this powerful tension, enriched by the extensive and pioneering work of Natural History. However, in Kant, the radical distinction between the laws of nature and the laws of freedom shows a common ground of necessity and purposiveness. Although the author does not explore the Kantian Physics and its paradigmatic change in the conception of matter, from the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* to the *Nachlass*, it is worth noting that a firmer passage will be opened in the latter to link Physics and Biology because matter is no longer the passive reception of movement but, instead, becomes a spontaneous, “primordially moving matter” that fills all the space (AA 21, 218-219)<sup>3</sup>.

The book is organized in seven chapters that reconstruct the genesis of the *Critique of pure Reason*, tracing the epigenetic trajectory of the transcendental deduction. The first two chapters provide a careful rendition of the main controversies and advances made by the life sciences during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, thus setting the historical context in which takes place the Kantian appropriation of the “problem of origin”. The analysis of Locke’s species nominalism, intimately related to the empirical uncertainty of the real boundaries between species, and of Leibniz’s metaphysical nature of all-encompassing vitality and continuity constitute the first moment of Mensch’s long argument in favor of life forms as analoga of concepts and truths through which reason creates and develops itself. Kant will dismiss both systems, the former because of its empirical physiology of reason, and the latter due to its too strong preformationist, supernatural, assumptions.

The following crucial moment involves the empire of mechanical Newtonianism in the life sciences, as practiced by Buffon and Maupertuis, which reduces organic generation and development to “growth as a process of mechanical addition and expansion” (p. 43). The most significant contribution by Buffon, however, refers to the genealogical understanding of species, which implies an epistemological and methodological revolution in the realm of modern biology. By attacking Linnaeus’s taxonomical system, Buffon lays the foundation of Natural History, the descriptive and explanatory science of life that focus on generation and origin, unity and affinity. The third chapter exposes Kant’s precritical development whose scientific eclecticism may be interpreted as a variety of research strands, from natural sciences to logics and metaphysics, revolving around the explanatory power of the knowledge of origins which, in the last analysis, must culminate in elucidating the origin of knowledge itself. Chapter four occupies the center stage or the epicycle in the course of the book for it explores the precritical turning-point in which the study of the epigenesis of knowledge requires a new metaphysics, “a science of the limits of human reason” (AA 2, 367-368). The content of the “great light” given by 1769 is here reinvested by the daring hypothesis of its meaning the Kantian solution for the “problem of origin” (p. 81): neither pure mechanics nor divine intervention, but rather

<sup>2</sup> The Leibnizian texts that inspire this remark are the well-known “Animadversiones in partem generalem Principiorum Cartesianorum” (1692) (GP IV, 354-91), “De primae philosophiae emendatione et de notione substantiae” (1694) (GP IV, 468-70), “De rerum originatione radicali” (1697) (GP VII, 302-08), and “De ipsa natura sive de vi insita actionibusque creaturarum” (1698) (GP IV, 504-16).

<sup>3</sup> I. Kant, *Opus Postumum*, tr. E. Forster & M. Rosen, Cambridge, CUP, 1995, p. 68-70.

the mind's generation, the "original acquisition" of concepts, that is, "epigenesis from the use of the natural laws of reason" (AA 17, 492). In this context, the reinterpretation of Kant's well-known letter to Herz (1772) focuses on the "origin of concepts" (AA 10, 131-132) and the idea of a priori mental laws that make representations possible. The chapters five and six supply enriching material to improve the understanding of the specificity of the Kantian model of epigenesis. The author examines its anthropological and psychological foundations, namely the problem of the unity of the human race and that of the unity of apperception or self-consciousness. In both cases, Kant refines a novel idea regarding the process of epigenetic production. His 1770's writings on mankind testify to the integration of Buffon's historical or genealogical unity of species with a teleological and lawful approach to nature. Germs and natural predispositions are not preformed, blind, forces: they encompass the practical and theoretical possibility, or potentiality, which are actualized only if man and mind may generate them spontaneously. Original acquisition or innateness of the mind to the mind mean, above all, free self-generation; hence, the judicious reference to the freedom of practical reason and to the active generation of concepts (i.e., the controversy with Eberhard). As for the epigenesis of the objective validity of concepts and its relationship with apperception, Tetens's empirical psychology leads Kant to unify all representations under the self-active and self-generative power of consciousness and to surpass the domain of an empirical physiology (*quid facti*) by a purely rational physiology of reason (*quid iuris*).

Finally, the seventh chapter is devoted to the inner sanctuary of transcendental philosophy, the transcendental deduction, understood as "a legal deduction, research into genealogical lines" (p. 131). Now, the inquiry into the origin of categories uncovers the unity of transcendental apperception, that is, transcendental affinity that resolves the quest for origin into the organic unity of reason, the very possibility of necessity in experience, and therefore the possibility of truth because it requires necessarily the cohesion of lower and higher cognitive faculties as well as the semantic unity or coherence within the manifold of representations in myself. The rich contrast between Deductions A and B could invite a longer, in-depth analysis.

To sum up, J. Mensch sustains emphatically and consistently that affinity and organic unity of reason are the main architectonic traits of the metaphysical portrait of reason under the guise of epigenesis as "generic preformation" (KU, AA 05, 424). The third Critique is briefly included as the basis for a "cautionary tale" (pp. 140-145), thus avoiding the conversion of organicism into transcendental realism. However, both the second and the third Critiques could deserve a more detailed treatment for they accomplish a deeper and larger unity between the system of freedom and the system of nature, in which the praxis of reason merges together with its poiesis, and auto-poiesis.

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