

And The Corpus Still Breathes

Y el corpus sigue respirando

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Review: Jennifer Mensch, *Kant's Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of Critical Theory*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, 258 pp., ISBN: 978022602198

In *Kant's Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of the Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), Jennifer Mensch provides a reading of Kant's theory of cognition that brings its biological and naturalist influences to the fore. In the interest of defending an interpretation of Kant's philosophy as an epigenetic theory of reason, the author tracks Kant's own intellectual development from his pre-critical to his critical stage, with an elucidating reading of the infamous "silent decade" that separates them. Along the way, she explores how the concept of *epigenesis* that served as the guiding-star for so many debates in natural history from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries became the dominant model through which Kant approached the theory of knowledge. On the whole, the work paints a portrait of Kant in which the father of transcendental idealism figures not as the great taxonomer of the understanding (as he is often portrayed) but as a theorist of reason's organic emergence from out of itself. This ambition is elegantly contained in the opening sentence of the "Introduction," where Mensch writes: "This book is oriented by the conviction that Kant should be fitted into a framework that has begun to take shape in a number of fields when it comes to thinking about the mid- to late eighteenth century, a framework that can be called something like 'organic thinking,' or, better yet, 'organicism.'"¹

Interestingly, this organicist reading of the Kantian philosophy is not achieved through some in-depth analysis of the passages in the third *Critique* where Kant talks about organisms and

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¹ Mensch, Jennifer, *Kant's Organicism. Epigenesis and the Development of Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University), 1.

teleology or even through a focused study of Kant's select writings on the life sciences. Rather, it is established more through a comprehensive re-framing of the Kantian project as a whole. For Mensch's work here is, in a strong sense of the term, a *narrative* that tells a story about of all the parts of the architectonic relate as one. This is, I take it, one of the book's most impressive accomplishments—namely, that it does not tie its fate either to a passage from one of Kant's various magnum opuses or to a "reading" of some of his less-known publications, but instead wagers the weight of its thesis solely on the author's ability to change the reader's perspective concerning the conceptual thread by which these works "hang" individually and as a collective.

The book is composed of seven chapters (spanning less 160 pages in total) organized in chronological order. Yet, because of the organic nature of the book itself, the reader may find it helpful to begin *and end* her reading of it with the author's brief but commanding "Introduction," which proffers a condensed account of the book's global thesis as well as a helpful sketch of the historical trajectory of Kant's development as a thinker from the 1840s to the 1870s. The details of this sketch get "filled out" over the course of the book, as the author guides the reader through Kant's many and varied attempts to come to term with what was, quite literally, the problem of the century: "the problem of genesis." How do we understand the emergence of the new? Surely, mapping the general arc of this trajectory seems to be the book's overriding scholarly interest. But it is also clear that the author has another, more local, goal in mind. She wants to convince her audience that this trajectory genuinely matters for how we think and talk about Kant's single most groundbreaking advancement: his theory of cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

The first two chapters provide the historical background for this organicist reading of Kant. The first one, "Generation and the Task of Classification," discusses seventeenth century debates in natural history about the possibility of a systematic classification of nature that function as the backdrop to Kant's own organic interests and concerns. Is a taxonomic system of nature possible? Does such a system presuppose the ontological existence of natural kinds or natural essences? If not, what grounds taxonomic kind terms? And, if so, how are these metaphysical essences to be assimilated into the conceptual armature of a largely empirical science? How are these fixed kind-terms, moreover, to be reconciled with the evident flexibility and variability of species? Mensch notes that these debates received their first impetus from Robert Boyle's re-introduction of the Aristotelian concept of *natural entelechies* into naturalist discourse and that this re-introduction culminated in the theoretical confrontation between the *species nominalism* of John Locke and the *preformationist theory* of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz that Kant would eventually make it his job to overcome.

Chapter two, "Buffon's Natural History and the Founding of Organicism," follows the consequences this polemic through the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, naturalists such as Georges Buffon made remarkable headway in the study of living matter by shifting the terms upon which the seventeenth century debates rested. First, they replaced the taxonomic framework of their predecessors with a genealogical one, effectively replacing concerns about the position of species within a classificatory grid (*tables of differences*) with new ones about the phyletic histories of species as a whole (*lines of descent*). Second, they began employing a new concept in their study of organisms that wasn't available the preceding century: the concept of "force." Although this concept was originally forged in the context of Newtonian physics, various naturalists appropriated it for the study of the living. Why? Because this concept gave naturalists a

model for describing and explaining natural phenomena (organization and reproduction for example) *without* having to appeal to outright metaphysical principles, such as Boyle's Aristotelian *entelechies*. Buffon's concept of "embryonic expansion" and Maupertuis's theory of "organic forces" are examples of this cross-disciplinary appropriation. And, as Mensch points out, these conceptual innovations in natural science were by no means unique or isolated events that stood out as anomalies in their cultural milieu. Both were part and parcel of a "revolution that came to place organicism at the heart of both science and the arts in the mid- to late eighteenth century."² This is the same revolution that Kant would eventually stage in the domain of epistemology.

Chapter three, "Kant and the Problem of Origin," is (along with seven) the most important chapter of the entire book for it lays out the position that will serve as both the foundation for the rest of the work as well as the author's lead criticism of current Kant scholarship—the position that Kant's long "pre-critical" period makes sense only when viewed as a sustained philosophical engagement with the problem of origin. Mensch makes two arguments that cut against the grain of received Kant scholarship. The first is that all of Kant's publications before the 1780s, from *On the True Estimation of Living Forces* (1747) to *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) to *The Only Possible Argument In Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), share one the same objective: articulating a notion of *generation* [*erzeugen*] in which the development of a thing is more than the *unfolding* [*auszuwickeln*] of a pre-existent form. Kant thought there must be a kind of generation (epi-genesis) in which a thing's development is not merely the execution of a fixed blueprint but a creative process that allows for the emergence of something new. Mensch shows that during the "pre-critical" period Kant systematically invokes this idea so as to separate himself from the preformationist philosophy of Leibniz and the coarse empiricism of Locke, from the mechanistic writings of Newton and the mordant dogmatism of Wolff. Mensch's second argument is her "continuity thesis" (my term). This is her assertion that there is no real break between Kant's "pre-critical" and "critical" periods. There is only continuity. The theory of epigenesis he starts developing in the 1740s and '50s in his writings on natural science and cosmology is the same theory that, in refined and modified form, grounds his system of transcendental idealism in the 1780s and '90s.

The details of this continuity thesis then get spelled out in chapters four and five, where Mensch argues that Kant's epistemological writings (on the genesis of ideas) follow quite organically from his early writings on cosmology and natural science (on the genesis of planets and animals). In chapter four, "The Rebirth of Metaphysics," she argues that well *before* the "silent decade"—in works such as *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* (1766) but also the 1769 *Dissertation*—Kant was already wrestling two epistemological problems that would frame his critical account in 1781: (1) the problem of the origin of ideas (which Kant tackles by splitting sense and intellect) and (2) the problem of their rightful employment and possible abuse (which Kant described as a problem of "subreption," i.e., of using concepts outside their legitimate field of applicability). These epistemological ventures convinced Kant that the way to get metaphysics "unstuck" from the morass of empiricism and rationalism was to move metaphysics in the direction of *a science of limits*, which could only be achieved via an *epigenetic* theory of knowledge. But, as chapter five makes clear, it would be a mistake to think that these early interests in the problem of genesis appear before 1770 only then to be submerged during the "silent decade." During this period, to start, Kant was fully immersed in questions concerning the logic of *genesis, formation* and

² Ibid., 50

inheritance. Indeed, it is in the years *leading up* to the full-fledged articulation of the critical standpoint that he manages to “crystalize” (Mensch’s word) the all-important concept of *teleology* that sneaks into the first *Critique* vis-à-vis the transcendental imagination and later acts as the organizing principle in the third *Critique*’s investigation of judgment. Furthermore, Mensch claims, it is also through the writings of this period (especially his anthropological discourses on race) that Kant first conceives of humanity as possessing a “germ of reason,” the same germ that spawns the laws of the understanding in the first *Critique* and secures the prospects of moral action in the second. With this move Mensch draws a continuous arch of epigenetic thinking that cuts through entire Kantian corpus and brings together under a single parabola the murmurs of the pre-critical stage, the presumed silence of the 1770s and the decisive roar of 1781.

Having establishing this continuity, Mensch directly takes up the question that would have been at the center of Kant’s thinking while writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*: What does it mean to talk about the “genesis” of reason or the “emergence” of concepts and concepts within a transcendental framework that stands in sharp opposition to empirical psychology? In “Empirical Psychology in Tetens and Kant”, Mensch claims that Kant develops a notion of “metaphysical epigenesis” that reconciles the anti-empirical demands of the newly born transcendental framework and the temporal logic of the concept of epigenesis itself. Framed through Kant’s often neglected relationship to philosophical writings of J.N. Tetens, this chapter sheds light on the two strategies by which Kant broke away from the allure of empirical psychology: 1) his appeal to the transcendental imagination and 2) his discussion of epistemic right.

Kant’s Organicism closes with an imposing final chapter that takes a bird’s-eye point of view on Kant’s architectonic of reason. Drawing on content from the previous chapters, Mensch clarifies that Kant’s view of reason and the philosophical system that articulates it (the *Bauplan*) are both modeled after an organic theory of animal development. Kant leans on the notion of *epigenesis* to explain how reason *grows*. He uses it to explain, on the one hand, the metaphysical genesis of the laws of reason and, on the other, the historical development of reason as a whole. More importantly, however, Mensch makes the strong claim that only *as an effect* of Kant’s appropriation of a biologically-informed theory of genesis does the “the centerpiece of [Kant’s] theory” make any sense: the infamous transcendental deduction of the first *Critique*. Readers interested in how this crucial component (the deduction) functions within the entire Kantian system or how the entire system turns on it are likely to find this final chapter particularly rewarding.

It is exciting to see a work of scholarship that combines textual exegesis with historical analysis in a clear yet sophisticated fashion. And it is even more exciting to come across a work that paints a picture of the man from Königsberg that is as relevant for philosophy as it is for history, biology and the history of biology.

Even so, the book suffers from two distinct shortcomings. The first one is the provinciality of its audience. Although its content is germane to debates in philosophy, history and biology, the work is written only with a philosophical audience in mind. In fact, it seems to be written almost exclusively for Kant scholars that already have a solid grasp of the three *Critiques* and their place in the history of Western philosophy. Philosophers who do not specialize either in Kantian philosophy or in the early modern period more generally might struggle with some sections (e.g., the discussion of Leibniz in chapter two, the description of the “logical” versus the “real” use of the

intellect in chapter four, and the analysis of the transcendental deduction in chapter seven), while non-philosophers might be entirely overpowered by them. My advice for these readers is to consult the footnotes whenever possible since the majority of them are elaborations of ideas contained in the body of the work and not simply references to primary or secondary sources.

The second shortcoming of the work is that, in a way, it lacks a conclusion. If Mensch is to be commended for her ambitiousness in taking Kant's whole intellectual trajectory as her object of study, she may be criticized for the chariness of her overall approach. She limits herself to describing the implications of her interpretation *only in relation to Kant's own philosophy*. But there is virtually nothing in the book about what this might mean beyond that; nothing about what this reading might teach us about Kantianism after Kant. What might Mensch's thesis tell us, for instance, about Hegel's meta-critique of Kant in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) or about Nietzsche's attacks in *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) in the nineteenth century? Or about how the tenets of Kantianism were mobilized by neo-Kantians, phenomenologists, moral theorists and epistemologists in the twentieth? What might her argument, moreover, have to say about the state of Kantian scholarship today in Europe, North America, Latin America or elsewhere? And what might it teach us about the current uptake of Kant's teleological discourse in the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of evolution? Could it be that this epigenetic perspective brings to light new links between Kant's theory of cognition and contemporary neuroscience or that it helps us make new interventions in ongoing debates about the origin of consciousness, rational choice theory and social epistemology? Why and how, in short, should Kant's "organicism" matter?

To be sure, Kant was a complicated thinker with a multi-faceted legacy, and no single work can begin to "contain" all these facets at once. Plus, a book without self-imposed limits is hardly a book worth reading. Still, the book would have benefited from an additional chapter or two investigating some of the thesis's implications (maybe just one or two!) beyond Kant's own corpus. As it stands, it is almost as if Mensch finishes the book a few bricks short of a load; almost as if she refuses, perhaps in line with the spirit of the very Kantian philosophy she studies, to go beyond the bounds of her island of early modern research and leap into more speculative territory. Yes, she has rearranged this island from within in a creative manner and put Kantianism in a new frame. But readers interested in what this rearrangement and this reframing might mean to those who live in different islands have no choice but to turn their backs to the Pillars of Hercules and, as Francis Bacon would have it, embark on the voyage themselves.

