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The Fate of Self-Organization: From Natural Machines to the Philosophy of the Organism

2.1 Materia soluta, materia ligata: individuation in Kant’s Opus Postumum

In the last chapter, we investigated the irruption of self-organization into Kant’s critical system, its incompatibility with the mechanistic and rule-bound spatiotemporal individuation proposed in the first Critique, and the unstable resolution of its problematic status in the Antinomy of Judgment. As we saw, the demand posed by the ontological evidence of organization to transcendental philosophy was only suspended and diverted by the introduction of reflective judgment, the employment of analogy for scientific investigation and, last but not least, the symbolic usage of the organism, for the sake of the systemic unity of critique and its theistic destination. In this chapter we will consider: (1) how Kant himself transformed his conceptualization of individuality in nature, extracting it from a strictly teleological inquiry and bringing it into the purview of a general theory of matter, covering the structure of natural machines as well as individuation of matter into bodies; (2) the legacy of Kant’s arguments for the distinction between organic and mechanical modalities of individuation on twentieth-century debates, in particular on theories of autopoiesis and on Whitehead’s philosophy of the organism. I shall conclude the chapter with a brief reflection on the effects of such transformations in our understanding of individual or individuating organization on the very idea of a transcendental philosophy.

Far from merely clarifying the details of an anachronistic engagement with the natural sciences on Kant’s part, an examination of Kant’s struggle
with the concept of organized beings in his late notebooks on the 'Transition from the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science to Physics', the notes later collected as the *Opus Postumum*, highlights the obstinate presence of the problem of material individuation in his thought. Kant's continuing struggles and reformulations refute the *prima facie* legitimacy of the position according to which he 'thinks that questions of individuation for empirical objects have no deeper answer than one proceeding in terms of the organizing principles of perceptual experience'.\(^1\) As we shall see, though the anomaly of organic form might have posed the initial impetus for the unfinished project of the 'Transition', it is ultimately in its approach to matter that these late writings provide a novel avenue into Kant's treatment of individuation. It is not my intention here dramatically to unveil some repressed conceptual content gnawing away at the foundations of an otherwise impregnable Kantian edifice. Indeed, if there is something to be learned from Kant, it is precisely the rigour with which the resistance of certain conceptual instances to systemic assimilation is exhibited, and the manner in which these apparent impasses are mined for the sake of the system. By giving us a glimpse into Kant's conceptual laboratory, the *Opus Postumum* has the great advantage of emancipating us from any fetishistic attachment to constituted systematicity and turning our attention to the remarkable inventiveness at the heart of Kant's systematizing will.

By focusing our attention on this will to systematicity we can see how the intrasystemic or symbolic use of organic form is constantly accompanied by its shadow, the ontological conversion discussed by Philonenko. As we saw, natural purposes present, by way of the experience of a being which is not possible as such, a sort of revenge of the *a posteriori*, of the evidence of ontogenesis, upon the limitations of a transcendental account of objective individuality, an account which thus stands revealed as overdetermined by the mechanistic image of spatio-temporal localization. In line with the focus in the previous chapter on the organism as crisis and conversion of the transcendental approach to individuation, my interest here is not in the strategies whereby the Critical philosophy strives for the regulative horizon of systematicity, but rather with the relation between the definition of organized beings and the transformations in Kant's concepts of matter and mechanism, as well as, more generally, with the philosophy of individuation that subtends this last stage of his thought.

Rather than considering it in terms of its contributions to the unity of the Critical philosophy we will thus approach the *Opus Postumum* from the angle of a general theory of material individuation, envisaged