

The background is a light-colored surface covered in dense, colorful scribbles and sketches. The colors include black, red, orange, blue, and grey. A large, irregular white shape is cut out from the center, creating a frame for the text. The scribbles are somewhat chaotic and expressive, with some circular and linear patterns.

Leaving room for life: Kant and the inorganicism challenge

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Structure of the talk

1. First, I'll summarize the “inorganicism challenge”
2. Raise two immediate problems for even thinking of this as a challenge
3. Use the conceptual tools I develop in my dissertation to make the challenge legitimate
4. Historical panorama of some inorganicism challengers
5. Offer some provisional escape routes for Kant

The inorganicism challenge

- ◇ “...post-Kantian philosophers took the fate of Kant’s idealism to be fundamentally tied to the fate of a concept of life, contending that idealism could be successfully defended only if the activities of reason could be determined in their essential connection with the form of activity of life” (Ng 2020, 6).
- ◇ Kant’s idealism is defensible only if he can ground the activities of reason in life. Kant cannot ground the activities of reason in life. Therefore, Kant’s idealism is not defensible.

The inorganicism challenge

- ◆ Two kneejerk reactions to the inorganicism challenge as it's stated above.
 - ◆ **It is extraneous.** The philosophers at work in the wake of Kant develop different concepts, arguments, and frameworks in response to a different set of problems. Life may be an important concept for them, but it is not for Kant.
 - ◆ **It is vague.** What does it even mean to say that Kant's transcendental idealism is defensible only if the activities of reason are grounded in the form of the activity of life?

Interpreting the challenge charitably

- ◆ I believe that we should take this challenge seriously, as it aligns with still-prominent ways of interpreting Kant.
- ◆ Interpreters of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* have often inferred that, because we cannot have empirical cognition of the causality characteristic of an organism, we cannot say that organisms exist. I this consider an “agnosticism” about organisms.
 - ◆ (McLaughlin 1990 and 2014, Zammito 1992, Zuckert 2007, Ginsborg 2015, and Kreines 2015.)
- ◆ The agnostic line potentially lends itself to a stronger “eliminativist” claim – i.e., for Kant, all things we judge to be organisms are mere machines.

Interpreting the challenge charitably

- ◆ McLaughlin on agnosticism: McL doubts that we can ever establish that an organism is real because we cannot empirically cognize the inner purposiveness characteristic of it. We cannot empirically cognize this causality because it is non-mechanistic, while the faculty of the understanding, necessary for cognition, is inherently mechanistic. “Organisms...seem to involve a causality *sui generis* that we cannot recognize as real” (2014, 156; also see 1990, 47).
- ◆ From this, we might infer to a stronger eliminativist reading of Kant, stating that organisms are really mere machines on the grounds that organisms are presented to us in outer sense and all objects of outer sense are subject to the second Law of Mechanics (i.e., for every change in matter, there is some antecedent change in matter that caused it).

Interpreting the challenge charitably

- ◇ So, one way to interpret the inorganicism challenge charitably is to connect it to agnostic and eliminativist trends in *Third Critique* interpretation.
 - ◇ Kant says we cannot empirically cognize the causality characteristic of an organism, and this suggests we cannot recognize it as real. (A key principle of agnosticism re the organism.)
 - ◇ Since we cannot recognize it as real and all objects presented to us in outer sense are mere matter in motion, everything we label an organism (e.g., trees, animals, humans, etc.) is just a machine.
 - ◇ If for all we know everything we judge to be organic is really just machine, we have no way of explaining how there are free, rational human beings in nature (for they condition action in a non-mechanistic way).
 - ◇ Therefore, Kant's idealism alienates the free, rational subject from nature.

A cast of challengers

- ◆ In “The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling” (2000), Rolf-Peter Horstmann depicts Jacobi and, subsequently, Schelling as philosophers who accused Kant of being an inorganicist.
 - ◆ Jacobi believes that Kant abandons “the idea that organisms and other forms of living nature have an ontological status of their own”, and this abandonment in turn “leads to a conception of reality that conceives of the world in its totality as a huge mechanism” (2000, 131).
 - ◆ Unlike Jacobi, Schelling envisions a Kantian solution to this problem. As Horstmann tells us, “This can be achieved by a different interpretation of Kant’s conception of the supersensible, an interpretation which liberates this idea from the status of being a merely problematic item, and thus opens the way for giving a different account of the validity of teleological judgments” (ibid).
 - ◆ Of course, Schelling ultimately gives up on this approach “because it leads to insoluble problems concerning the determination of the relation that holds between the world of objects and reality proper” (2000, 132).

A cast of challengers

- ◇ One might conceive of the charge of inorganicism along the lines of a more general anti-realist critique of Kant's idealism launched by German Idealists such as Hegel.
 - ◇ According to Karl Ameriks, "Hegel asserts that the essence of Kant's idealism is its "subjectivity," its wholly limiting the categories to our mind" (1985, 24). That is, Kant's idealism is flawed because it does not give us a surefire means of connecting appearances to reality. Kant's treatment of life exemplifies this problem, since Kant's doctrine of inner purposiveness, which he appeals to when explaining the life of organisms, says that teleological judgment is not a form of determining judgment, and only determining judgment has a "given objective concept" as its predicate (AK 20:223).
 - ◇ According to James Kreines's reading of Hegel and Kant (see 2015, ch. 9), Hegel, like many inorganicism challengers, endorses a "skeptical" and "pessimistic" reading of Kant's doctrine of purposiveness, concluding that we cannot know that a thing is purposive when we judge it to be such. This leads Hegel to the conclusion that, for Kant, we cannot know that any organisms are real.

A cast of challengers

- ◆ The Romantics take a similar, but slightly stronger approach, affirming that Kant is a mechanist.
 - ◆ In *The Romantic Conception of Life*, Robert Richards offers a version of this charge against Kant when he groups Kant alongside Descartes, Newton, and Hume as philosophers who employed mechanism as “the basic concept by which to understand not only the inanimate universe, but the living world as well” (2004, xvii).
 - ◆ The Romantics will vehemently resist this line exemplified by Kant and his mechanist ilk and attempt to defend the supremacy of the concept of the organic over mechanism.

A cast of challengers

- ◆ Henri Bergson's 1909 *L'évolution créatrice* similarly depicts Kant as closer to his mechanist predecessors than he had anticipated. Even though Kant "opened up the pathway to a new philosophy" (1909, 357) boasting a superior account of intuition compared to that of his predecessors, Bergson laments that Kant still did not have the resources to explain phenomena such as consciousness and life.
 - ◆ **"Kant is again fairly close to his predecessors. He does not admit any middle ground between the non-temporal and time as scattered out into distinct moments. And since there is no intuition that transports us into the non-temporal, every intuition would therefore be, by definition, sensible. But between physical existence, which is scattered out in space, and a non-temporal existence, which could be nothing other than a conceptual and logical existence, such as the one discussed by dogmatic metaphysics, is there not a place for consciousness and for life? Yes, incontestably. We catch sight of it the moment we place ourselves within durée in order to go from there to the moments, rather than beginning from the moments in order to connect them together in durée."**

A cast of challengers

- ◆ To Plessner, Kant is another philosopher in a long line of philosophers who forewent a genuine analysis of life by relying on the “exact sciences” (1928, 12). The exact sciences base their knowledge in the understanding and its categories, limiting knowledge claims to empirical cognition. While we can empirically cognize the mechanistic activity of a thing, we cannot cognize its purposiveness. Assuming that living and organic activity are fundamentally non-mechanistic and instead purposive, Kant’s Critical philosophy is incapable of giving us knowledge that any organisms exist, and, subsequently, it cannot give us an adequate interpretation of the human being in the world.
- ◆ “[To Kant,] both the mechanical and teleological principles with respect to organism are mere maxims of inquiry of comparable, but not total, explanatory power. We simply do not know what, if anything, is “behind” life, “causing” its basic purposive quality in some ultimate sense.” (Plessner 1982, p. 247)

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◇ So, does it even make sense to steer Kant clear of the inorganicism challenge? After all, he rejects the objective reality of the concept <organism>. He therefore thinks that we can never determine that there are organisms.
- ◇ Following Weber and Varela (2002), I argue for "the possibility of a third way between a strong teleology and a brute materialism" in Kant's doctrine of the organism (99).
- ◇ Whereas Weber and Varela reach into Kant's remarks in the *Opus Postumum* and relate his view to extant trends in the literature on autopoiesis, I think that critical period Kant gives us the resources to chart this middle way.

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◇ For instance, in the Remark to the 2nd Law of Mechanics in the *MFNS*, Kant suggests that the life of the human being is real and connected to reason:
 - ◇ Life is the faculty of a substance to determine itself to act from an internal principle, of a finite substance to change, and of a material substance to motion or rest, as change of its state. Now we are acquainted with [kennen wir] no other internal principle in a substance for changing its state except desiring, and no other internal activity at all except thinking, together with that which depends on it, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and desire or willing. (*MFNS* 4:544, translation modified, my emphasis)

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◆ Kant states that we are “acquainted with” the grounds and activities characteristic of human life.
- ◆ In his *Lectures on Logic*, Kant characterizes acquaintance as a “level of cognition” that is more refined than perception (i.e., an intuition + consciousness of it) and less refined than empirical cognition (i.e., an intuition subsumed under a schematized concept of the understanding). (see AK 24:65-6 and 24:133)
- ◆ So, on the basis that we are acquainted with the grounds and activities of our own life and acquaintance is a mental state that requires us to intuit that with which we are acquainted, we can establish that we human beings really do possess a causality that is non-mechanistic (i.e., has inner not outer principles as its grounds).

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◇ Based on this short argument, we can infer that human beings really do possess a non-mechanistic, purposive causality. Possessing such a causality is enough to establish that the human being is not a mere machine.
- ◇ The human being's non-mechanistic causality has desires and thoughts as its grounds and is characterized by activities such as thinking. So, against the inorganicism challenger, it is possible to ground the activities of reason (e.g., thinking) in life (i.e., the capacity of a substance to act in accordance with inner principles).
- ◇ The inorganicism challenge is blocked.

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◇ But I worry that this is too quick and easy. I also worry because the inorganicism challenger seems particularly interested in Kant's notion of a *natural end* – that is, the challenger is worried about the possibility of intrinsic teleology in nature. To them, the possibility of an organism is ruled out by Kant's commitment to the universal scope of the laws of physics.
- ◇ From the perspective of Schelling and Hegel at least, it appears that, since Kant denies the objective reality of the organism, his account of mental activity is incomplete, mind is radically separated from the (living) world, and his idealism alienates us from nature (see Ng 2020, Chs. 2-3).

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◆ At this point, a Kant scholar might revive the charge that the inorganicism challenge is extraneous.
 - ◆ Schelling, Hegel, and their ilk had different intentions and presuppositions in mind when formulating their philosophical systems. Faulting Kant for depriving the concept of an organism objective reality, and therefore the ability to play a constitutive role in our mental activity, is anachronistic and gratuitous.
- ◆ Nevertheless, a seasoned scholar of German Idealism might insist that Kant is missing something essential from his philosophy by denying the objective reality of the organism and its real internally purposive activity.
 - ◆ While Kant claims that the purposiveness of nature conditions our mental activity, such purposiveness plays no real role in conditioning mental activity. By denying its reality, Kant leaves no real role for the purposiveness of nature in his picture of mental life, and this is a glaring omission on his part.

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◆ Here's an escape route that may satisfy the German-Idealist-inspired inorganicist challenger:
- ◆ Perhaps we cannot empirically prove that organisms exist, but we can Theoretically Believe in the existence of the organism, in the sense that Andrew Chignell constructs in "Belief in Kant" (2007).
- ◆ Belief in this sense is something like a "firm, positive, and voluntary attitude that is subjectively sufficient² for a particular subject in a particular circumstance, given his or her interests and ends, and that has implications for the subject's rational action, assertion, and deliberation" (2007, 359)

Kant's responses to the challenge

- ◇ By accepting the claim that organisms exist as a matter of belief, we do not attain empirical cognition or knowledge of the existence of organisms, but this belief can “give direction to our inquiry and motivate the search for unified, systematic, simple theories, without themselves amount to Knowledge”, or a mental state for which we do have sufficient objective and subjective grounds of assent (2007, 353).
- ◇ Moreover, we can make sense of Kant's insistence that , “purposive unity is still so important a condition of the application of reason to nature that I cannot pass it by, especially since experience liberally supplies examples of it” (A826/B854).

Some conclusions

- ◇ The inorganicism challenger contends that Kant is a mechanist: everything we take to be organic is mere machine.
- ◇ Here I've sketched two escape routes:
 - ◇ Kant can appeal to our acquaintance with the structure of human life to show that there really is such a non-mechanistic causality in the world, or
 - ◇ assert the need for *belief* in the organism.
- ◇ If the inorganicism challenger is right, Kant may lapse into materialism about living nature (i.e., everything that we consider alive is just matter all the way down). However, what I have shown here is that Kant has the resources to avoid this sort of materialism. Kant is not a mechanist but leaves room for life in his theoretical philosophy.



Thanks!

- ◆ All questions, comments, objections, etc. are appreciated!
- ◆ Please feel free to email me at jcg050@ucsd.edu

Appendix

- ◆ Assent is a mental attitude involving objective grounds and subjective grounds of assent. Ideally, an individual has sufficient objective and subjective grounds for assent, the result of which is knowledge. The right kinds of objective grounds are “perceptual, memorial, or introspective states” (2007, 327), and those states serve as sufficient objective grounds only if they render the proposition in question “probable to a degree that licenses assent with a moderate-to-high degree of probability” (ibid). We could think of principled observation, data compiled on the basis of those observations, reflection on the legitimacy of the data, and so forth ingredients that contribute to the formation of sufficient objective grounds. Subjective grounds consist in the “subject’s own determination that the assent is based on sufficient objective grounds” (2007, 328), and those grounds are sufficient only if “the everyday process of using memory, a priori reasoning, introspection, and so forth” allows the subject to establish a high degree of confidence in the sufficient objective grounds motivating the proposition in question. We could think of subjective grounds as one’s level certainty with respect to their objective grounds

Appendix

- ◆ Subjective grounds that are sufficient² are subjective grounds ground with some nonepistemic merits. For instance, assent to the proposition that there is a future life has the nonepistemic merit of allowing us to avoid rendering the moral law practically absurd (2007, 334). Belief is a state characterized by a lack of sufficient objective grounds – we cannot appeal perceptual, memorial, etc. states to show that the propositions we believe in are probable with a moderate to high degree of certainty. Theoretical beliefs are subjectively sufficient, meaning that we have nonepistemic reasons for desiring or valuing the truth of these assents, though we have no direct route to proving their truth. In our case, I propose that the goal of making reason applicable to nature is an adequate nonepistemic motivation for desiring the truth of the existence of natural purposive unities.

Appendix

- ◇ **Theoretical Belief: S is permitted to form a Theoretical Belief that p if and only if**
 - ◇ (a) S has set a contextually appropriate contingent end e,
 - ◇ (b) a hypothetically necessary condition of S's attaining e is S's having a firm assent that p or some relevant alternative to p,
 - ◇ (c) p is a logically possible, "merely theoretical" proposition for or against which S does not have sufficient objective grounds,
 - ◇ (d) S's available objective grounds, if any, render p at least as likely as any relevant alternative to p (though not likely enough to count as Conviction). (2007, 350)

Appendix

- ◇ We might think that the anatomist, the medical physiologist, the archaeologist of nature, and so forth have a contingently appropriate end of explaining the structure of animal or human bodies, chronicling the species of animals present in nature, and so forth. To explain such phenomena, these researchers attaining their ends is firmly assenting to the statement that there are organisms, or beings organized in accordance with ends. It is logically possible that there are organisms, since we cannot prove the truth of the constitutive Thesis of the Antinomy. The available objective grounds – recall experience's suggestions and nature's offerings discussed above – render the existence of organisms at least as likely as any alternative to this proposition.

Appendix

- ◆ One reason not to jump to these strong conclusions is Kant's verbiage when discussing the organism. Kant states that "Experience leads our power of judgment to the concept" of a natural end (AK 5:366) and that the principle stating that an organized product of nature is a natural end is "derived from experience, that is, experience of the kind that is methodically undertaken and is called observation" (AK 5:376). Whereas the "cause of the possibility of a natural end", i.e., an intelligent author of nature, is merely an idea of reason, "the consequence that answers to it (the product) is still given in nature" (AK 5:405). Reaching back into the Canon of the First Critique, we even see Kant claim that, "purposive unity is still so important a condition of the application of reason to nature that I cannot pass it by, especially since experience liberally supplies examples of it" (A826/B854). Kant states that nature "obviously displays an intentional unity of purpose" that leads us to posit certain objects are only possible as a result of final causes. As the question of how organisms arise in the first place is one that reason compels us to pose, it is necessary for us to "conceive of a particular kind of causality for it that is not, unlike the mechanism of natural causes, found in nature" (AK 5:411).

Appendix

- ◆ What these passages and passages like them suggest is that something about the way in which nature presents itself to us leads us to reflect upon objects such that they are generated and act in accordance with ends. Furthermore, as we have seen above, Kant maintains that, “for things we once acknowledge [anerkennen] as natural ends” (AK 5:415), mechanically causal explanations will never suffice as a full account of their generation and activity.
- ◆ In light of these passages, one ought to ask the agnostics and eliminativists, What exactly are we acknowledging when we acknowledge a thing as a natural end? What is the nature of that acknowledgement such that it licenses certainty about the fact that mechanical explanations “will still always be inadequate” for those things?