Kant and the idea of the organism

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Nature seems to be alive; the origin of life, however, is a mystery. Living beings are born, develop and move out of themselves, yet the cause of this is unknown to science. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) describes this in his opus Die Kritik der Urteilskraft\[1\](The Critique of Judgement) where he looks for an answer. No living whole ever emerges through the law of causality, i.e. the mechanical relation of all the natural phenomena through cause and effect.

Kant opened a new way to see life and the wholeness of organic beings. This is a way that is compatible with scientific thought processes. He was very cautious about this, since he was a sceptic and as such he thought that a cognitive faculty
which would let us recognize the primary cause of life, was not in accordance with our state of being. He emphasized the necessity of empirical-rational research of science because the limits, which are given to man through his sensory organs and his capacity of understanding, should not be crossed.

On the other hand, he wanted to overcome the materialistic realism with his transcendental philosophy. He claims that there is no existing matter that is independent of our perception. Therefore this view was not invented by the quantum physicists. Kant stated that the human subject was the centre of insight. We only know the things in the outside world, however, as appearances and not in the way they actually are. Therefore, if we follow him, quantum phenomena, as the term already expresses it, are appearances, not things in themselves.

This means that the scientists only know about their imaginations and theories about nature; its essence remains a mystery.

**An idea of that which is alive**

Furthermore, Kant strictly differentiated between the categories of the rational mind and metaphysical ideas. However, he recognized the necessity for us to form an idea of that which is alive, and which goes beyond the materialistic-mechanical mentality. He called this idea expediency or natural purpose, which are terms that are a kind of secular replacement formula for the metaphysical soul. Someone who is looking for insight, must have an enlarged perspective – which the term expediency can provide him – without expecting any insight in a strictly scientific sense. However, we should think of organized beings of nature “as if” there was a purpose, an idea or an intention active in them:

„We absolutely need to give nature the concept of an intention, even if we only want to research its organized products through continuous observation; this concept is a necessary maxim for making use of the findings of our rationality.“[2]

The idea of an organism is in the centre of this thinking. Kant describes the organism as an autonomous interdependency of cause and effect, it is a natural unit which establishes itself because in it everything is reciprocally means and purpose, cause and effect. He explains this self-inducement in such a way that the effect – being normally the consequence of its cause in the passage of time - moves to the beginning and thereby becomes the cause of the cause and thus the inducing idea of the organism. [3] Kant illustrates this self-organisation with an image: A house generates rent which is its effect. On the other hand the
prospect of a profit is the idea which must be seen as the cause for the construction and the existence of the house. The financial gain as the purpose or the causing idea is already at the beginning of the whole context. This circular, integral causal link, therefore, has an immaterial (ideal) cause, in contrast to a linear-mechanical causality, with which our mind usually works, and which is the basis of science.

He illustrates this with another example: A tree creates itself continuously, it reproduces itself in its species. Furthermore, it ensures its own, individual continued existence by living and growing out of an inner drive for being. This growth is different from the common growth of matter and is similar to a continual procreation out of itself, since it cannot be explained according to causal-mechanical principles.

The tree creates itself by taking what it needs from the outside world and transforming it into a special quality which is “it’s own product”. The separation and composition of the material substances of “this kind of nature beings” is a kind of chemistry which cannot be deduced from any previous capacity and is therefore original. It cannot be reconstructed through mechanical-technical procedures. Here, Kant seems to point to photosynthesis, which is the living principle of plants. His imagination of a being that organizes itself, leads him to the idea of “the whole”. The whole is not the result of a composition of parts, but it already exists – as an idea – before its parts and gives them their structure. And the parts are interacting in a causal way serving the whole. All the organs are autonomous by being purposes, and at the same time they are means that serve the whole. Thus Kant creates a basic concept of the self-organization of nature for the modern times, which is also called autopoiesis.

**The intellectus archetypus**

As we have said, Kant developed this idea of the organism to give an explanation about the living beings of nature who live out of themselves. This model owes itself to the limitations of the human mind. Only through the possibility of higher insight could we understand the spiritual, holistic level – Kant called it “the transcendental substrate”. He arrives at the conclusion of an intelligible world cause and has the imagination of a primary cause, without which life could not be understood; according to him the dualism of our consciousness is connected to this primal cause or flows out of it. However, Kant emphasizes that such an intelligible reason for nature cannot be understood by our mind and he thinks about another kind of intelligence which he calls the intellectus archetypus. This is his term for intuition, for the ability to recognize sensual appearances and their
true being directly and as a unity. He states that sensual-organic perception and the understanding of what is perceived (the term) could only by intuition take place in one act.

Only such a different kind of intelligence can directly understand the nature of the whole in a single, concrete appearance – in the phenomenon; only intuition can recognize the intelligible primal origin of being. Although Kant deems such a mode of insight impossible for our human mind, nevertheless the imagination of wholeness as a guiding principle and as an integration model should precede the mechanical-analytical science.

The scientific, empirical-rational method should be integrated in the concept of an intelligible whole of nature which gives it its orientation.

Let us make a short summary of what we have stated so far and add some further reflections. The concept of an organism and the idea of the wholeness of nature is modern – it is an alternative to the prevailing materialism and important in view of our present loss of nature.[7] Living organisms and the organisation of living beings cannot be understood only from matter. Life which appears in and through matter and is obviously active, cannot be matter itself. Furthermore, the realism, which is the assumption of an objective outside world that exists independently of our consciousness, is naïve and untenable, since the object and the subject are interwoven. The objective cannot be attained without the subject; perception and the understanding of nature depend on the subject. This means that all the attempts of an explanation of life require a perceptive and reflecting consciousness, which, furthermore, must be able to transcend the mechanism of nature by means of the intuition. Kant gives us a plausible reason to have a guiding principle for our insight and our actions. With the objective idea of the organism as a hypothesis we can – and with this thought we are getting away from Kant – transform our subjective view and experience.

The different, separate appearances of life are related and unified through the idea by means of which we watch them; each perceived aspect can be recognized in its organic connection with the whole. Diverging parts merge according to their relationships. Antagonisms complement each other and circle around a centre.
To experience nature as a living wholeness, is decisive, not only for scientists. In the face of a threatening loss of nature through the extinction of species and climate change a new kind of thinking is indispensable for transformation and regeneration.

Particularly artists and scientists often use their intuitive mental skills without realizing that this is an *intellectus archetypus*, and as such a small miracle. If you distinguish intuition from instinct, it is a supernatural ability of our consciousness and as such one that can actually not exist in the frame of the prevailing materialistic-naturalist concept of the human being.


[6] Ibid B 345-363