



# Natural history and the formation of the human being: Kant on active forces



Anik Waldow

Department of Philosophy, School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry, Main Quad, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

Article history:  
Available online 25 June 2016

Keywords:  
Kant;  
Active forces;  
Matter theory;  
Mechanistic explanations;  
Cosmology;  
Anthropology

## ABSTRACT

In his 1785-review of the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Kant objects to Herder's conception of nature as being imbued with active forces. This attack is usually evaluated against the background of Kant's critical project and his epistemological concern to caution against the "meta-physical excess" of attributing immanent properties to matter. In this paper I explore a slightly different reading by investigating Kant's pre-critical account of creation and generation. The aim of this is to show that Kant's struggle with the forces of matter has a long history and revolves around one central problem: that of how to distinguish between the non-purposive forces of nature and the intentional powers of the mind. Given this history, the epistemic stricture that Kant's critical project imposes on him no longer appears to be the primary reason for his attack on Herder. It merely aggravates a problem that Kant has been battling with since his earliest writings.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

In his 1785 review of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784),<sup>1</sup> Kant objects to Herder's speculative method. More precisely, he claims that Herder is entirely unjustified in conceiving of the power to reason as a force that has evolved out of the principle of life that is common to all animate beings. The problem with this conception is, he continues, that the existence of life forces is dubitable, which means that they cannot be cited in order to explain what reason is:

Yet what is one to think in general about the hypothesis of *invisible* forces, effecting organization, hence about the endeavor to want to explain what one does not comprehend from what one comprehends even less (8:53–4, emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup>

E-mail address: [anik.waldow@sydney.edu.au](mailto:anik.waldow@sydney.edu.au).

<sup>1</sup> References to this work will be given in the text after the relevant quotes as *Ideen*, page number. Quoted passages are taken from the edition Johann Gottfried Herder (1989) *Werke in Zehn Bänden*, vol. 6. Edited by Martin Bollacher. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag.

<sup>2</sup> All references to Kant's writings will be made in the body of the text and are as follows: AA: Immanuel Kant (1900), *Gesammelte Schriften*. The English translation is taken from Immanuel Kant (1995–), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, indicated by page numbers after the reference to the Akademieausgabe.

In this passage Kant cites the invisibility of occult powers as the reason for rejecting Herder's account. The fact that he uses this strategy is surprising. Kant was well aware of the debate on living forces surrounding the publications of Georges-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon and Albrecht von Haller's works between 1740 and 1780.<sup>3</sup> This debate focused on the question of whether life can develop gradually as a consequence of a self-organising principle in matter, as the so-called epigenesists claimed, or whether it must be understood as having come into existence through an act of divine creation at the beginning of history. Importantly, defenders of *both* positions were committed to careful experimentation and observation.

Given Kant's familiarity with this debate, his charge against Herder seems to be exaggerated: it ignores that it was part of the observation-based science of his day to claim that living forces exist. Moreover, in recent years scholars have argued that Kant was

<sup>3</sup> Wubnig (1969); Genova (1974); Zöller (1988); Müller-Sievers (1997), pp. 45–64; Roe (2002), pp. 50–88; Zammito (2002), p. 305; Riskin (2015).

not only familiar with this debate, but also deeply influenced by it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Phillip Sloan claims that in the *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (1790) Kant defends a quasi-epigenesist account by conceiving of pre-formed “Anlagen... as dynamic, purposive predispositions that function in relation to... [Blumenbach’s] Bildungstrieb.”<sup>5</sup> Sloan qualifies this claim by adding that Kant did not think of the *Bildungstrieb* as operating in the noumenal realm. Yet he attributes to Kant the view that “reason as well as experience suggests [epigenesis] as the most defensible account.”<sup>6</sup> On this epistemological reading, Kant objects to Herder primarily because of Herder’s ontological commitment to the principle of life. Sloan’s interpretation thus conforms to the standard account, according to which Kant’s attack on Herder is driven by his attempt to caution against “metaphysical excess”, which occurs when we ascribe “immanent properties to matter,” as John Zammito has put it.<sup>7</sup> Yet in a later article Zammito goes further than this, arguing that Kant himself was not entirely neutral in this regard as he “tacitly admitted the *objective* actuality of forces throughout physical science.”<sup>8</sup> And this, he adds, is the position Kant also embraces in the *Opus postumum*.

In this essay I want to explore what it could have meant for Kant to accept that processes of generation involve forces, that is, not just at the level of the phenomena but at the noumenal level as well. Instead of focussing on the late Kant, however, I will offer an analysis of his *pre-critical* account of creation and generation.<sup>9</sup> The aim of this is to show that the epistemic stricture that Kant’s critical philosophy imposes on him is not the primary reason for his attack on Herder. It merely aggravates a problem that Kant has been struggling with since his earliest writings. This is the problem that on the one hand we must distinguish forces operative in the realm of nature from the intentional powers of the mind, while on the other hand it is not clear how such a distinction can be established.

As we will see, this problem becomes particularly pressing after the critical turn. Now Kant can no longer engage in those metaphysical manoeuvres that once served him to specify what the activity of matter consists in and how it differs from that activity we attribute to free agents who act in accordance with their reason and will. Yet at the same time much more hinges on the possibility of establishing such a difference. Without it, Herder’s conception of

reason as a power that develops out of a general force in nature is only one step away, which is problematic as Herder’s account dynamises the structures of reason in relation to a world that perpetually evolves.<sup>10</sup> It thereby dissolves the fixity and necessity of the Kantian *Apriori*, on which the possibility of objective knowledge depends.<sup>11</sup>

By working from Kant’s pre-critical acceptance of forces of matter to the threat that this position poses for him during his critical phase, we not only understand the vehemence of his response to Herder—which is absent from his earlier critique of mind-like forces in nature—but we can also better comprehend Kant’s decision to abandon the concept of active matter shortly after the review. According to the account developed here, Kant’s struggle with the forces of matter has a long history.<sup>12</sup> The *Ideen* can therefore not be seen as having pointed Kant to an entirely new problem, namely that through Herder’s active forces it becomes possible to derive reason from nature. Instead, the *Ideen* only made clear to Kant that in order to achieve his long-held goal of keeping the realm of matter free of mind-like agency, he had to dispense with the notion of active matter altogether. In what follows I will sketch this development in Kant’s thoughts.

## 1. Creation, generation and supernatural causes

From the start of his career Kant took a strong interest in questions of creation and generation. Thus, *A Universal Natural History and a Theory of the Heavens* (1755) presents an account that sees comets, planets and solar systems as forming through the influence of forces that perpetually drive creation forward from the centre point of the universe to its periphery:

Millions and whole mountain ranges of millions of centuries will pass within which ever new worlds and world-orders will form and attain completion one after another in the remote distances from the centre point that has become the first point of formation and the centre of creation by the attractive capacity of its pre-eminent matter. (1:314, 266)

Original particles of matter are here conceived as endeavouring and striving towards the formation of greater lumps of matter, while the forces of attraction and repulsion organise this formation in concentric circles around the centre point of the universe (1: 313, 265–6).

Despite Kant’s frequent use of language that presents nature as an active agent of an orderly production that pursues a certain purpose—such as the replacement of one maladapted species by the production of better ones (1: 317, 269<sup>13</sup>)—he is clear that all creative forces follow general laws of motion, and in this sense count as determined and blind, rather than as initiated by some purpose-pursuing intentional forces (1:222, 194). The distinction between blind forces bound by the laws of nature and those which are freely unfolding in accordance with self-chosen purposes ultimately goes back to Kant’s physicotheology.<sup>14</sup> During his pre-critical phase Kant conceives of God as a supreme intelligence who acts in line with understanding and will, and for specific purposes when creating the universe in a specific way. However,

<sup>4</sup> Zammito (2003); Mensch (2013); Riskin (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Sloan (2002), p. 249.

<sup>6</sup> Sloan (2002), pp. 249–50.

<sup>7</sup> Zammito (2002), p. 302. Also see Beiser (1987), p. 152, for a similar interpretation. The standard account is closely related to the question of the status of teleological judgement in Kant. What crops up in this discussion is the question of how to judge nature and more specifically the fact that organisms exist without attributing teleological causes to nature. McLaughlin (1990), Ginsborg (2001), Zuckert (2007) argue that for Kant teleological principles are heuristic tools employed in judging organisms; and they all claim that these principles do not inform us about the causal structure of the organism *in re*.

<sup>8</sup> Zammito (2003), p. 82, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Lord (2009) for Kant’s critique of Herder’s Spinozism after the publication of the review of the *Ideen*. Also see Boehm (2014), for the claim that Spinoza is one of the main targets of Kant’s critical philosophy.

<sup>10</sup> Beiser (1987), p. 154; Zammito (1992); Sloan (2002). See Zöller (1988) and (1989), especially pp. 231–232, for the view that the success of the critical project depends on the conception of reason as being productive of its own principles and the related claim that Kant had to oppose the idea (which Herder embraced) that nature is able to generate reason out of its own accord.

<sup>11</sup> Although arguing that for Kant intuitions and categories are acquired by being produced through spontaneity and receptivity, Zöller (1989) stresses that the formal aspects of this productive process are fixed. See Falkenstein (1990) for an anti-nativist interpretation that also stresses the productive character of the structures of time and space and yet acknowledges the fixity of these structures once they have been produced. See Kitcher (1990), especially pp. 35–39, for a detailed analysis of the various component parts of productive processes and the fixity of the “laws of mind” operative in such processes.

<sup>12</sup> For other accounts that also stress continuities in Kant’s thinking about forces see Watkins (2001) and (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Within Kant’s pre-critical and critical framework organisms assume a special status, since he believes that their existence is neither exhaustively explicable through the mechanism of nature nor through the presence of a purposive, mind-like force. I will say more about this presently when turning to the discussion of Kant’s critique of the so-called naturalists.

<sup>14</sup> Waschkies (1987), pp. 562–578; Zammito (2006).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1160332>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1160332>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)