Organism, Growth and History

Michael Rosen

I Organism and Mechanism

In the *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith explains his conviction that the parts of society interact with one another, not just as a contingent concatenation of particular efficient causes, but as a purposive, mutually harmonious whole:

> In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual and the propagation of the species.... Yet we never endeavour to account for them from those purposes as from their efficient causes, nor imagine that the blood circulates, or that the food digests of its own accord, and with a view or intention to the purposes of circulation or digestion. The wheels of the watch are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made, the pointing of the hour. All their various motions conspire in the nicest manner to produce this effect. If they were endowed with a desire and intention to produce it, they could not do it better. Yet we never ascribe any such desire or intention to them, but to the watch-maker, and we know that they are put in motion by a spring, which intends the effects it produces as little as they do.[1]

Perhaps the most striking feature of this passage (to the modern reader) is that Smith makes no distinction between "organism" and "mechanism": he invokes

simultaneously the analogy between society and an animal body and that between society and a watch. Indeed, he speaks (in a way that would seem to be plainly oxymoronic to later thinkers) of the "*mechanism* of a plant, or animal body".

Yet when, in 1797, Hölderlin (as far as we can judge) wrote the short fragment that has become known as "The Oldest System Programme of German Idealism"[2] his use of the term "mechanical" was wholly pejorative:

> ...I wish to show that there is no *Idea* of the state, because the state is something mechanical, as little as there is an Idea of a machine. Only what is an object of freedom can be called "Idea". So we must go beyond the state! For every state must treat free men as mechanical gear-cogs.[3]

The course by which this transformation in the concepts of organism and mechanism took place and its consequences will be the subject of this paper. Its central figure will be Johann Gottfried Herder. It is Herder, I claim, who provides the crucial connection in a chain that runs from Smith to Kant, Schiller and, finally, those German Idealist and Romantic thinkers to whom we owe the contrast between organism and mechanism in the form that has become familiar to post-romantic social thought.

That Herder's use of the ideas of organism and mechanism forms part of a radically new way of thinking about society has been denied – surprisingly and wrongly, I think – by none other than his great admirer, Isaiah Berlin. In relation to

---

[1] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1976) II.ii.3.5, p. 87.

[2] Scholars will know that both the date and the authorship of this text are extremely controversial. However, these are currently the best-argued conclusions. See E. Förster, *European Journal of Philosophy*.[[]] Förster contradicts C. Jamme and H. Schneider (eds.), *Mythologie der Vernunft: Hegels 'ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*' (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984).

Herder's use of organic vocabulary to describe society, Berlin writes: "The use of organic metaphors is at least as old as Aristotle; nobody had used them more lavishly than mediaeval writers; they are the heart and centre of John of Salisbury's political tracts, and are a weapon consciously used by Hooker and Pascal against the new scientific-mechanical conceptions. There was certainly nothing novel in this notion; it represents, on the contrary, if anything, a deliberate return to older views of social life."[4] In my view, Berlin has been misled by a superficial truth into a significant error. While it is certainly the case that the organic analogy goes back to the ancient world, it does not follow that the significance of that analogy remained unchanged for those who subsequently used it. On the contrary; my argument is that Herder played a central role in the transformation of the organic analogy's force. Nor was that transformation a simple one, for it involved changes in two dimensions: a different understanding of the respects in which history and society resemble the organic realm; but also a change in the way that the organic realm itself was understood.

II Growth and Order

To commence the argument, let me return to the equation of society with both mechanism and organism simultaneously, as we find it in Smith. The essential feature of the mechanical analogy is the idea of the mutual adjustment of parts in a whole: the idea that the individual elements and the forces to which they were subject had a character such that their causal interaction would be stable, predictable and benevolent. It is important to note that, as it stands, the analogy is essentially unhistorical. The metaphor of the watch suggests that the parts are adjusted to one

---

[3] C. Jamme and H. Schneider (eds.), *Mythologie der Vernunft: Hegels 'ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*' (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 11-12

another once and for all initially and that the process, once set in motion, will repeat itself for as long as the motive power – the "mainspring" – continues. Parts themselves may, perhaps, wear out, but they do not undergo any change or development after the initial adjustment. It was in this sense, of course, that so many eighteenth-century Deists were drawn to the image of a "watch-maker" God; as Voltaire puts the idea in his *Traité de Métaphysique*:

> It is with this mainspring [sc. the passions] that God, called by Plato the eternal geometer, but whom I call here the eternal engineer [*machiniste*], animated and embellished nature: the passions are the wheels which set all these machines in motion.[5]

Yet the view of social order that we find in Smith and the other authors of the "Scottish Enlightenment" or in Smith's French contemporaries, such as Turgot, is not entirely unhistorical. In contrast to the implications of the mechanical image, they by no means considered the individual "elements" that go to make up human nature to be static. Turgot, for instance, in his discourse "On Universal History" considers the way in which the basic elements of human nature, the passions, change through time. The violent passions, characteristic of a primitive stage of human nature for example, lead to a transformation of society by which they themselves come to be limited and transformed into calmer, more "polite" forms:

> Men who are taught by experience become more and more humane .... But before laws had framed manners, these odious passions were still necessary for the defence of individuals and peoples. They were, so to speak, the

---

[4] *Vico and Herder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), pp. 149-50

[5] Voltaire, *Traité de Métaphysique* (1734), Ch. 8. Lovejoy gives a slightly different quote as from *Dieu et les hommes.*

> leading-strings with which nature and its Author guided the human race in its infancy.[6]

Here, then, is the first apparent disanalogy between society and the idea of mechanism: it apparently fails to do justice to the idea of *growth*.

Yet it is important to appreciate that, for the eighteenth century, the idea of organic growth was not unproblematic. How growth was to be understood – the ways in which it comes about that the seed transforms itself into the plant, the embryo into the adult animal – was a significant metaphysical problem faced by eighteenth-century biologists[7], to which there was no agreed, satisfactory solution. The problem was, as I shall explain, not merely empirical but conceptual. If growth was to be understood as *development*, then it contained an apparently insoluble antinomy.

Somewhat oversimplified, the dilemma can be presented as follows. If a final state (FS) is a *development* from an initial state (IS) then there will be some features of FS by which it differs from IS. But then what relationship do those aspects of FS bear to IS? Are these apparently novel elements to be held to be somehow already present, implicitly, but not apparently, in IS? If so, then they are not really something new. On the other hand, if the novel features of FS are *not* to be found already in IS, then they must be something that is – in relation to the antecedent state – arbitrary, and, hence, unexplained. Thus it seems that either FS is inexplicable in relation to IS or else it is not really a *development* from IS at all.

---

[6] A. Turgot, "On Universal History", in R.L. Meek (ed.), *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1973), pp. 70-71

[7] The term "biology" was only coined at the beginning of the nineteenth-century to denote a "vitalistic" approach to the study of the natural world (in contrast to the classificatory aspirations of eighteenth-century "natural history"). However, I use the term here in its modern sense, to include all those whose interests lie in the life sciences.

The response of many, if not most, eighteenth-century thinkers to the problem of development was to accept the first horn of the dilemma and to interpret growth in terms of some form of the doctrine of pre-formation (what was called, confusingly to modern ears, the doctrine of *evolution*).[8] On this view, whatever features developed later in an organism could be thought of as present, *in nuce*, in the original – "encased", as Lovejoy puts it, "within one another like a nest of boxes".[9] Preformation, it is clear, is very compatible with the watch-maker analogy. For, though the deveopmental process is an unfolding, not a mere repetition, what is going on is simply that a chain of efficient causes makes manifest an organisation that had been pre-determined at the very outset of the process. Thus it can be represented as essentially analogous to mechanical processes; it does not involve *development* in any strong sense at all. [[]]

Historical progress, as it was represented by such as Turgot and Smith, could be understood as a providential "evolution" of this kind – although what was developing was not an individual organism but the species as a whole, moving through stages from "immaturity" to "maturity". Conceptual and empirical issues aside, however, the application of the evolutionist model to history has a fateful normative consequence, and that is this. The stages that the organism passes through *before* its, full, final development are somehow deficient: a less rich collection of properties that will come to full articulation only later. Likewise, then, the species in its earlier stages would be seen as an inadequate anticipation of what would only come to fruition with the full development of "civilization".

---

[8] Their opponents, the "epigenetists" believed that a form asserted itself gradually and continually in the course of the animal's development.

[9] A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard U.P., 1936) pp. 243-44.

III Herder's Originality

Turning now to Herder, it is important to point out that he vehemently rejects this Enlightenment orthodoxy; it is quite wrong, he argues, to regard history as a process in which "all preceding generations [should have been made] properly for the last alone, which is to be enthroned on the ruined scaffolding of the happiness of the rest".[10] What is particularly significant, I believe, is that Herder does not simply reject the normative privileging of the "developed" over the "primitive"; he rejects at the same time the biological explanation and, ultimately, the metaphysics on which, as I have suggested, this normative privilege rests.

In a widely diverse series of writings on religion, aesthetics, philosophy and politics, culminating in the *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-91) Herder articulates a non-preformationist, anti-evolutionist conception of the "organic" realm. Herder takes as his starting-point a metaphysical conception that is supposed to be both naturalistic and non-reductive: the concept of *Kraft* (power). He does so, as Frederick Beiser puts it, in pursuit of "a middle path between the extremes of a reductivist materialism and a supernaturalist dualism".[11] Higher-order properties such as those of life and (ultimately) mind, were neither to be explained away nor to be left inexplicable.

---

[10] J. G. Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-91), translated by W. Churchill (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1968) Bk VIII, Ch. 5, p.75. As well as Millar (whose *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* he reviewed) Herder certainly also knew the writings of Robertson and Ferguson. See R. Pascal, "Herder and the Scottish Historical School", *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, New Series, XIV (1939), pp. 23-42.

[11] F. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard U.P., 1987), p. 128.

What Herder means by *Kraft* is complicated (and his arguments in defence of it conspicuously thin)[12] but it is possible to identify six central features:

(a) *Matter*. *Kraft* is more fundamental than "matter". Indeed, Herder appears to regard matter as a product of *Kräfte*: the latter are not simply forms that animate an inert material but are in some sense internal to, and, ultimately, generative of, matter.[13]

(b) *Mind*. Mind, too, is an effect of *Kräfte*. But it is not to be thought of as opposed to body. On the contrary, mind is an effect of the body taken as a unified whole: the mind, in Herder's view, has just as much right to be said to be "in" the sense-organs as in the brain. Mind is that aspect of organic being that is not just active and reactive, but self-aware.[14]

(c) *Development*. *Kräfte* are capable of growth and development. This is neither the simple unfolding of pre-formationism, nor the realization of a pre-established fixed form. For Herder, growth is – or, at least, can be – real *genesis.*

(d) *Dynamism*. *Kräfte* are complex and conflictual. Although they form a unity, they are not uniform or unvarying. On the contrary, they are dynamic and,

---

[12] Herder seems to be an early example of that persistent tendency in German philosophy to regard it as a sufficient argument in favour of a philosophical position to point out the attractiveness of the conclusions that can be drawn from it – if it is true.

[13] Herder asserts that "order arose out of chaos by means of divine implanted *Kräfte*" (*Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Bk XV, Ch. 2, p. 87).

[14] As H. B. Nisbet puts the point, "... Herder was by nature predisposed in favour of some sort of philosophical monism. He was always inclined to envisage the whole universe as an ultimate unity. But while later (materialistic) monists have affirmed the oneness of everything by denying, within the traditional dualism, that one of its two poles (in this case, mind or spirit) has any separate existence, Herder preserves both matter and spirit by reducing them to the higher common factor of *Kraft*." (*Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science*, p. 4).

potentially, negative. However, with time they come into balance with one another.[15]

(e) *Understanding.* The operation of *Kräfte* – or at least some of them – is intelligible. Because we ourselves are a system of *Kräfte*, it is open to us to understand them from the inside. In so doing, we gain access to those "powers" which alone could make causal processes more than a blind and unreasonable sequence of intrinsically unconnected events.

(f) *Unity.* Finally, organic wholes, formed out of *Kräfte*, form unities in some strong sense. What that "inner unity" amounts to is clearest in relation to consciousness: consciousness is not an *effect* in the mind of an *event* in a sense-organ, but is something that unites the apparently separate parts into a single entity. The doctrine of *Kräfte* could do justice, Herder believed, to the

---

[15] This aspect is part of what made Herder so influential on that literary and social movement called the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress). See R. Pascal, *The German Sturm und Drang* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1953.

As Berlin sums the matter up:

> ... in general [Herder] considered nature as a unity in which the *Kräfte* – the mysterious, dynamic, purpose-seeking forces, the interplay of which constitutes all movement and growth – flow into each other, clash, combine, coalesce. These forces are not causal and mechanical as in Descartes; nor insulated from each other as in the *Monadology* of Leibniz; his notion of them owes more to neo-Platonic and Renaissance mysticism, and, perhaps, to Erigena's *Natura naturans* than to the sciences of his time.
>
> *Vico and Herder*, pp. 176-77

It is worth noting, though, that the idea of *Kräfte* as real, negating forces, also owed something to Herder's teacher Kant's early defence of contradiction: *Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Größe in der Weltweisheit einzuführen*, and to Kant's account of the universe, in the *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, as the product of the interplay of "attractive and repulsive forces". (See Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 194.)

unity necessary (he supposed) to organic life and to consciousness, without having to abandon the aspiration to a naturalistic explanation of the world.[16]

In Herder's view, the point about organic beings is that they are composed of *Kräfte* with the capacity to *organize themselves*:

---

[16] The need for (and the nature of) unity in living beings was, like the problem of development, a burning metaphysical issue in Herder's day. Herder greatly admired Rousseau's *Émile* and so he certainly knew the following passage from the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Priest*:

> ... for my own part, whatever Locke may say, it is enough for me to recognise matter as having merely extension and divisibility to convince myself that it cannot think, and if a philosopher tells me that trees feel and rocks think, in vain will he perplex me with his cunning arguments... But if it is true that all matter feels, where shall I find the sensitive unit, the individual ego? Shall it be in each molecule of matter or in bodies as aggregates of molecules? Shall I place this unity in fluids and solids alike, in compounds and in elements?... If every elementary atom is a sensitive being, how shall I conceive of that intimate communication by which one feels within the other, so that their two egos are blended into one?... The sensitive parts have extension, but the sensitive being is one and indivisible; he cannot be cut in two, he is a whole or he is nothing; therefore the sensitive being is not a material body.
>
> *Émile*, pp. 242-43

The other side is put in a fictional dialogue between Diderot and D'Alembert, *D'Alembert's Dream* (written by Diderot in 1769, but only made public in 1784, after Diderot's death). Diderot defends the idea that matter itself is sensitive – to which D'Alembert (supposedly) objects:

> D'ALEMBERT: While not understanding the nature of sensitivity or matter, I can see that sensitivity is a simple quality, one and indivisible, and incompatible with any divisible object or *suppositum*.
>
> *D'Alembert's Dream*, p. 160

Diderot counters that this objection is purely metaphysical: that there is no reason to think that the supposed "continuity" of an organic being differs in principle from the "contiguity" characteristic of a swarm of bees: what we think of as a single unit, is always divisible – although the way that the "swarm" functions cannot be for that reason reduced to claims about the operation of the parts.

Herder (despite his pluralistic conception of *Kräfte*) was on D'Alembert's rather than Diderot's side in this dispute

> Bearing in mind these transformations, these living operations in the egg of the bird or in the womb of the mammal, I feel we speak imprecisely if we talk of seeds that are merely *evolving*, or of an *epigenesis* by which the members are superadded externally. It is *Bildung* (genesis), an effect of growing, inward *Kräfte*, brought together in a mass by Nature in order that they might manifest themselves. [17]

Only the doctrine of *Kräfte* could do justice, Herder believed, to the strong kind of unity necessary (he supposed) to organic life and to consciousness, without having to abandon the aspiration to a naturalistic explanation of the world and relapse into dualism.[18]

IV Herder and Society

---

[17] J.G. Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by B. Suphan (Berlin, 1877-1913), XIII, p. 173, quoted in F.M. Barnard (ed.), *Herder on Social and Political Culture* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1969), p. 273, translation modified. [check ref. [?]]

[18] Herder's account of *Kräfte* comes close in certain respects to the position that the eighteenth century would call "hylozoism". For the hylozoist, the solution to the problem of development is to argue that the conection between an initial state and the final state that emerges from it does not lie in the *material* character of the final state but in the *mental* character of the initial state.

Herder himself would surely have disputed the application of the term, however: "hylozoism" is, literally, the doctrine that there is life in matter. Herder, on the other hand, would deny that the initial stage of development was already mental. Processes involving the interplay of *Kräfte* could provide an intelligible account of development, he believed, without thereby assuming that there is some kind of correspondence between the initial state and the final state. Herder's position is that both mind and matter are themselves the effects of *Kräfte*.

Again, the label of "pantheism" (frequently applied to Herder) is misleading if it is taken to imply that God exists *only* as embodied in his creation. Herder (a Lutheran pastor) appears to me to take a more orthodox view of the relationship between God and his creation. Nisbet suggests that "pananimism" is the "least misleading term" to describe Herder's view (*Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science*, p. 11)

Three aspects of Herder's biological theory bear directly on his application of the organic analogy to society: his assertion of the importance of the ideas of *diversity*, of *balance* and of *equality*.

When closely inspected, the organic world, Herder thinks, shows every tree, every leaf and every other organism to have minute differences in structure that establish their individuality. This is, to my knowledge, the very first appearance of an idea that, taken up by Humboldt (in the concept of *Eigentümlichkeit*) and passed on to John Stuart Mill, was to have the greatest consequences for liberalism. The interaction of *Kräfte* in the developing organism is not merely a source of conflict: just as the universe can be seen as an "equilibrium of contending *Kräfte*", forming itself from chaotic multiplicity into a stable and self-sustaining harmony, so, too, the characteristic of an organic being is its inner balance. But the condition for such a balance to be achieved is that each of the individual elements must be able to express its own distinctive nature: "The end of anything that is not just a lifeless means must lie in itself."[19] When individuality is realized, so, too, is equality, in the sense that no one individual takes priority over any other: according to Herder, "man, from his very nature, will clash but little in his pursuits with man; his dispositions, sensations and propensities being so infinitely diversified, and, as it were, individualized. What is a matter of indifference to one man, to another is an object of desire: and then each has a world of enjoyment in himself, each a creation of his own."[20]

Thus, *pace* Berlin, Herder's application of the organic analogy represents an almost complete inversion of its traditional meaning. In medieval and ancient uses of

---

[19] J. G. Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* Bk XV, Ch. 1, p. 82, translation modified.
[20] J. G. Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* Bk VIII, Ch. 3, p. 59

the organic analogy the central point was to vindicate the hierarchical subordination of society to a superior directing principle (the subordination of the body to the head, for instance, in the celebrated fable of Menenius Agrippa). For Herder, however, the characteristic of a living being is its internal unity and its free and uncoerced cooperation, in which each part can realize its own ends. In Herder's thought, the organic analogy comes to denote not order and purpose as such but a particular kind of order.

It is this that provides the force behind Herder's contrast between organic and mechanical forms of social order. It is true that Herder was not the first to express the contrast between those forms of political organisation that do, and those that do not, respect the good of each individual member as a contrast between "living" continuity and "lifeless" contiguity.[21] But it is Herder, so far as I am aware, who first introduces

---

[21] Rousseau, in his article on "Political Economy" for the *Encyclopédie*, was making just this contrast as early as 1755:

> The body politic can be considered more specifically as an organised body, alive and resembling that of man... The citizens are the the body and the members which make the machine live, move and work, and which, if the animal is in a state of health, one could not wound in any part without the painful impression carrying to the brain.
>
> The life of the one with the other is the self which is common to all, the reciprocal sensitivity and the internal correspondence of all the parts. If this communication should cease, the formal unity were to evaporate, and the contiguous parts to belong to one another by no more than juxtaposition, the man is dead or the state is dissolved.
>
> The body politic is thus also a moral being which has a will; and this general will, which always tends towards the conservation and the well-being of the whole and of each part, and which is the source of laws, is, for all of the members of the state, in relation to it and to one another, the rule of what is just and unjust...
>
> J.-J. Rousseau, Article "Économie Politique", in *The Political Writings of Rousseau*, edited by C.E. Vaughan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), my translation [check page [?]]

the use of the term "machine" in relation to society in a pejorative sense.[22] Machines have the characteristics of instrumentality, homogeneity and repetitiveness. They use the material that they need for their operation without regard for that material's intrinsic character and impose their own ends upon it regardless. Where the machine is a state, the costs are borne by the individuals who are thereby condemned to one-sidedness and mutilation. That is to say, they lack precisely those characteristics which, according to Herder, are most characteristic of organic nature.

It is in the *Reflections* that Herder explains his contrast between natural and "mechanical" forms of society in most detail:

> These patched-up fragile contraptions known as state-machines are wholly devoid of inner life. There is no sentiment, no sympathy of any kind linking their component parts. Just like Trojan horses they move together or against each other. Without national character, they are just lifeless monsters. [23]

It is the absolute monarchies that are the most "mechanical" states, ordered by the will of a single individual, epitomized in the idea of *sovereignty*. They lack the shared consciousness – the "national character" – that would give them the intrinsic unity that is characteristic of living beings. The subjects of mechanical states are condemned to an eternal, senseless, torment – "whirled around ... on Ixion's wheel" – from which they can escape only by destroying themselves.[24]

---

[22] Herder does not always use the term "machine" pejoratively – but that is the leading sense.

[23] J.G. Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by B. Suphan (Berlin, 1877-1913), XIII, pp. 384-85, quoted in F.M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1969), p. 59.

[24] Since we are told by the political scientist that every well-constituted state must be a machine regulated only by the will of one, can there conceivably be any greater bliss than to serve in this machine as an unthinking member? Or, indeed, contrary to our better knowledge and conscience, to be whirled around all our lives on Ixion's wheel, with no comfort other than that of performing

For Herder, the "false consciousness" of human beings in oppressive and inhumane societies is at one and the same time consequence, symptom and cause of the fact that the society itself is a "false society", lacking the animating threads that would enable its victims even to be aware of what it is that they lack: "it is the first germ of freedom to feel that one is *not* free, to recognise the fetters that restrain one".[25]

Herder emphasizes that the forms taken by human beings (both physically and socially) vary greatly from time to time and from place to place. Each individual culture is like a plant which – responding to its environment – grows in a certain direction, blooms and perishes. While variations and adaptations take place *within* the various organisms out of which the species is composed, Herder is clear that humanity is, in the end, all one species.[26] Nevertheless, the history of the human species has this peculiarity: that each nation forms part of a "chain of development

---

> the final office of infanticide upon our free and self-determining soul in order to find happiness in the insensibility of a machine?
>
> J. G. Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* Bk VIII, Ch. 5, p. 77, translation modified.

[25] J.G. Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by B. Suphan (Berlin, 1877-1913), VIII, pp. 201-202, quoted in F.M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1965), p. 94.

[26] It is inevitable that we look at Herder's "biological anthropology" with hindsight, in the light of modern Darwinism. In general, Herder endorses the modern definition of speciation (the members of a species are those who are capable of mating and producing fertile offspring). Thus he rejects Kant's idea that mankind is made up of different *races*. He also believes that variations among human beings (darker skins for those dwelling in tropical regions) are adaptive. On the other hand, he is clear that such characteristics are heritable rather than enviromental (dark-skinned parents will have dark-skinned children, even in northern climates). Thus (lacking the Darwinian account of genetic variation and random selection) he supposes that certain, dramatic, environmental changes cause heritable changes in man (and other animals).

[*Bildung*]".[27] Thus Herder keeps within the boundaries of the Enlightenment in seeing the history of the human race as forming an overall progress.

For Herder, no less than for his more orthodox Enlightenment contemporaries, the modern world held out the possibility of an advance in moderation and civilisation. It is possible, Herder believed, for human beings to achieve happiness and fulfilment at every stage of history, provided that their society takes a form that allows them to be themselves: he was no "primitivist". It was simply that the repressive, absolutist states of contemporary Germany (and France) would have to be replaced before *Humanität* – a properly integrated, active humanity – could flourish.[28]

V Kant and the Organism

Herder, then, on my account, played the crucial role in giving the organic analogy a new, critical, force: proposing a distinctive view of the nature of organisms themselves and using that analogy for a politically radical contrast between organic and mechanical forms of social organization. Yet it has to be said that, at the theoretical level, Herder's analysis of the nature of the organism and its distinctiveness from mechanical forms of organization was less than explicit. It was left to Kant to articulate with his characteristic eye for detail the conceptual issues involved. In particular, Kant was responsible for making explicit a distinction between two features of the organic realm: (1) that organic wholes are characterized by a different relationship between the whole and the parts of which it is composed

---

[27] J. G. Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* Bk XV, Ch. 3, p. 100.

[28] For the important role played by the concept of *Humanität* in Herder's politics (and, in particular, in the welcome that Herder gave to the French Revolution) see F. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard U.P., 1992) Ch. 8.

than is to be found in mechanical systems; and (2) that organisms are *actively* self-organizing in the sense of being able to repair (and reproduce) themselves.

Kant wrote a very hostile review of the first part of Herder's *Reflections* – motivated in part, apparently, by personal resentment against Herder, his own former pupil, whom he blamed for the poor reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[29] Kant attacks the idea of *Kräfte* for failing to solve the problem that it sets itself: that of providing a genuine *explanation* of organic development. Nevertheless, when Kant came to work out his own views on the organic realm, the similarity of his position to Herder's is more striking than their differences.

Kant's view, as presented in the second half of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), is that organic nature represents an objectively insoluble problem for the human understanding. Organic beings are a part of the natural world and, to that extent, they can be explained according to the ordinary laws of empirical causality, but what is most characteristic of them – their *organized* character – can neither, Kant believes, be analysed away as a merely subjective projection of purpose onto objective reality[30] nor be given an empirical explanation.[31]

---

[29] See F. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard U.P., 1987), Ch. 5. Beiser points out that, to the extent that Herder is indebted to Kant, Kant's attack on him could be thought of as part of his break with his own, pre-Critical past.

[30] "Organized beings are then the only beings in nature which, considered in themselves and apart from any relation to other things, can be thought as possible only as purposes of nature [*Naturzwecke*]." I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), translated by J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1968), Sect. 65, p. 222.

[31] In a thing that we must judge as a natural purpose (an organized being), we can no doubt try all the known and yet to be discovered laws of mechanical production, and even hope to make good progress therewith, but we can never get rid of the call for a quite different ground of production for the possibility of such a product, viz. causality by means of purposes. Absolutely no human reason (in fact no finite reason like ours in quality, however much it may surpass it in degree) can hope to understand the production of even a blade of grass by mere mechanical causes.

Kant's account of the differences between organism and mechanism initially takes up Herder's idea of the contrast between the *internal* purpose of the former and the *external* purpose of the latter. An organism as a "natural purpose" is such that its parts "as regards their presence and their form ... are only possible through their reference to the whole".[32] That is to say, each part must be explained as being the way that it is because of the relation that it has to the whole of which it is a part. But this could be just as true of a deliberately produced work of art (the form given to a successful work of art by an artist, Kant believes, relates its parts with the same kind of inner necessity). What is distinctive about an organic being is a second feature: namely that it is truly *self*-producing. In an organism, we must, Kant says, take the "concept of the whole" as if it were the cause of the way in which the parts develop and are combined:

> In such a product of nature, every part not only exists *by means of* the other parts, but is thought as existing *for the sake of* the others and the whole – that is, as an (organic) instrument... Only a product of such a kind can be called a *natural purpose*, and this because it is an *organized* and *self-organizing being*.[33]

Thus, for Kant, a true organism combines the characteristics of *unity* (each part is the way that it is because of its relation to the whole) with the power to *produce*, *preserve* and *propagate* itself. In this, Kant says, it is quite unlike a merely mechanical artefact – even a purposefully organized one, such as a watch:

I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), translated by J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1968), Sect. 77, p. 258.

[32] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Sect. 65, p. 219.

[33] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Sect. 65, p. 220.

> ... a watch wheel does not produce other wheels; still less does one watch produce other watches, utilizing (organizing) foreign material for that purpose; hence it does not replace of itself parts of which it has been deprived, nor does it make good what is lacking in a first formation by the addition of missing parts, nor if it has gone out of order does it repair itself – all of which, on the contrary, we may expect from organized nature.[34]

However, the fact that parts in an organic whole develop in the way that they do for the sake of the whole is, for Kant as much as for Herder, quite compatible with the corresponding idea that each part is an end in itself: in an organism, says Kant, "everything is a purpose and, reciprocally, also means".[35] The idea that things – actions, lives, institutions – should be *both* means *and* ends seems to be one of German Idealism's most valuable contributions to moral thought. Goethe himself puts the point in one of his conversations with Eckermann:

> It is not enough to take steps which may some day lead to a goal; each step must be itself a goal and a step at the same time.[36]

The *Critique of Judgment* is the *locus classicus* for the discussion of the distinction between organism and mechanism and none of the later Romantic and German Idealist writers was uninfluenced by it. Nevertheless, Kant does not go so far as to claim that social life *is*, in fact, organic, although he certainly accepts the legitimacy of the analogy as a metaphor. [[]] For Kant, a contrast still remains: he does not suggest that even a well-ordered society has the second feature that is characteristic of true organisms: the power of self-organization and self-preservation.

---

[34] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Sect. 65, pp. 220-21.
[35] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Sect. 66, p. 222.

VI Schiller: Organic against Mechanical Societies

This final step is taken in one of the fundamental political texts of German Romanticism: the Sixth Letter of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1795). Here Schiller takes still further Herder's contrast between the vitality of the organic state and the sterility of its mechanical counterpart. According to Schiller, the growth of empirical knowledge, the division of labour and the separation of ranks all mean that, in the modern world, man has become specialized and divided, with the result that the "totality of the species" (*Totalität der Gattung*) becomes impossible to recover from its "fragments" (*Bruchstücke)*, the individual members.[37] The self-division of man in a society that lacks inner unity makes him all too easily its victim. As the society itself is not harmonious, nor can the individual be so. The consequence, for Schiller, is to deprive society of precisely that characteristic – its existence as an organizing and self-organizing entity that Kant had taken to be characteristic of the organic realm as such. Greek society, according to Schiller, had had just this capacity to repair itself and grow back when damaged; yet its "polyp-nature" has been lost in the merely mechanical organization of the modern state:

> That polyp-nature of the Greek states, in which every individual enjoyed an independent life, but could, when the need arose, grow into the whole

---

[36] Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, Sept. 18, 1823

[37] Once the increase of empirical knowledge, and more exact modes of thought, made sharper divisions between the sciences inevitable, and once the increasingly intricate clockwork of the states necessitated a more rigorous separation of ranks and occupations, then the inner connection [*Bund*] of human nature was severed too, and a disastrous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance [*entzweite*]...

F. Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), translated by E. Wilkinson and L. Willoughby, (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1967), Sixth Letter, pp. 33-35, translation modified.

> organism, now made way for an ingenious clockwork, in which out of the piecing together [*Zusammenstückelung*] of innumerable but lifeless parts, a mechanical kind of collective life ensued. State and Church, laws and customs [*Sitten*], were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward.[38]

The issue posed by Schiller here was to prove seminal: whether (and, if so, how) the social machinery of modern states could be restored to its organic nature would become the fundamental problem animating and motivating Romantic and Idealist political philosophy. As Hegel puts it in a characteristic aphorism:

> Division [*Entzweiung*] is the source of the need for philosophy.

[38] F. Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Sixth Letter, pp. 33-35, translation modified.