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What is Life?

At the Roots of Romantic Philosophy:

Kant's Philosophical Vitalism

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of a broader research project on the significance of physiology in Kant's thought. It attempts to show that vitalism is an essential hermeneutical key for understanding the meaning of his philosophy. Grounded in essential concepts such as vital force and vital feeling, it aims to give an overview of the critical project. As such, Kant's philosophical vitalism would also involve an interpretative review of post-Kantian philosophies: it implies rethinking the nexus between spirit and life in Fichte, Schlegel and Novalis, as well as understanding the relationship between philosophy and physiology in Schelling and Schopenhauer. The present paper constitutes a first philosophical foundation for leading up to these post-Kantian and romantic thinkers. It also includes an appendix providing a brief sketch of Kant's possible place in the history of vitalism.

Keywords: Kant, vital force, physiology, Unzer, Stahl

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude fait partie intégrante d'un projet de recherche plus large consacré à l'importance de la physiologie dans l'économie de la pensée de Kant. On tente de montrer ici que le vitalisme est une clé herméneutique essentielle pour comprendre le sens de sa philosophie. L'étude vise à donner une vue d'ensemble du projet critique en s'appuyant sur les concepts essentiels de force vitale et de sentiment vital. Mettre en évidence le vitalisme philosophique de Kant impliquerait de réexaminer également les philosophies postkantienne en repensant le nœud entre l'esprit et la vie chez Fichte, Schlegel et Novalis. Comme aussi de comprendre la relation qu'il y a entre la philosophie et la physiologie chez Schelling et Schopenhauer. Le présent article constitue un point de départ pour une réflexion qui reste à mener sur ces penseurs post-kantiens et romantiques. Il s'achève par un appendice qui esquisse brièvement la situation de Kant dans l'histoire du vitalisme.

Mots-clés : Kant, force vitale, physiologie, Unzer, Stahl

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*Der Philosoph behandelt eine Frage;
wie eine Krankheit.*

The philosopher's treatment of a question
is like the treatment of an illness.

Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

The aim of the following pages is to present the interpretative hypothesis that Kant's philosophy not only can, but in great measure must, be read from the viewpoint of *vitalism*.² It will be sketched out that the concept of *life* is not just one notion among others in his thinking, but rather plays a fundamental, articulating role within it, since that which differentiates the critical way of philosophizing from the dogmatic one has largely to do with the *physiological* comprehension of what life is. The trouble with dogmatism, as well as with many other philosophical systems, is that it has neglected to understand the meaning of life, while from the critical viewpoint *philosophy is essentially a form of vitalism* – of keeping the flame of life alive.³ According to this supposition, Kant's philosophy cannot be properly understood without this physiological background. The guiding question for the following inquiries deals with the concept of life present in his work. Some emblematical excerpts from his writings, reflections, and lectures will be hopefully telling enough as to give a general account of the vitalistic input his critical system depends on.

To begin with, a Reflection on Anthropology (Refl. 1539, AA 15: 964) may be recalled. It is quoted by Georges Canguilhem in the second part of *On the Normal and the Pathological*:

The need to unravel the skein of politics by starting from the subject's duties rather than the citizen's rights has recently been stressed.

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, I, 255. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Malden: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 91-92.

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³ Some readers, especially Kantian ones, will not fail to interrupt here and ask: "But what kind of vitalism do we find in Kant?" If they have the patience to go to the end of the present text they will find an appendix that tries to locate the place Kant would occupy in a history of vitalism.

Likewise it is diseases which have stimulated physiology; and it is not physiology but pathology and clinical practice which gave medicine its start. The reason is that as a matter of fact well-being is not felt, for it is the simple awareness of living, and only its impediment provokes the force of resistance. It is no wonder then that Brown begins by classifying diseases.⁴

Three aspects deserve attention in the above lines. First: medicine does not begin with physiology, but with pathology and clinic. Second: well-being is perceived merely as a “simple awareness of living” (*blos Lebensbewusstseyn*). Third: not only promotion (*Beförderung*) but also impediment (*Hindernis*) is beneficial to the maintenance of health and life. These assertions essentially summarize Kant’s conception of life and health, which is based on two correlated vitalist notions: *vital force* and *vital sensation (Vitalsinn)* or feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*).

How does Kant understand the vital sense?⁵ According to him, the vital sense can be seen as a kind of sensor that perceives all changes occurring within the organism. This sensor, which indicates the vital intensity by which the body and its parts are affected, is also called by Kant *sensus vagus*⁶ or even *vitalischer Sinn*:

that is the inner feeling through which we actually only feel ourselves. With this sense we are only passive, and it is also everywhere where nerves are spread. The vital sense [*der vitalische Sinn*] aims mainly at everything that promotes our life and sets aside that which can shorten it.⁷

⁴ G. Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*. Translated by Carolyn F. Fawcett. (Dodrecht/Boston/London: Reidel, 1978), p. 141. Commenting on this Reflection, Canguilhem considers it an antecedent of his own ideas about the normal and the pathological. Despite the interest of his remarks, Canguilhem’s statements will not be discussed in the main section of this paper (cf. however, the appendix).

⁵ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 153-54. English translation by Robert B. Loudon. In: I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 265. The translator employs *vital sensation* to translate both *Vitalempfindung* and *Vitalsinn*.

⁶ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 153-54, p. 265. See Brandt/Starke, Einleitung, AA 25: LXI.

⁷ “das ist das inwendige Gefühl wodurch wir eigentlich nur uns selbst empfinden. Bey diesem Sinn sind wir nur passive und er ist auch ueberall wo Nerven sind ausgebreitet. Der vitalische Sinn geht hauptsächlich dahin alles das zu thun was unser Leben befördert und hinwegzuraumen das es verkürzen kann.” I. Kant, *Anthropologie Pillau*, AA 25: 742. The proximity to a crucial teaching of the Stahlian doctrine is striking, when one remembers, for example, a renowned text on the *motus tonicus vitalis* and how through it the soul inhabiting the body selects what is useful and eliminates what is harmful to it: “Die Causa Efficiens oder dasjenige Wesen, welches den Motum Tonicum eigentlich anstellet und fortühret, ist die

As the soul in Stahl, the vital sense inspects the whole body on a full-time basis, choosing all that is beneficial and avoiding all that is harmful to it, without perception or awareness, i.e., this silent, inside scrutiny does not need to resort to an act of attention or reflection to do its work.⁸ According to Kant, the vital feeling oscillates in fact between two limits: at the one extremity, there is health, which is characterized by a zero degree of sensitivity or, as in Reflection 1539, by a minimum of feeling, by a simple awareness of well-being (*Wohlbefinden*); at the other extremity, there is a state of the greatest possible delight (*Wohlgefallen*), or a sum of pleasures that human beings can feel. Between these extremes of *Wohlbefinden* and *Wohlgefallen*, there is an entire gamut of human pleasures and pains, ranging from more physical sensations to more spiritual feelings.

Health does not make itself felt, because in the sound state the vital feeling, as conscious awareness, is close to its zero degree. The source of this idea is the Stahlian vitalist lesson according to which the organism works well, without being noticed, if there is no anomaly that it cannot regulate itself. This leads to a crucial figure in the understanding of Kant's approach to vitalism, namely the physiologist Johann August Unzer (1727-1799), from whom he takes a number of crucial arguments, some of which will be mentioned further below. In his well-known manual of physiology from 1771, the *Celeberrimus Unzerus*,⁹ he explains his notion of well-being:

A person describes a condition of health, by saying that *he is well*; – of sickness, by the expression *he is ill*. This being *well* and *ill* are sensations of what is pleasant and unpleasant. One perfectly in health says that not a finger aches, one out of health, that nothing goes right with him; obviously expressions of what is pleasant and unpleasant, whereby we designate a natural or contra-natural condition of the body.¹⁰

Seele, in so weit sie das Leben hervorbringt und erhält, und in Ansehung dessen sie insgemein die Natur genennet wird. Eben hierdurch leitet sie die Lebens-Säfte wohin sie will, hierdurch wendet sie die Säfte, zu ihrem gehörigen Endzwecke an, hierdurch sondert sie ab und aus, was dem Leibe nützlich und schädlich ist." Georg Ernst Stahl, *De motu tonico vitali*. German translation in: *Ausführliche Abhandlung von den Zufällen und Krankheiten des Frauenzimmers etc.* (Leipzig: Eysseln, 1735), § 117, p. 609.

⁸ How much Kant read Stahl and his followers, is an important historiographical question. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze this question in detail, some references are provided in the appendix relating to Kant's place in the history of vitalism.

⁹ I. Kant, Refl. 1525, AA 15: 924.

¹⁰ "Man beschreibt den Zustand der Gesundheit dadurch, daß man sich wohl befinde, der Krankheit, daß man sich übel befinde. Dieses Wohl und Übel sind die Empfindung des Angenehmen und Unangenehmen. Ein ganz Gesunder sagt, daß ihm kein Finger weh thue, ein Kränklicher schon, daß ihm gar nicht recht sey. Lauter Begriffe vom Angenehmen und Unangenehmen, womit wir den natürlichen und widernatürlichen Zustand des Körpers

This passage from Unzer clearly illustrates the affinity between Kant and the physiologist with regard to the state of health and illness. Kant's descriptions of the healthy state are not all exactly the same, and some variations occurring in his texts are of significance. In any case, it is important to keep this main notion of well-being in mind in order to understand the scale of pleasures and pains that he builds starting from it. Whereas in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant clearly differentiates between interested and disinterested pleasures, in his anthropology he builds a relatively continuous scale from "impure" to "pure" pleasures. Certainly, the differences between those pleasures and pains directly affecting sensibility, and those arising from more elaborate mental representations are not to be neglected; the latter are not objects of immediate gratification or pain, but of more lasting delight or disgust. Despite their differences, these types of pleasure nevertheless have something in common; namely, they all must affect the *same vital sensitivity*. To that extent, the scale of pains and pleasures varies depending on the intensity of the vital sensation, which, in turn, is proportionally determined by the lower or higher degree of *vital force* contained in a representation. An argument presented by Kant in this context might be helpful to understand this point. In paragraph 29 of his *Anthropology* he makes some considerations about intoxication and drunkenness, in which he asserts that "getting drunk" is a "very widespread inclination" and "its influence on the use of the understanding deserves special consideration in a pragmatic anthropology."¹¹ What drives him to make such a claim?

1. The Pragmatic Meaning of Getting Drunk

The pragmatic observations about drunkenness compare three kinds of drinks: brandy, beer, and wine. All three kinds, as well as opium, have some effect on the body, but there is a difference between them regarding sociability and silence:

All *silent* intoxication has something shameful about it: that is, intoxication that does not enliven [*belebt*] sociability and the reciprocal communication of thoughts – of which opium and brandy are examples.

bezeichnet." Johann August Unzer, *Erste Gründe einer Physiologie der eigentlichen thierischen Natur thierischer Körper*. (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erbe und Reich, 1771), § 253, p. 231. In the English translation by Thomas Laycock (*Principles of a Physiology of the Nature of the Animal Organism*, followed by the translation of the *Dissertation on the Functions of the Nervous System*, written by the Austrian-Czech physiologist George Prochaska [1740-1820]. (London: Sydeham Society, 1851), p. 127.

¹¹ AA 07: 170; trans., p. 280.

Wine, which merely stimulates, and beer, which is more nourishing and satisfying like a meal, function as social intoxication [*zur geselligen Berausung*]; but with the difference that drinking bouts with beer make guests more dreamy and withdrawn, whereas at a wine-party guests are cheerful, boisterous, talkative, and witty.¹²

Unlike opium and brandy, wine enlivens sociability and facilitates the exchange of ideas. Drunkenness that promotes life (*belebt*) can be considered to be social, because it establishes a kind of *sensus communis* which is situated somewhere between the *sensus communis universalis* of the judgement of taste and the mere *sensus privatus* of the individual who drinks only to get away from others. The socializing quality of wine also appears in other passages of the *Lectures on Anthropology*. In these, wine is contrasted, on account of its lightness, with brandy, which leads to lifelessness (*Leblosigkeit*), a decrease of the vital force (*Abnahme der Lebenskraft*), caused by the dullness of the senses and torpor (AA 25: 922). It is also contrasted with beer, which is considered to be too heavy. The reasons why the pragmatic anthropologist appreciates moderate drinking deserve attention; they are outlined in the following excerpt:

Our representations are animated through the sensation of a new impression, for example, of a drink. Here we are dealing with the favourable side of the drink, whereby the mind is set into an artificial motion, for the feeling of a greater vivification is joy. The ancients did not have such unfavourable concepts of drinking. Sociable and unsociable drinking must be distinguished; the latter is improper and base. Drinking must be sociable, and if it escalates to a certain degree of liveliness [*zu einem gewissen Grad von Lebhaftigkeit*], then it promotes the arousal of the mind [*erfordert die Erweckung des Gemüths*] and makes it sociable. Moreover, in this way it also removes the propensity for dissimulation, and makes one openhearted. For constraint exists in all societies, to which one has already accustomed oneself through frequent practice. However, as soon as cheerfulness has been aroused in society through a moderate drink, but where the understanding still need not be befuddled, but only a degree of talkativeness is reached, one sets constraint aside and becomes openhearted. If cheerfulness becomes

¹² “Alle stumme Berausung, d. i. diejenige, welche die Geselligkeit und wechselseitige Gedankenmittheilung nicht belebt, hat etwas Schändliches an sich; dergleichen die vom Opium und dem Branntwein ist. Wein und Bier, wovon der erstere bloß reizend, das zweite mehr nährend und gleich einer Speise sättigend ist, dienen zur geselligen Berausung; wobei doch der Unterschied ist, daß die Trinkgelage mit dem letzteren mehr träumerisch verschlossen, oft auch ungeschliffen, die aber mit dem ersteren fröhlich, laut und mit Witz redselig sind.” I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 170; Eng. trans., p. 281.

widespread, then everyone talks about what comes to mind, and no one weighs the other's words. For this reason, a company of such people does not like to tolerate someone who is completely sober among them, since such a person pays attention to them, and *is on the alert with his understanding*.¹³

Moderate drunkenness is beneficial to health as well as to sociability since it elicits the feeling of a great vivification (*das Gefühl einer größeren Belebung*). How do guests at a wine-party come to this positive affection called joy (*Freude*)? When combined with an impression occasioned by the ingestion of wine, some representations stimulate the awakening of the mind, while help to increase sociability among individuals. This simultaneous operation is made possible because wine sets the mind free, relaxes and “dribbles” the sentry of our understanding. It is noteworthy that, in this case, the understanding represents social norms, conventions and dissimulations that hamper life's expansion. As a result, wine provides an escape from the standards of conduct that often embarrass sociability and constitute an obstacle to life. From this description of the pragmatic significance of social drinking, it becomes clear that the effects of drunkenness are very similar to those aesthetic pleasures set free by the artistic genius. There is certainly a difference in degree between them (which will be discussed further); but there are also points in common: while the genius sets creativity free from the bounds of art schools, in alcoholic enlivenment the joyful representation

¹³ “Unsere Vorstellungen werden durch Empfindung eines neuen Eindrucks z. E. Geträncks rege gemacht. Wir nehmen hier die vorteilhafte Seite des Geträncks, wodurch das Gemüth in eine künstliche Bewegung gesetzt wird, denn das Gefühl einer größeren Belebung ist Freude. Die Alten hatten nicht solchen nachtheilige Begriffe vom Trincken. Es ist zu unterscheiden der gesellige und ungesellige Tranck, der letztere ist unanständig und niedrig. Das Trincken muß gesellig seyn, und wenn es zu einem gewissen Grad der Lebhaftigkeit heraussteigt, so befördert es die Erweckung des Gemüths und macht es gesellig. Ferner so nimmt es auch den Hang zur Verstellung weg, und macht offenhertzig, denn in allen Gesellschaften ist ein Zwanck, den man sich schon aus der öfteren Uebung angewöhnt hat. So bald aber die Fröhlichkeit in der Gesellschaft durch einen mäßigen Trunck aufgeweckt wird, wo aber der Verstand noch nicht benebelt werden muß, sondern nur der Grad der Gesprächigkeit erreicht wird, so legt man den Zwanck ab, und wird offenhertzig. Wenn die Fröhlichkeit überhand nimt, so redet jeder was ihm vorkommt, und keiner legt die Worte des andern auf die Waagschaale, daher eine Gesellschaft von solchen Leuten nicht gerne einen ganz nüchternen unter sich leidet, indem ein solcher auf sie acht hat, und mit seinem Verstand auf der Wache ist, wenn sie aber alle gleich sind, so nimmt einer dem andern nichts übel. Wer aber in solcher Gesellschaft nicht trincken will, weil er die Folge seiner Offenhertzigkeit voraussieht, dem ist nicht viel zu trauen, denn er hütet sich offenhertzig zu seyn, und muß viel zu reserwiren haben, er traut sich selbst nicht, und will daher die Schildwache seines Verstandes nicht ablösen.” I. Kant, *Anthropology Friedländer*, AA 25: 509. English translation: Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 78. Italics added. See also *Anthropology Mrongovius*. AA 25: 1251-1252.

unlocks the mind from the bounds of the understanding, leading to a more expansive state, one that is conducive to sociability. Besides this, while the *sensus communis* can become universalized in the judgment of taste, in drunkenness socialization enjoys a limited generalization; but it is still socialization, because in both cases the individual can overcome the limits of his private sense and attain a *comparative universality*. The analogy between a sociable meal, organized by a host of taste, and aesthetic judgment could not be clearer:

There is no situation in which sensibility and understanding unite in one enjoyment that can be continued as long and repeated with satisfaction as often as a good meal in good company. – But here the meal is regarded merely as the vehicle for supporting the company. The aesthetic taste of the host shows itself in his skill in choosing *with universal validity*, something which he cannot bring about through his own sense of taste, because his guests might choose other foods or drinks, each according with his own private taste. Therefore he sets up his meeting with *variety*, so that everyone will find something that suits his sense, which yields *a comparative universal validity*.¹⁴

The conceptual bridge that Kant wants to build is remarkable: the community of judging subjects (*sensus communis*) must be thought of in direct proportion to the degree a representation touches the vital feeling (expressed in the sociable drunkenness as the affection of joy, and in the aesthetic contemplation as disinterested pleasure in a beautiful object). No less remarkable is how he explains that the positive value of reasonable drinking goes beyond the anthropological-pragmatic goal it is apparently aiming for. It would therefore be a mistake to believe that getting drunk in a reasonable manner is only a ritualized, elegant form of socialization; it is much more than that, because one can see in it an emblematic instance of what health is, *a constant and progressive removal of life's impediments*:

The freedom from care that drunkenness produces, and along with it also undoubtedly the carelessness, is an illusory feeling of increased power of life: *the drunken man no longer feels life's obstacles [die Hindernisse des Lebens], with whose overcoming nature is incessantly connected (and in which health also consists)*: and he is happy in his weakness, since nature is

¹⁴ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 242; Eng. trans., p. 345. Italics added.

actually striving in him to restore his life step by step, through the gradual increase of his power.¹⁵

People who are under the influence of socially shared alcohol experience a kind of freedom that is artificially obtained, that is, an illusory feeling that their vital forces have been expanded (*ein täuschendes Gefühl vermehrter Lebenskraft*). This feeling is in fact a delusion; its fictitious character, however, is essential to its anthropological and dietetic value, because, far from being a mere sedative or even a narcotic,¹⁶ this fiction (like others dealt with below) is effective in gradually increasing forces in order to restore life (*durch allmähliche Steigerung seiner Kräfte sein Leben stufenweise wieder herzustellen*). That is why a pragmatic anthropology must point out the *vital* importance of these artifices which, just like social drunkenness, lift the burden from the shoulders and minds of men, for that is what life seems to be about: “all of these means [*Mittel*] are supposed to serve the purpose of making the human being forget *the burden that seems to lie, originally, in life generally*.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, by inventing these voluntary or intentional (*willkürlich oder absichtlich*)¹⁸ ways of deceiving themselves, people are doing nothing but acting *under the guidance of nature*, which wants them to continually overcome life’s impediments; nature seems even to wish for impediments and pains to arise, as they are necessary to her purpose of keeping human beings alive.¹⁹ Constantly having new hindrances to overcome is therefore the unavoidable condition for obtaining pleasure and, by this means, for life and health:

Therefore pain must always precede every enjoyment; pain is always first. For what else but a quick death from joy would follow from a continuous

¹⁵ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 170; Eng. trans., p. 281. Italics added.

¹⁶ “Partaking in intoxicating food and drink is a physical means to excite or soothe the power of imagination. Some of these, as poisons, weaken the power of life (certain mushrooms, wild rosemary, wild hogweed, the Chicha of the Peruvians, the Ava of the South Sea Indians, opium); others strengthen it or at least elevate its feeling (like fermented beverages, wine and beer, or the spirits extracted from them, such as brandy; but all of them are contrary to nature and artificial.” I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 169-70; Eng. trans., p. 280.

¹⁷ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 170; Eng. trans., p. 280 (italics added; slightly changed). On these artificial expedients for the expansion of vital forces, specially smoking pipe, see “Georg Friedrich Meier e os ‘paraísos artificiais’ de Immanuel Kant,” in *Cadernos de filosofia alemã*, 19, 1 (2014), pp. 105-116.

¹⁸ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 170; Eng. trans., p. 280.

¹⁹ “Nature herself has arranged things so that pain creeps in, uninvited, between pleasant sensations that entertain the senses, and so makes life interesting.” I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 165; Eng. trans., p. 257.

promotion of the vital force, which cannot be raised above a certain degree anyway?

*Also, no enjoyment can immediately follow another; rather, between one and another pain must appear. Small inhibitions of the vital force mixed in with advancements of it constitute the state of health that we erroneously consider to be a continuously felt well-being; when in fact it consists only of intermittent pleasant feelings that follow one another (with pain always intervening between them). Pain is the incentive of activity, and in this, above all, we feel our life; without pain lifelessness would set in.*²⁰

First of all, it is necessary to avoid the mistake of believing that there can be a continuous and gradual series of enjoyments; such a series would be deadly, as it would only lead to stagnation and boredom. The vital force must always be diminished to some degree in order to renew and grow. This is one of the most important maxims of the anthropological dietary regime, which must guide the individual's entire conduct, so that he can enjoy life and health, even in old age; such a precept teaches a management, an appropriate *usage des plaisirs* (to paraphrase Michel Foucault), and expresses nothing less than the "refined Epicurean intention of having in view an ever-increasing enjoyment":

This stinginess with the assets of your enjoyment of life actually makes you richer through the postponement of enjoyment, even if, at the end of life, you have had to give up most of the profit from it.²¹

Kant also calls this economy of pleasures with a view to renewing strength and vital feeling by the name of *Cultur*:

One way of enjoying ourselves is also a way of *cultivating* ourselves; that is, *increasing the capacity for having more enjoyment of this kind*, and this applies to the sciences and the fine arts [...] But whichever way we may seek enjoyment, it is a principal maxim [...] that we indulge only so far that we can climb still further; for being satiated produces that disgusting state that makes life itself a burden for the spoiled human being [...].²²

Life is, in short, a mix of pleasure and pain, where pain always comes first so that pleasure can be felt. As seen at the beginning of this article, such a

²⁰ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 237; Eng. trans., p. 276.

²¹ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 165; Eng. trans., p. 276.

²² I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 236-37; Eng. trans., pp. 339-40. Italics added.

scheme is also understood in general with disease preceding health. In this way, Kant better explains the meaning of the healthy state or well-being: this is not a uniform, continuous condition; it is, actually, the illusion of this continuity brought about by the incessant alternation of pleasure and pain. This alternation might certainly result in routine. But, precisely, one must always find new artificial ways to fight against, and escape from, this routine.²³ Whatever it is, boredom is also felt as suffering, or even worse than that, because it provokes a kind of vacuum in the vital economy:

Finally, even if no positive pain stimulates us to activity, if necessary a negative one, *boredom* [*die lange Weile*] will often affect us in such a manner that we feel driven to do something harmful to ourselves rather than nothing at all. For boredom is perceived as a *void* of sensation by the human being who is used to an alternation of sensations in himself, and who is striving to fill up his instinct for life [*Lebenstrieb*] with something or other.²⁴

2. What is Spirit / *Was ist Geist?*

As previously suggested, the analysis of the pragmatic meaning of getting drunk gives a good account of how Kant understands the process of life and the feeling of life. Wine favours health and life in a broader, social sense, and not only because it is beneficial to the body (at the time wine could be employed as medicament, as well as tea, coffee, and opium). Kant goes so far as to claim that wine is not just a sociable (*gesellig*) drink, but even a spiritual (*geistig*) one:

²³ Like smoking tobacco, which is an alternation of pain and pleasure, being at the same time comparable to drinking in company: “Tobacco (whether smoked or snuffed) is at first linked with a disagreeable sensation. But just because nature immediately removes this pain (by secreting a mucous from the palate or nose), tobacco (especially when smoked) becomes a kind of company, by entertaining and constantly reawakening sensations and even thoughts; even if in this case they are only fleeting.” I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 233; Eng. trans., p. 335. Kant’s reflections on the role of pain as a sting of activity (leaving one state of mind to enter another) and on the imperceptible transition between suffering and contentment owe much to the Italian philosopher Pietro Verri, nominally cited by him in the *Anthropology* (AA 07: 232; Eng. trans., p. 334). On the role of Verri in the Kantian conception of affections and passions, see M. Suzuki, *A forma e o sentimento do mundo* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2014), pp. 486-502. The book also discusses Kant’s position in relation to the Pascalian problem of *ennui* (boredom) and Locke’s and Malebranche’s Augustian views on human restlessness (uneasiness/inquiétude).

²⁴ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 232-33; Eng. trans., p. 335.

Beer makes a person at once heavy and unsociable, but wine, spiritual.²⁵

The word *geistig* is not used here by chance; Kant knows very well that *distilled liquors also have spirit*, they are *spirituous* in the chemical sense of the word:

[Spirit] is based on this, that the mind is enlivened [*belebt*] by it, since spirit is the basis of vivification [*Belebung*]. In chemistry, water is the phlegm and alcohol the spirit. Who has the talent to enliven [*beleben*], has spirit, for example, [to enliven] a social gathering by conversation.²⁶

The comparison between the chemical and the spiritual sense of *Geist* is not a weak, metaphorical, analogy; actually, both are in a great measure the same, since both are forms of enlivening (*Belebung*) occurring through the same nervous system. This lesson is again learned from Johann August Unzer. According to the general explanations presented by the physiologist in paragraph 6 of his *First Principles*, all animal forces (*thierische Kräfte*) existing in animal and human organisms are neural forces that are divided into “nervous forces” (*Nervenkräfte*) and “soul forces” (*Nervenkräfte*), respectively producing movements called “neural effects” and “soul effects” (*Nerven-, Seelenwirkungen*).²⁷ They overlap each other in the nervous system, in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other. But this overlap also shows that people have not two, but just one nervous system as well as just one vital sense. This leads Kant to say that a drink has spirit, and so does a conversation, a sermon, or a literary work. There is, nevertheless, a difference between the two ways of enlivening the nervous system, which can be gauged by the greater or lesser intensification of the feeling of life they produce. In other words: although soul forces and nerve forces are both nervous, the intensity of feeling can be differentiated, in that the former are nothing but a physical phenomenon, reaching only sensibility (or memory and imagination), whereas the latter are greater or smaller by quickening a greater or lesser number of higher faculties of the mind and reaching in this way a greater or smaller intersubjective span (*sensus communis*).

A survey of the psychosomatic structure that Kant got to know from his readings of physiological works, especially those of Unzer, are helpful to better understand how vital feeling senses and measures different levels of vivification. Life can be divided into three levels, as he describes in the *Metaphysik Dohna*:

²⁵ “Das Bier macht gleichfals schwer und ungesellig, der Wein aber geistig”. I. Kant, *Anthropologie Parow*, AA 25: 295.

²⁶ I. Kant, *Anthropologie Friedländer*, AA 25: 556-57; trans., p. 115 (slightly modified).

²⁷ J. A. Unzer, *Erste Gründe*, § 6, pp. 5-6; Eng. trans, pp. 14-15.

Soul is the principle of life in an animal. Animal is something corporal in so far as it lives.

Life is the faculty of having representations of the capacity of desire. Soul is abstracted from matter – it is that which animates –, a particular substance that is connected with the body is called soul. *Anima* could be called *Seele*, the subject of sensation, *animus* could be called *Gemüth*, the subject of thoughts, and *spiritus* could be called *Geist* – as the subject of spontaneity.²⁸

As the noun says, the *anima* belongs to the *animal* life of human beings, it is the principle of life in an animal. But the human being has another source of life, which lies in the *Begehrungsvermögen*. This contains the most powerful form of life, it is identified with *Geist*, which arises from the spontaneity of the subject. This physiological connection between life with spirit and the spontaneity of the capacity of desire is fundamental for understanding the definitions of life found in other passages in Kant's texts, such as the definition of life found in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Life is a being's power to act according to laws of the power of desire."²⁹

Besides the soul and the spirit as principles of life, the complex physical-mental structure of a human being has also another level, the *animus* or *Gemüth* (mind), which lies, so to speak, between the soul and the spirit. It is very difficult to give a precise definition of *animus*, because it is not a power or faculty, but a set of capacities which is not fixed and stable: the *animus* is something in constant change; its features depend on the interplay of its components, that is, the faculties of the subject involved in a particular cognitive, aesthetic, or practical activity; the *animus* is more like a disposition, a *Stimmung*, or a *mood*. And it is in a direct relationship with the vital sense. Both the soul and the spirit act on the mind (*Gemüt*), but *animating* it is one thing (the force coming from the anima), and *enlivening* it is another (the vital

²⁸ "Seelenlehre – Seele ist das Princip des Lebens in einem Thier. Thier ist etwas körperliches in sofern es lebt. Leben ist das Vermögen Vorstellungen des Begehrungsvermögens zu haben. Seele ist von der Materie abgesondert – das was beseelt – eine besondere Substanz, die mit dem Körper verbunden heißt. *anima*, könnte man Seele, das Subjekt der Empfindung, *animus*, Gemüth das Subjekt der Gedanken, und *spiritus*, Geist – als Subjekt der Spontaneität – nennen." AA 29: 679-680.

²⁹ "Leben ist das Vermögen eines Wesens, nach Gesetzen des Begehrungsvermögens zu handeln." I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. AA 05: 09. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2002), p. 15. See also *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Natur*, AA 04: 544. "Leben heißt das Vermögen einer Substanz, sich aus einem inneren Princip zum Handeln, einer endlichen Substanz, sich zur Veränderung, und einer materiellen Substanz, sich zur Bewegung oder Ruhe als Veränderung ihres Zustandes zu bestimmen."

force here resides in the spontaneity or *Geist*). Despite appearances, the former kind of action is much weaker than the latter. The soul is in direct, immediate contact with the body; an impression coming from the body through the soul to the mind produces only gratification (*Vergnügen*) or pain (*Schmerz*), exactly as when one has a drink only to cool off or warm up. Solely by itself such a drink has no power to produce affections such as the joy one feels when drinking with friends. The force or intensity of the vivification produced by *Geist* is very different and much stronger: if the representation really has spirit, it changes the disposition (in both meanings of the word) of the *animus* and by this means it can also act back beneficially on physical health. Among many texts in which this point is made clear, Reflection 802 is particularly enlightening, because it also gives a glimpse of the physiological system Kant was familiar with:

In many cases one can only come to grips with the body through the mind. The right springs from enlivening, which work on the nervous system, and, through it, on the system of fibres, come from the mind; therefore society, play, and entertainment of the senses are powerful dietetic resources. All these motives only act in relation to society, which is why it is considered particularly to enliven. (There are mechanical, chemical, and animating [psychological] moving forces of the body.)³⁰

This text recalls that the spiritual activity relates to the body through the *Gemüth*, working through it on the nervous and fibrous systems.³¹ Given its importance for understanding Kant's conception of vitalism, it will be necessary to discuss in more detail why representations produced by the spontaneity of the spirit have more vital power than the representations coming from the animal or human life. To do this it is essential to comprehend that *Geist* is employed to designate spontaneity in two senses, that of the reason as the superior power of desire, and that of the free creativity of the artistic genius. This second meaning of *Geist* is more widely known.

³⁰ "Man kan dem Körper in vielen Fällen nur durchs Gemüth beykommen. Die rechte quellen der Belebung, welche auf das Nervensystem würken und vermittelst desselben auf das System der Fasern, kommen aus dem Gemüth; daher Gesellschaft, Spiel und Unterhalt der Sinne kraftige diaetetische Mittel sind. Alle diese Triebfedern wirken nur in Beziehung auf die Gesellschaft, daher diese besonders belebt heißt. (Es giebt mechanische, chymische und animirende [psychologische] bewegende Kräfte des Körpers.)" I. Kant, Refl. 802. AA 25: 350.

³¹ In the scope of this article, it will not be discussed Kant's assertion that the action of the spirit on the body depends in general on the nervous sap (*Nervensaft*) or on the vital spirits (*Lebensgeister*) – see *Vorlesungen über Anthropologie*, AA 25: 72, 74, 300 –, concepts that he also learned from the physiology of his time.

There is something inexplicable about genius's ability to form aesthetic ideas; somehow it acts according to "the laws that are based on analogy" (*nach analogischen Gesetzen*), but "still also following principles which have a higher seat in reason" (*nach Principien, die höher hinauf in der Vernunft liegen.*)³² Its products can therefore be called aesthetic ideas, which are a "counterpart of a rational idea" (*Pendant einer Vernunftidee*).³³ As a representation formed by the creative imagination, an aesthetic idea acts in a way that can be compared to the effect produced by wine, because it releases two types of "constraints": in that it reshapes the material given by the sensation, it makes people experience both "freedom from the law of association"³⁴ and an expansion in relation to the concepts they are in possession of. As no concept is adequate to it, the aesthetic idea evokes a "wealth of thought" and comes very close to the presentation (*Darstellung*) of a rational idea.³⁵ An inevitable circularity appears here. Thus, expanding the limits of the concept, the *Geist*, which is spontaneity and the rational principle of life, sets in turn reason itself into activity through the imaginative creativity: "Giving aesthetically an unbounded expansion of the concept itself [...] the imagination here displays a creative activity, and it sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into movement."³⁶

All this aesthetic explanation of *Geist* should not, however, hide that it also has a connection with the spontaneity of *practical* reason. Among numerous definitions of *Geist* given in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* as the "enlivening principle in the human being,"³⁷ as "the enlivening principle in the mind"³⁸ or the "life-giving principle of the mind through Ideas,"³⁹ the book also expressly affirms that "spirit is *the productive faculty of reason*" (*Geist aber das productive Vermögen der Vernunft*).⁴⁰ This statement clarifies how the spontaneity of the spirit relates to the practical faculty or the faculty of desire, which contains life in the pregnant sense of the word, according to its definition in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

As previously mentioned, rather than being a secondary topic, life is of essential importance in Kant's philosophy: following its traces in his texts, lectures, and reflections, one realizes that physiology is a hermeneutical key

³² KU, AA 05: 314; Eng. trans., p. 143.

³³ KU, AA 05: 314; Eng. trans., p. 143.

³⁴ KU, AA 05: 314; Eng. trans., p. 143.

³⁵ KU, AA 05: 314-15; Eng. trans., pp. 143-44.

³⁶ KU, AA 05: 315; Eng. trans., pp. 143-44.

³⁷ AA 07: 225; trans., p. 329.

³⁸ AA 05: 313; trans., p. 142.

³⁹ AA 07: 246; trans., p. 349 (modified).

⁴⁰ AA 07: 246; trans., p. 349. Italics added.

of the utmost importance for understanding how he conceives philosophy and the tasks it must perform. As an interpretative clue, it can afford a comprehensive view of Kant's philosophical project, which covers not only his three Critiques, but also his anthropology and his philosophy of history. His physiological and medical presuppositions are thus essential for understanding the core and the scope of his philosophical endeavour.

3. Delusions Provoked by Nature

Inserted in the body, the soul receives impressions from the senses and is able to consistently respond to them. But this is not the only means by which the vital feeling is naturally affected. For at this level nature does not intervene merely to regulate the soul in terms of what is immediately healthy or unhealthy for the organism; besides, *nature provokes certain representations which are fundamental to the increase or decrease of the vital force*. Food, for instance, is naturally a means of increasing physical strength; but nature also acts in a more ingenious way by stimulating human beings to confront each other in order to reciprocally develop their competences and skills. *Delusion (Wahn)* is the trick nature uses to implement this strategy. Its definition and explanation are set forth in paragraph 86 of the *Anthropology*:

By delusion, as an incentive of desires, I understand the inner practical illusion of taking what is subjective in the motivating cause for objective. – From time to time nature wants the stronger stimulations of life force [*Lebenskraft*] in order to refresh the activity of the human being, so that he does not lose the feeling of life completely in mere *enjoyment* [*das Gefühl des Lebens gar nicht im bloßen Genießen einbüße*]. To this end it has very wisely and beneficently simulated objects for the naturally lazy human being, which according to his imagination are real ends (ways of acquiring honour, control, and money). These objects give the person who is reluctant to undertake any work enough *to keep him occupied* and busy *doing nothing*, so that the interest which he takes in them is an interest of mere delusion. And nature therefore really is playing with the human being and spurring him (the subject) to its ends, while he is convinced (objectively) that he has set his own end. – These inclinations of delusion, just because imagination is a self-creator in them, are apt to become *passionate* in the highest degree, especially when they are applied to competition among human beings.⁴¹

⁴¹ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. AA 07: 275; Eng. trans., p. 375. Translation modified.

Nature uses imagination's creative power to deceive people so as not to let their vital force run out. For this purpose, the main deceptive representations devised by nature are the illusions of honour, power, and money. It is not just a coincidence that these three delusions are defined as *passions* (*Leiden-schaften*) and that these three passions are exactly the same ones described in *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* as the tools nature employs to implement unsociable sociability – that is, the paradoxical stratagem of socially integrating people through the exacerbation of their selfishness, which is, however, also the way to develop their individual talents and abilities. But in contrast to the *Anthropology*, in *Idea for a Universal History* no mention is made of this capital point, namely, that the three main illusions of sociable unsociability *are anchored in physiology*. Nature introduces imaginary illusions in human beings in order to more strongly stimulate their vital forces. These vital forces, however, should not be understood merely as pure biological entities, because they are the physiological-anthropological conditions for the emergence and development of people's capacities and skills (the biological cannot be absolutely separated from the cultural, and vice versa). If these considerations make sense, the critical philosophy could and should be read as *an expanded vitalism*. The pragmatic anthropology shows that this vitalism is rooted in nature and that the philosophy of history is built on the growth of the vital forces.

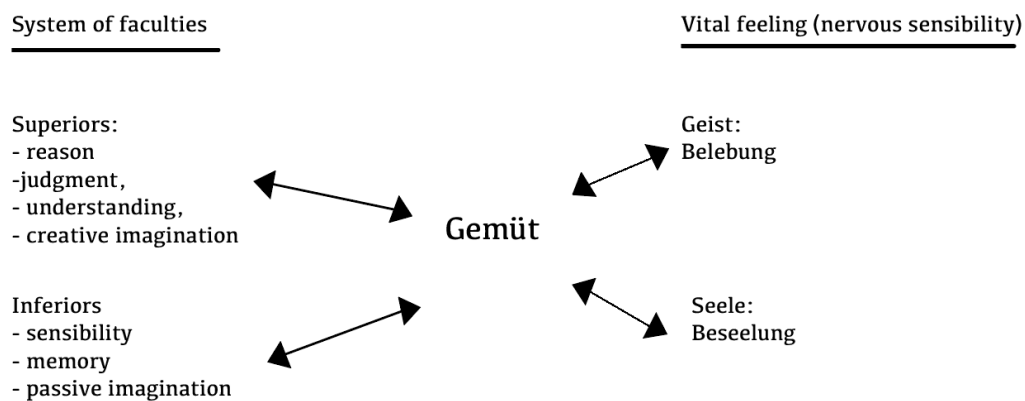
Nature subtly introduces antagonism in the relationships between individuals, as well as within individuals. According to Kant, this is a lesson to be learned from the physicians themselves: "Enjoyment is the feeling of promotion of life; pain is that of hindrance of life. But (animal) life, as physicians have already noted, is a continuous play of antagonism between both."⁴² Physicians explain animal life as an antagonistic interplay between pleasure and pain. A much earlier Reflection had already indicated that illusion, inclination, and conflict, depend on *vital spirits*:

Some vital spirits set themselves in motion against matter, these are only animalistic; others only set themselves in motion against people, either in disputes, in inclination, and honor, or in jest, and these are spiritual. The latter contain the source of life.⁴³

⁴² I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, AA 07: 231; trans., p. 334.

⁴³ I. Kant, Refl. 468. AA 15: 193: "Einige Lebensgeister setzen sich gegen die Materie in Bewegung, diese sind nur animalisch; andere setzen sich nur gegen Menschen in Bewegung, es sey im Streit oder in Neigung und Ehre oder im Schertze, und diese sind geistig. Die letzteren enthalten die Quelle des Lebens."

Vital spirits come into activity with respect both to matter and to representations produced by the spirit. In physiological terms animal and spiritual life operate just in the same manner, that is, life takes place only when vital spirits affect the nervous sensitivity by travelling through the nerves and fibres. But this common nervous fund implies no risks: the upper and lower domains (spontaneity and passivity) of the subject remain separated, and the superior powers (their “transcendentality”) are not contaminated by the lower ones.⁴⁴ Although it is possible and necessary to carefully respect the separation between passivity and spontaneity, this separation does not argue against the fact that there only exists one common vital sensitivity, which prevents the “two sides” of a person from being separated as if by an abyss. The spiritual life keeps its purity and its strength untouched, but at the same time animal and spiritual life meet in the *Gemüth*, touching the vital sensitivity through it.



Kant most likely learned from Unzer that the vital force emanating from reason should be called spirit or *Geist*, and that *Geist* acts on the body but is independent from it; conversely, everything that happens to the soul can only be animal. These differentiations are dealt with, for instance, in two excerpts from Unzer:

When an internal impression arises from the higher passions, from intellectual conceptions and motives, and from desires and aversions of the will and their satisfaction, the movements it excites, in so far as these intellectual conceptions &c., are unmingled with sensible conceptions, are solely sentient actions, and there is no combined action of the cerebral forces and the nerve forces in their production. They are not

⁴⁴ “Alle Triebe zusammen genommen machen das Fleisch, die Bewegungs Gründe der Vernunft aber den Geist aus”. *Anthropologie Parow*, AA 25: 410.

dependent on any external impression, and consequently cannot be nerve-actions induced by the nerve force, and the only other animal forces are the cerebral ones. Nature has granted this higher species of conceptions to the most perfect animals only, whose souls are not simply sensible [*sinnlich*], but spiritual [*Geister*].⁴⁵

Every sentient animal [or every ensouled animal: *ein jedes beseelte Thier*] must not only be endowed with mind [soul = *Seele*], or the conceptive force [*Vorstellungskraft*], but also with the *vis nervosa* [*Nervenkräfte*] and nerves, and with the cerebral forces and a brain: if the soul is spiritual [*Ist die Seele desselben ein Geist*], that is to say, if the animal be endowed with understanding and will, it is termed a *reasoning animal*, but if the soul be simply sensible [*bloß sinnlich*], then the animal is a *sensible* or *unreasoning animal* (a brute).⁴⁶

In any case, Kant states quite explicitly that intellectual delight (or displeasure) in social communication must affect the same vital sensibility as sensual pleasure or displeasure, as in this passage from his *Anthropology*:

However, there is a *spiritual pleasure* [*Geistesgenuß*], which consists in the communication of thoughts. But if it is forced on us and still a spiritual nutrition [*Geistes-Nahrung*] is not beneficial to us, the mind finds it repulsive (as in, e.g., the constant repetition of would-be flashes of wit or humour, whose sameness can be unwholesome to us), and thus the natural instinct to be free of it is also called nausea by analogy, although it belongs to the inner sense.⁴⁷

How does Kant understand the passage from the antagonism (sociable unsociability) instituted by nature to the constitution of society, which has been made possible through the efforts of human and spiritual life? Readers of the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* tend to think (particularly after Foucault's interpretation of the book) that there is a gap between nature and culture in Kant's assertion that pragmatic anthropology should not be confused with mere physiological anthropology.⁴⁸ This interpretation can certainly be relativized. Undoubtedly anthropology cannot be guided by what nature makes of human beings. The pragmatic anthropologist as well as the critical philosopher, however, must be attentive to the directives given by nature, as she reveals to them that even obstacles to life can actually serve as

⁴⁵ J. A. Unzer, *Erste Gründe*, § 593, pp. 603-04; Eng. trans., p. 304 (slightly modified). At the end of the passage, Unzer recalls that the differentiation between sensational and spiritual souls (*Geister*) is found in paragraph 590 of Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*.

⁴⁶ J. A. Unzer, *Erste Gründe*, § 605, p. 615; Eng. trans., p. 311.

⁴⁷ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, AA 07: 157-58; Eng. trans., p. 269.

⁴⁸ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, AA 07: 119; Eng. trans., p. 231.

a means of stimulating it. Both the pragmatic anthropologist and the critical philosopher look for the best possibilities people have for developing their talents and skills; both of them realize that properly understood, *the meaning of life is to have more and more life* – a stronger life, in a process that has some resemblance to, but is not synonymous with, Nietzsche’s “great health.”⁴⁹ Indeed, as Canguilhem has well noted, according to Kant illness comes before health, pain before pleasure, the pathological before the normal: nature first establishes a pathological life, in which people are guided by unpleasant sensations and illusory passions. After this stage, however, at the second (human) and third (spiritual) levels of life nature passes the baton to human beings, who are from now on responsible for their own health.⁵⁰ This means that at this moment they must leave the passive-pathological state (that is, the state in which they are ordered by natural sensations and passions) and take the reins of conduct in their own hands, by means of pragmatic, ethical and moral rules, which means entering a true state of health. How does this happen? This move is possible because at the anthropological level human beings already have the power to make decisions; their lives can be largely governed by a faculty of desire that privileges life-giving undertakings and entertainment over deadening ones. Anthropology is conceived in this sense as a correction of unsociability; it teaches individuals to abandon their antagonisms and become active members of a collective effort to discover and cultivate new and greater forms of life (to improve and share their knowledge and skills, their aesthetic taste, as well as their moral, ethical culture). Of course, antagonisms will always exist, because people will never fully overcome their selfish inclinations and, therefore, their conflicts. But these conflicts must be appeased in increasingly general forms of consensus, in larger forms of common sense, where divergences are erased, and plurality encouraged.

The choice of more universally valid activities does not only imply an independence from selfish motivations; it also opens up the possibility for coexistence, for an agreement that would stimulate the development of *all talents in general*, and not only those of a *particular* person. Conversely, the conflict between divergent wills is always the greatest impediment to an intensification of life:

⁴⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, I, Vorrede, § 4.

⁵⁰ Kant certainly had to overcome the commonsensical belief that the sensitive motivation is stronger than the pragmatic and moral ones. See, for instance, Refl. 6722: “Die treibende Kraft der moralischen Bewegungsgründe ist die Schwächste; stärker ist die der pragmatischen, noch stärker die der pathologischen” (AA 19: 141).

The feeling of the spiritual life refers to understanding and freedom, since one has within oneself the grounds for knowledge and choice. Everything that agrees with it is considered to be good. This judgment is independent of the private constitution of the subject. It depends on whether it is possible for the matter to pass through us and consists in the general validity for any will; for usually controversial will is life's greatest obstacle. Everything that pleases us so that we depend on it is so far out of our control and proves to be an obstacle to the highest life, namely the power of will, to have one's condition and oneself under one's own freedom.

[...]

The feeling of life is greater in sensation, but I feel a greater life in voluntary enlivening, and I feel the greatest *principium* of life in morality.⁵¹

From the viewpoint of life and its gradual expansion, the aim of anthropology and philosophy is the same, with the difference that in philosophy the spirit shows itself in the fullness of its strength. Wine and other artificial inventions of people can temporally free them from mortifying routines, and indicate to them that a path for their *Bildung* and refinement is possible. As noted above, a social gathering is an anticipation of the universal community of subjects, and the host who tastefully organizes a meal can be considered an anthropo-

⁵¹ "Das Gefühl des geistigen Lebens geht auf Verstand und freyheit, da man in sich selbst die Gründe der Erkenntnis und der Wahl hat. Alles was damit zusammenstimmt, heißt gut. Dies Urtheil ist unabhängig von der Privatbeschaffenheit des subjects. Es geht auf die Möglichkeit der Sache durch uns und besteht in der allgemeingültigkeit vor jede Willkühr; denn sonst ist eine andre Widerstreitende Willkühr die größte Hindernis des Lebens. Alles, was uns gefällt, so daß wir davon abhängen, ist so fern nicht in unsrer Gewalt und beweiset eine Hindernis des obersten Lebens, nemlich der Macht der Willkühr, seinen Zustand und sich selbst unter seiner eignen Freyheit zu haben. [...] Das Gefühl des Lebens ist in der Empfindung Größer, aber ich fühle ein größeres Leben in der willkührlichen Belebung, und ich fühle das größte principium des Lebens bey der moralitaet." I. Kant, Refl. 824, AA 15: 368. Reflection 823 (AA 15: 367) brings an important explanation of the relationship between the vital feeling (pleasure/displeasure) and the principle of life, both linked to the three layers that make up human physiology: "Der Werth des Wohlgefallens und Misfallens beziehen sich auf mögliche Wahl, d. i. auf willkühr, folglich auf das principium des lebens. Was kann ein Gegenstand unserer Wahl sey? Was unser Wohl hervorbringt, folglich die actus des Lebens vergrößert. Das Gefühl also von der Beforderung oder Hindernis des Lebens ist wohlgefallen und Misfallen. (Ob wir das Vermögen es hervorzubringen auch bey uns finden, ist nicht nöthig, wenn wir nur die Gründe, solche, wo sie da sind, in Spiel zu setzen, bey uns antreffen.) Wir haben ein thierisches, ein Geistiges und Menschliches Leben. Durch das erste sind wir des Vergnügens und Schmerzes fähig (Gefühl), durch das [zweyte] dritte des Wohlgefallens durch sinnliche Urtheilskraft (Geschmak), durch das zweyte des Wohlgefallens durch Vernunft. Epicur sagt: alles Vergnüen kömt nur durch Mitwirkung vom Körper, ob es zwar seine erste Ursache im Geiste hat."

logical version of the artistic genius, as it allows for harmonious coexistence between different individuals with different inclinations and particular talents. However, genius, i.e., spirit or *Geist*, is much stronger as it enlivens *all human talents*, and the conflict of interests can be overcome in a more universal agreement.

The word spirit can also be used instead of genius. But it is not used with the article. A person not only has skill, but also spirit. Spirit is not a special talent, but an invigorating principle of all talents. You cannot use an adjective to modify the word spirit, e.g., a fine spirit, but these apply to the head and talent; spirit is what enlivens everything.⁵²

Just as the host is the anthropological version of the artistic taste, so too the artistic genius can be seen as the aesthetic version of that which occurs in moral wisdom, as the unification and cohesion of all forces in the idea of *freedom and life*:

Ultimately, everything depends on life; what enlivens (or the feeling of promotion of life) is pleasant. Life is a unit; hence all tastes related to the *principio* have the unity of the enlivening sensations.

Freedom is the original life, and in its connection the condition for the harmony of all life; hence that which promotes the feeling of universal life, or that which promotes the general life causes pleasure. But do we feel in universal life? The universality makes all our feelings agree, although there is no special kind of feeling to this universality. It is the form of consensus.⁵³

⁵² “Man kan auch das Wort Geist allein statt Genie brauchen. Doch wird es als denn nicht mit dem artikel gebraucht. Der Mann hat nicht allein Geschicklichkeit, sondern Geist. Geist ist kein besonder Talent, sondern ein belebend *principium* aller talente. Man kann zu dem Wort Geist kein Beywort setzen, z. E. feiner Geist, sondern diese Gelten vom Kopf und talente; der Geist ist der, so das alles belebt.” I. Kant, Refl. 933. AA 25: 414.

⁵³ “Es komt doch alles zuletzt aufs Leben an; was belebt (oder das Gefühl von der Beförderung des Lebens) ist angenehm. Das Leben ist eine Einheit; daher aller Geschmack zum principio hat die Einheit der belebenden Empfindungen. Freyheit ist das ursprüngliche Leben und in ihrem Zusammenhang die Bedingung der Übereinstimmung alles Lebens; daher das, was das Gefühl allgemeinen Lebens [vergrößert] befördert, oder das Gefühl von der Beförderung des allgemeinen Lebens eine Lust verursacht. Fühlen wir uns aber wohl im allgemeinen Leben? Die Allgemeinheit macht, daß alle unsere Gefühle zusammenstimmen, obzwar vor diese Allgemeinheit keine besondere Art von Empfindung ist. Es ist die form des consensus.” Refl. 6862. AA 19: 184.

4. Towards Perpetual Peace in Philosophy

Although far from being exhaustive, the excerpts from Kant's texts cited so far provide sufficient evidence that physiology plays a major role in the structuring of his philosophy. One last step will be necessary to show how his conception of the *history of philosophy* and the part ascribed to his own philosophy in this history follow a physiological schema that is very similar to the one found in his pragmatic anthropology and his history of philosophy. The importance of vitalism for his understanding of the philosophical systems and their history is revealed in his *Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy*, from 1796. The text also begins with a physiological explanation:

Chrysippus says, in his pithy Stoic way: "Nature has given the pig a *soul*, instead of *salt*, so that he should not become rotten." Now this is the lowest level of man's nature, prior to all cultivation, namely that of mere animal instinct. But it seems as if here the philosopher has thrown a prophetic glance into the physiological systems of our own day [*in die physiologischen Systeme unserer Zeit*]; save only that now, instead of the word *soul*, we have taken to using that of *vital force* (and rightly so, since from an effect we can certainly infer to the *force* that produces it, but not forthwith to a *substance* specially adapted to this type of effect); we locate *life*, therefore, in the *action* of animating forces (life-impulse) and the ability to *react* to them (vital capacity), and call that man *healthy* in whom a proportionate stimulus produces neither an excessive nor an altogether too small effect.⁵⁴

The Stoic Chrysippus anticipated the explanation that would be given much later by the physiological systems of Kant's time, which no longer work with a mere chemical element (salt), but with an organic operation of nature (the soul as a substance now converted into vital forces). In any event, just as it affects animals this support of nature also takes place in a person before he reaches his humanity, "merely in order to evolve forces which can subse-

⁵⁴ I. Kant, *Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy*. AA 08: 413; Eng. trans., p. 453 (slightly modified). The English version of this passage deserves some comments: firstly, the option "living force" to render *Lebenskraft* is entirely misleading, the capital physiological notion of *vital force* being lost in translation and replaced by the *physical* concept of "living forces" (*lebendige Kräfte, vires vivae*); the same physical orientation appears in the translation of *Lebensreiz* by "life-impulse," whereas "vital stimulus" or even "vital irritability" would be closer to the original. *Reiz* is correctly translated by stimulus, *reizende Kräfte* not incorrectly by "animating forces" (though stimulating, stirring, or irritating would be more literal), but *Lebensvermögen* by "living capacity" is not good enough to render the vitalistic idea of a *vital capacity* or *power* which has the faculty to react to the stimulating forces.

quently turn man to laws of freedom.”⁵⁵ It is thus not by chance *that the history of philosophy begins before a person becomes human*, that is, it begins with his “merely animal” nature.

The next stage in the history of philosophy is also governed by physiology. Humans beings are endowed with *self-consciousness* “in virtue of which the human being is a *rational* animal.” But together with this power of reasoning, the human being also receives an inclination or an “itch” (*Hang*):

to use this power for *trifling* [*Vernünfteln*] and thereafter to trifle methodically and even by concepts alone, i.e., to *philosophize*; and then also to grate polemically upon others with one’s philosophy, i.e., to *dispute*, and since this does not readily happen without emotion, to *squabble* on behalf of one’s philosophy, and finally, united in masses against one another (school against school, as contending armies) to *wage* open *war fare*.⁵⁶

The very beginning of thinking is linked with a propensity to provide arguments and reasons in too subtle a way. When arguing in this manner becomes methodical so that it can deal with concepts, this is called “philosophizing.” This tendency to *philosophieren* gradually becomes passionate and bellicose, with different schools struggling and disputing with each other. What soon results is a state of war in which one school of philosophy, like an army, seeks to attack and destroy the other. Yet, this war is not nonsensical at all. On the contrary, just as with the sociable unsociability, this war is, so to speak, carefully planned by nature:

this itch, I say, or rather *drive*, will have to be viewed as one of the beneficent and wise arrangements of Nature, whereby she seeks to protect man from the great misfortune, the decomposition of their living bodies.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Idem, ibidem.*

⁵⁶ *Idem.* AA 08: 414; Eng. trans., p. 453. A better translation would be “propensity” or “tendency,” as, for example, in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*: “nature has wisely implanted in him [the human being] the tendency [*Hang*] to willingly allow himself to be deceived.” I. Kant, AA 07: 152; Eng. trans., p. 264. “Trifling” is maybe too strong to render *Vernünfteln*. In his translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (pp. 380, 587, 589, 619) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (pp. 4, 117, 191), Werner S. Pluhar translates the term respectively by “subtly” or “subtle reasoning.”

⁵⁷ “dieser Hang, sage ich, oder vielmehr *Drang* wird als eine von den wohltätigen und weisen Veranstaltungen der Natur angesehen werden müssen, Wodurch wie das größte Unglück lebendigen Leibes zu verfaulen von den Menschen abzuwenden sucht.” *Idem.* AA 08: 414; Eng. trans., p. 453.

Nature, once again, lends a hand: she institutes philosophical conflict *so that the living body does not decompose*. In other words, here the philosophical activity, like some sort of refined wine, shows a direct influence on the functioning of the organism. Nonetheless, in a subsequent section the text explains that this help from nature is no longer sufficient to reach the real *status salubritatis* – the *health of reason* (*Gesundheit der Vernunft*), which is “an effect of philosophy.” This passage deserves to be closely scrutinized, because it puts two types of health face to face: there is a first kind of health, well known already, which consists of the incessant alternation “between sickening and recovering.” “Mere” human health, however, cannot be equated with a real state of *equilibrium*. Although tacitly governing the process up to this point, from now on nature is unable to produce alone a truly healthy condition; neither can an optimal, well-balanced state be achieved with just a “diet.” This is the case because in this situation reason needs medical help, a therapy, *which only comes from philosophy acting as a medicine*. However, not all kinds of philosophy are an adequate remedy, and this raises the question of which philosophy should be chosen.⁵⁸ Kant therefore proceeds to examine which of the possible “medications” is the most recommendable:

Dogmatism (e.g., that of the Wolffian school) is a pillow to fall asleep on [*Polster zum Einschlafen*], and an end to all vitality [*End aller Belebung*], which latter is precisely the benefit conferred by philosophy [*welche letztere gerade das Wohlthätige der Philosophie ist*].⁵⁹

As medicine, the dogmatism of Wolff and his followers works in the opposite direction to what is expected from a treatment of reason’s ills, since it, so to speak, has no active principle; it is more like a soporific, which leads to the paralysis of all activity. Indeed, made a number of years earlier, Kant’s famous statement that he was woken from his dogmatic slumber by Hume only acquires its full significance from this vitalist context. It was not a mere rhapsodical remark: sleeping is a form of minus life, very close to death. Yet, besides dogmatism, other forms of philosophy, like scepticism and mode-

⁵⁸ “But since human health [...] is an incessant sickening and recovery, the mere *dietary* of practical reason (a sort of gymnastics thereof) is not yet sufficient to preserve the equilibrium which we call health, and which is poised upon a knife-edge; philosophy must also act (therapeutically) as a *medicine* (*materia medica*), for the use of which we need dispensaries and doctors (though the latter are alone entitled to *prescribe* such use); in which connection the authorities must be vigilant to see that it is qualified physicians who profess to *advise what philosophy should be studied*, and not mere amateurs, who thereby practice quackery in an art of which they know not the first elements.” AA: 08: 414; Eng. trans., p. 454.

⁵⁹ AA 08: 415; trans., p. 454.

ratism, are equally ineffective as treatments for curing the controversies that destabilize reason.⁶⁰

There are two ingredients that qualify critical philosophy as the best method for healing reason. In the first place, the critical system is distinguished from all others by the concept of freedom and the categorical imperative, through which the rational Ideas are conceived as postulates for practical-moral realization. Regarding the first explanation, however, certainly well known to most readers of Kant, the text on *Perpetual Peace* presents another view of the critical project, placing it in direct connection with the kind of perpetual peace sought by philosophy in a vitalistic approach:

This philosophy, which is an outlook ever-armed (against those who perversely confound appearances with things-in-themselves), and precisely because of this unceasingly accompanies the activity of reason, offers the prospect of an eternal peace among philosophers, through the impotence, on the one hand, of *theoretical* proofs to the contrary, and through the strength of the *practical* grounds for accepting its principles on the other; a peace having the further advantage of constantly activating the powers of the subject, who is seemingly in danger of attack, and thus of also promoting, by philosophy, nature's intention of continuously revitalizing him, and preventing the sleep of death [*und so auch die Absicht der Natur zu kontinuierlicher Belebung desselben und Abwehrung des Todesschlafs durch Philosophie zu befördern*].⁶¹

Further on, it becomes clear in the text that critical philosophy is an antidote to any weakening of forces that can numb the subject, because it is grounded on the "hyperphysical basis of a person's life." In explaining this hyperphysical support of philosophy, Kant employs again the correlation between *Geist* and the vital principle now well known to the reader:

By means of reason, the soul of the human being is endowed with a *spirit* (*mens, noûs*), so that he may lead a life adapted, not merely to the mechanism of *nature* and her technico-practical laws, but also to the spontaneity of *freedom* and its moral-practical laws. This life-principle is not founded on concepts of the *sensible*, which collectively begin by

⁶⁰ "Scepticism, which when fully set out represents the exact counterpart of this, has nothing with which it can exert influence upon a nimble reason, since it lays everything aside unused. Moderatism, which proceeds from halfway, and thinks to find the philosopher's stone in subjective *probability*, and by piling up a mass of isolated reasons (none in themselves probative) purports to supply the want of sufficient reason, is no philosophy at all; and with this medicine (of *doxology*) it is much as with plague-drops or Venetian theriac, that owing to the all-too-many *good things* that flung into them, right and left, they are good for nothing." AA 415; Eng. trans., p. 455.

⁶¹ AA 8: 416; Eng. trans., p. 455.

presupposing *science*, i.e., theoretical knowledge (prior to any practical use of reason); it proceeds initially and at once from an Idea of the *super-sensible*, namely *freedom*, and from the morally categorical imperative [...].⁶²

5. “Life” in Post-Kantian Philosophy. Hints for Further Developments

In conclusion, if it is accepted that the Kantian philosophy achieved this feat of transferring on to the philosophical plane what it had learned from contemporary vitalist physiology, then it could certainly be fruitful from the viewpoint of the history of philosophy and the history of ideas to inquire whether German Idealism and German Romanticism suspected a vitalist core to the critical philosophy. The following are just a few hints for a possible further exploration of this topic.

Schiller had a medical background and would certainly have agreed with the idea that a full development of our human skills is the real life or the main goal of life, and that this is to be achieved through the aesthetic education of the human being. In fact, a more precise examination of Schiller’s medical texts would reveal many similarities with Kantian vitalism, bringing him closer to Kant than he himself might have envisioned. Notwithstanding, by using the term *Geist* as an enlivening power, were Fichte, Schlegel, and Novalis aware that this concept had these physiological, close-to-life implications? Without being able to tackle the problem here, it seems very suggestive that the production of meaning by the spirit has been linked, in both Fichte and in Romanticism, to what they understand by life.⁶³ And what about Hegel? In a recently published text, Margit Ruffing has convincingly showed that there is a philosophy of spirit in Kant,⁶⁴ to her persuasive argumentation, one can only add that Kant’s philosophy of the spirit is at the same time a philosophy of life. Unzer had revealed to Kant that the representations and desires linked to the higher faculties could be called spirit, and this spirit has a connection with the body, although it maintains its entire

⁶² AA 08: 417: Eng. trans., p. 456.

⁶³ A text that points in this direction (of the relationship between meaning and life) is Giulia Valpione’s, “Schlegel’s Incomprehensibility and Life: From Literature to Politics.” In: M. N. Forster/L. Steiner (eds.), *Romanticism, Philosophy and Literature* (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 193-215. Novalis points in a very fruitful direction, merging as it were Kant, Fichte and Schiller in a single sentence: “Poësie ist die große Kunst der Construction der transscendentalen Gesundheit. Der Poët ist also der transscendentale Artz.” In: Novalis, *Logologische Fragmente, Schriften, 2*. Edited by Richard Samuel, H.-J. Mähl and Gerhard Schulz. (Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1981), p. 535. The author is grateful to Laure Cahen-Maurel for her remarks about medicine in Schiller and Novalis.

⁶⁴ Margit Ruffing, “Geist im Sinnlichen. Eine Deutung der transzendentalen Ideen im Ausgang von Kants Anthropologie,” in *Revista de Estudios Kantianos*, 4, 2 (2019): 434-51.

autonomy in relation to the latter. It is difficult to imagine that Hegel thought of a connection between the spirit and life in this sense.

Extremely close to the Kantian critical-philosophical vitalism are Schelling's considerations in his works of the intermediate period (1809-1821), mainly the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810) and *Erlanger Vorlesungen* (1820/21), where he conceives his philosophy as a set of scales, a sensation of well-being (*Empfindung des Wohlseyns*), whereas the other philosophies are pathological, they suffer from the excessive growth of one of the organs of life (*Seele, Gemüt, Geist*), from diseases that affect the "system" of philosophy.⁶⁵ A comparison between Kantian and Schellingian medicine would be all the more interesting on this point when one recalls that the "middle" Schelling had just abandoned the medical theory of John Brown.

Schopenhauer's position with regard to Kant's vitalism is undeniably also extremely instructive. As suggested in the previous pages, it was physiology that made it possible to convert Wolff's representative force (*vis repraesentativa*) into a vital force and to define the causality proper to representation as *life* in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. *In parole povere*: the central Wolffian concept of representation has been *physiologisiert*, and the moment Kant realizes that representation is not only a *vis* in a general, abstract sense, but that it has a life, a vital force, he turns his back on dogmatism, describing it as a soporific if not a fatal form of philosophy. A similar step was taken by Schopenhauer in passing from representation to the will. When Schopenhauer writes in the *Nachlass* that the physiological point of view is a necessary supplement to Kant's transcendentalism, because physiology provides a further outside viewpoint to the transcendental considerations,⁶⁶ he certainly did not realize that physiology had already been so crucial to Kant's thought. Although Schopenhauer did not know this physiological nucleus of the Kantian philosophy, he still suspected that something was missing, and that the displacement from transcendental to physiology was fundamental. This spiritual affinity is due to the fact that both philosophers were in tune with the physiology of their time. Kant and Schopenhauer are vitalists: it is this that makes their philosophies anti-dogmatic. But both are vitalists in different ways: while Kant has a much more optimistic view, in which reason assumes an important role in maintaining life against death (his final texts on medicine accentuate this aspect), Schopenhauer (probably thanks to Bichat)

⁶⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*. Edited by Miklos Vetö. (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1973), p. 103.

⁶⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß*, IV, § 19. (Oxford: Berg, 1988), vol. 1. Apud Marco Segala, "The Role of Physiology in Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Nature", in: *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 93 (2012): 333.

is much more faithful to Stahl's teaching that life is nothing except a constant struggle not to die. Despite this difference, Kant and Schopenhauer certainly share a great deal in common. As Schopenhauer wrote in a note from the *Nachlass*:

our walking is a continuously prevented falling; and in the same way the life of our body is a continuously prevented *dying*, and the alertness and activity of our minds a continuously deferred *boredom*.⁶⁷

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Appendix: On Kant's Place in the History of Vitalism

Understandably, Kant's presence in the history of vitalism is generally considered in relation to his contributions on purposiveness or "finality without end", a topic discussed in the second part of the *Critique of Judgment*.⁶⁸ This perspective is also to some extent shared by John Zammito, in his recent book on the genesis of romantic biological thought, despite Kant's refusal to be part of the "evolutionist" development that connects the beginnings of the life sciences in Germany with the romantic philosophy of nature. Kant himself retreated from the "daring adventure of reason" that sought to interlink the entire chain of being in a thread of continuity.⁶⁹ But perhaps Kant's place in the history of the life sciences can be best understood if one focuses more on the *internal* developments in the fields of medicine and *physiology*, rather than on his general approach to purposiveness or finalism found in *biology*.

In order to understand Kant's vitalism in a more comprehensive way, it is helpful to return to Stahl's medical theory. However, Stahl's theory needs to be evaluated beyond the mere opposition between animism and mechanism.⁷⁰ The difficulty for Kantian studies to accomplish this task is due to the

⁶⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß*, IV, § 117. Apud Marco Segala, p. 330.

⁶⁸ See Hans Driesch's classic study: *Geschichte des Vitalismus* (Leipzig: Barth, 1922).

⁶⁹ Cf. J. H. Zammito, *The Gestation of German Biology. Philosophy and Physiology from Stahl to Schelling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Chapter 8, pp. 224-244.

⁷⁰ An important step beyond this superficial approach is the publication of the translation of *The Leibniz-Stahl Controversy* by François Duchesneau and Justin E. H. Smith (Yale University Press, 2016). Of great value are the works of the Italian scholar Francesco Paolo de Ceglia: *I fari di Halle, Georg Ernst Stahl, Friedrich Hoffmann e la medicina europea del Primo Settecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), *Introduzione alla fisiologia di Georg Ernst Stahl* (Lecce:

fact that the two main passages in which Kant explicitly refers to Stahl (certainly more favourably to him than to Hoffmann, Boerhave, etc.) are also situated in the context of the dispute between the animists and mechanists.⁷¹ Notwithstanding, a number of important topics dealt with by Kant, such as the temperament and vital feeling, have their origin in Stahlian medicine. A certain contempt for these supposedly “minor” topics perhaps explains why they are not sufficiently taken into account, even though when examined in detail they furnish clues for understanding the meaning of “life” in Kant’s philosophy. For example, this is the case with the question of the temperament. In the *Anthropologie Friedländer*, there is a long excerpt on this subject, and its initial lines are enough to underscore how deeply Kant was aware of the physiological intricacies of this topic:

With the body, we can here however especially examine the constitution, complexion, and the temperament. As regard the constitution, this is thus the nature of the solid parts, the edifice, the constitution of the body. Complexion, however, concerns the mixture [*Mixtur*] of the fluid parts. Temperament concerns the principle of life, to the extent it is a combination both of the constitution and of the complexion, both in regard to the fluid and solid parts, to the extent they constitute mechanical powers. (AA 25: 624-25)

Here the temperament arises from the combination of the solid and fluid parts. This conceptualization comes entirely from Stahl and his school. This can be read, for example, in the *Dissertatio medica, qua temperamenta physiologico-physiognomonico-pathologico-mechanice enunciantur*, which was already defended in 1697 by Christian Albert Richter, under the presidency of Stahl:

according to our opinion, temperament is an adequate proportion between the solid and fluid parts of the body in relation to each other, whereby in both due movement, purification and maintenance by separations and segregations in the fluid and solid parts achieves adequate flexibility.⁷²

In studies on vitalism, it cannot be overlooked that prejudices surrounding Stahl’s animism compromise a real assessment of the historical reach of his doctrine. It could be argued that Stahl’s problem is to maintain the soul as

Pensa, 2000), and the introduction to the translation: Friedrich Hoffmann, *Differenza tra la dottrina di Stahl e la mia in patologia e terapia*. (Pisa: Edizione Plus/Pisa University Press, 2009).

⁷¹ I. Kant, AA 02: 331; AA 15: 943-45.

⁷² C. F. Richter, *Dissertatio medica, qua temperamenta physiologico-physiognomonico-pathologico-mechanice enunciantur*, chapter 3, no pagination. The dissertation was published in Halle by the Henckel press in 1707.

the vital principle that is productive and preserves the body against degeneration. But the complexity and richness of his animism is frequently overlooked. The soul observes the temperament suited to the constitution of each individual, and this has to do with a fundamental distinction that appears in Kant's anthropology. Namely, that which differentiates the *vital sensation* (or *sensus vagus*) from the *organic sensation* (or *sensus fixus*: touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell).⁷³ This distinction largely corresponds to the conceptualization of *lógos* and *logismós* established by Stahl⁷⁴: the latter is an "objectifying" sense, aimed at the knowledge of external things, while the former refers to the inner life of the organism, noting what is helpful or harmful to it. *Sensus vitalis* is the expression Stahlians commonly use instead of *logos*; that is to say, the soul's capacity to perceive the proper proportion of the solid and liquid parts of the organism.⁷⁵ The *sensus vitalis* differs from the *sensus rationalis*, which is the syntagma used in place of the *logismós*, which Kant will call organic or fixed sensation. Here's how the Stahlian Johann Daniel Gohl explains the differentiation:

[The *sensus vitalis internus*] is not, however, what the *sensus rationalis* is: for the *sensus vitalis* perceives [literally "listens": *vernimmt*] only what goes on in it and its principle and how it rests simply in a delicate contact of the nervous tissue scattered throughout the body : on the other hand, the *sensus rationalis* perceives [*vernimmt*] all external objects by means of organs correctly suited for this, and presents their images in the imagination, so that one can reflect, judge and decide what should be done.⁷⁶

⁷³ I. Kant, Anth AA 07: 153-54. Cf. Anth/Mron, 25: 1242; Anth/Busolt, 25: 1451-52.

⁷⁴ "Therefore, I think that one must distinguish between *lógos* and *logismós*, [between] the simple intellect or intellect of the simplest things, especially the subtlest, and reasoning and the comparison of many things" [Ergo distinguendum esse arbitror inter *lógon* & *logismon*, intellectum simplicem, simpliciorum, inprimis autem subtilissimorum, & ratiocinationem atque comparationem plurium [...]] G. E. Stahl, *Theoria medica vera*, I, I, 1, § 21, p. 208. Cf. G. E. Stahl, *Propempticon inaugurale de differentia rationis et ratiocinationis et actionum, quæ per et secundum utrumque horum actuum fiunt in negotio vitali et animali*. Halle, 1701.

⁷⁵ Cf., for example, the testimony of Haller: "Sensumque vitalem vocant, perceptionem proprii corporis, cujus statum mens per divisos undique nervulos ita percipit, ut ejus non sit conscia". Albrecht von Haller, *Elementa physiologiae corporis humani*, Lausanne: Grasset, 1759, vol. 5, p. 536. In Johann Samuel Hallen's translation, *Anfangsgründe der Physiologie des menschlichen Körpers* (Berlin/Leipzig: Voss, 1772), vol. 5, p. 1053.

⁷⁶ Johann Daniel Gohl, *Aufrichtige Gedanken über den von Vorurtheilen kranken Verstand, insonderheit in der Materie von den spiritibus animalibus*. (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1733), pp. 31-32. As Francesco Paolo de Ceglia warns, Stahl's True Theory of Medicine was much more known through his followers than through the physiologist's own texts: "Stahl fu fin da subito un autore molto commentato, con finalità diverse, sia da sostenitori sia da detrattori. Non fu però molto letto, perché le sue opere, soprattutto la *Theoria medica vera*,

Kant operates, therefore, with crucial Stahl's notions, and by following them in his courses and reflections he allows us to see how his *sensus vitalis* (*Vitalsinn* or *Lebensgefühl*) consolidates itself as *the feeling of pleasure and displeasure* in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and the Third Critique. This signifies that Stahl's physiology has entered the critical edifice and occupies a systematic place there. This can be observed by looking at the division of the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Its first part (Anthropological Didactics) is divided, as is well known, into three books: 1) the faculty of knowing; 2) the feeling of pleasure and displeasure; 3) faculty of desire. This division, which is likewise well known, corresponds to the triadic structure of the three Kantian Critiques, the second entry corresponding to the *Critique of Judgment*. In the Third Critique Kant explicitly states that the feeling of pleasure and displeasure is a kind of feeling of life:

To apprehend a regular and appropriate building with one's cognitive faculties, whether the mode of representation be clear or confused, is quite a different thing from being conscious of this representation with an accompanying sensation of delight. Here the representation is referred wholly to the subject, and what is more to its feeling of life [*Lebensgefühl*] – under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure – and this forms the basis of a quite separate faculty of discriminating and judging, that contributes nothing to knowledge. All it does is to compare the given representation in the subject with the entire faculty of representations of which the mind is conscious in the feeling of its state.⁷⁷

Obviously, the present overview of Kant's Stahlism cannot detail numerous other aspects (such as the meaning of the vital feeling for the whole of his thinking), because they deserve an independent treatment. In addition to Stahl, in order to understand Kant's vitalism it is also fundamental to pay attention to the influence of Unzer. The latter is often forgotten in studies on the Kantian conception of life.

Appraising the place that Unzer occupies in the history of vitalism is particularly important for seizing the trajectory that physiology pursued in the development of Kant's thought. But defining precisely what kind of

erano scritte in un latino difficile e prolisso. Furono dunque i testi dei suoi discepoli, considerati 'ispirati' dal maestro, ad esseri assunti come fonte primaria. Erano sia opere in latino, sia in tedesco. Le prime erano in genere riservate all'ambiente accademico segnatamente medico. Le seconde avevano come pubblico d'elezione la comunità di quanti non avevano ricevuto un'istruzione formale di livello superiore o comunque non possedevano una formazione medica". F. P. de Ceglia, *I fari de Halle*, pp. 94-95.

⁷⁷ I. Kant, *KU*, AA 05: 204; Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, English translation by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 35-36.

vitalism Unzer professes is not an easy task. Georges Canguilhem also points out the difficulty of classifying Unzer's physiology: "It is exceedingly difficult, it appears to us, to apply a classificatory label to Unzer's theories. We see why Fearing placed him among the mechanists."⁷⁸ However, Canguilhem seems to complicate matters by locating Unzer's philosophical position too close to the metaphysics of Leibniz and Baumgarten.⁷⁹ Hans-Peter Nowitzki has a more balanced approach when he claims that Unzer's dynamic vitalism leaves behind Krüger's still mechanical vitalism and comes rather close to a sort of neurophysiological vitalism.⁸⁰ Nowitzki reconstructs the evolution of Unzer's physiology (as well as Krüger's), providing landmarks for understanding Kant's adoption of the physiological thinking of the time.⁸¹ Indeed, Unzer managed to avoid a vitalism linked to the idea of the soul, without falling back into mechanism; he finds in the ganglionic system vital centres that act independently, in coordination but not in subordination, with the brain. Therefore, his approach is much more radical than Haller's. This is because the Swiss physician and poet's muscular explanation of the organic process (mainly as irritability) remains stuck in a mechanical paradigm, while Unzer explains the sensorimotor thanks the *sensibility* of the nervous system.

This pre-critical text on mental illness concludes by defending the idea that the seat of diseases affecting the head is not to be found in the brain, but rather in the viscera. This hypothesis had been presented in issues 150, 151 and 152 of the journal *Der Arzt*, a popular scientific journal written entirely by Unzer. Kant accepts this explanation as plausible, but, more important,

⁷⁸ "Il est bien difficile, nous semble-t-il, d'appliquer sur les théories d'Unzer une étiquette de classification. On voit bien pourquoi Fearing le range parmi les mécanistes", G. Canguilhem, *La formation du concept de réflexe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Vrin, 2015), p. 112.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113. Canguilhem rightly argues that it is necessary to pay attention "Unzer's loyalty to the idea of a Leibnizian-Wolffian philosopher [that is, Baumgarten]" (à la fidélité dont Unzer témoigne à l'égard des idées d'un philosophe leibnizo-wolfien) (*ibid.*, p. 112). But perhaps not so for the reasons he claimed. Unzer's closeness to Baumgarten is due to his friendship with Georg Friedrich Meier. As Matthias Reiber has shown, Unzer met Meier and Krüger at the Friedrichs-Universität in Halle. The meeting with Baumgarten's disciple was decisive for Unzer's conception of a cooperation between medicine and philosophy. It also helped him strive for a more popular form of presenting medical ideas to the public. This culminated in the huge success of his magazine *Der Arzt*. See Matthias Reiber, *Anatomie eines Bestsellers. Johann August Unzers Wochenschrift "Der Arzt"* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999), pp. 25f.

⁸⁰ H-P. Nowitzki, *Der wohltemperierte Mensch: Aufklärungsanthropologie im Widerstreit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), p. 34.

⁸¹ It took Unzer about 25 years to undergo the transition from "mechanism and psychovitalism to dynamic vitalism in the guise of nervosism" (Mechanismus und Psychovitalismus zum dynamischen Vitalismus im Gewande des Nervosismus). H.-P. Nowitzki, *Der wohltemperierte Mensch*, p. 88.

his acceptance is not merely of a passing interest. This is because Kant clearly understands its key implication; namely, that the brain is not the only centre of vital activity. Thus, the pathology of mental diseases shows us that there are many other foci of life in the organism that function independently of the central nervous system.

His essay on mental illnesses explicitly mentions Unzer, but there are other texts revealing that Kant is fully aware of the scientific-philosophical transformation occasioned by the independence of the peripheral nervous system. In his own way, he carries out that “Copernican revolution” in the physiology of movement that Georges Canguilhem talks about. It is a revolution associated with the development of the concept of reflex actions. Here Unzer is one of the most prominent names:

The Copernican Revolution, in the physiology of movement, is the dissociation of the notions of the brain and the sensory-motor center, the discovery of eccentric centers, the formation of the concept of the reflex. This revolution did not happen all at once, without hesitations, without concessions to the traditional conception of animal motility [...] From Descartes to Prochaska and Legallois, it was necessary to form with difficulty the idea of a neuro-muscular apparatus which is not only a system, but a system of systems. Consequently, while assuring the functioning of the organism as a whole, this allows a certain independence of partial automatisms and institutes the coordination of sensibility and movement, not from the top down, as in a monarchy of divine right and by delegation of the central power, but from the bottom up as in a federal republic and by the integration of local powers. A vitalist conception, or if one prefers, an organicist conception of the animal body, eventually proved more favorable to the fruitfulness of such a way of seeing than a mechanistic conception. An organism can be composed of parts which are themselves organized and whose *consensus* depends, at each degree of complication, on links capable of subsisting even after their liberation from the highest center of integration and control.⁸²

It is not fortuitous that in these same pages Canguilhem quotes the letter to Sömmering, in which Kant underscores the absurdity of all attempts to locate the seat of the soul.⁸³ This Kantian objection, as Canguilhem is well aware, already appears in the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. But in this context it becomes umbilically linked to the history of vitalist physiology, which has only been briefly sketched here. The following passage from Kant’s *Metaphysics* could

⁸² G. Canguilhem, *La formation du concept de réflexe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, pp. 127-128 (Eng. trans. D. W. Wood).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

similarly have been cited by the French epistemologist to illustrate his idea of a Copernican revolution in physiology:

A living being has only one soul, this is a grounding principle in psychology. From the consciousness of my subject, there already follows the consciousness of the unity of my soul. If we also think of several life principles in the body, which are in union, that therefore many lives unite into one, then this is still only one soul. One wants to explain irritability from the mechanical qualities of the body. This is still doubtful. The cause of this is perhaps a secreted liquid from the nerves that looks like slime and coats the muscles. A cut wasp grabs the abdomen with its head and the abdomen defends itself with its sting. The earth crab can be guided by its claws, and these then still pinch away the body, which it has seized. It is therefore not improbable that multiple lives are concentrated in the body under a single principle. Therefore, there are not several animals, because several life-principles are in different parts of the animal.⁸⁴

It should not be imagined that the organic unity disappears because of the different vital principles at work in the same organism: an animal can be constituted by many animalistic elements without ceasing to be a single animal (this is what Canguilhem calls “a system of system”). The examples of animals that are decapitated (the wasp) or with their limbs separated from the rest of the body (the crab) illustrate that the organism or parts of it can continue to function without the directive of the brain. It is true that the literature of the time was replete with examples like these, but the context is undoubtedly Unzerian. For it not only concerns the independence of the parts, but also their unity within a single system. Furthermore, animal physiology reveals another aspect that is fundamental to Kant’s philosophy. Eccentric centres (“centres excentriques”, according to Canguilhem) also exist in the simplest organisms that are devoid of brains. In these, the vital activity existing in their multiple ganglia satisfactorily replaces the cerebral functions. In this regard, Canguilhem states that Unzer’s originality consists in maintaining that the reflection points (*Reflexionspunkte*) for reflex activity are not only to be found in the spinal cord, like in Whytt, but already at the level of the ganglia and plexuses; in short, in the “sympathetic centers, where we actually know today that certain reflexes find one of their anatomical conditions.”⁸⁵

According to Unzer, because they lack the force of representation (*Vorstellungskraft*), brainless animal organisms perform all their actions due to

⁸⁴ I. Kant, V-Met-K2/Heinze, AA 28: 753 (Eng. trans. D. W. Wood).

⁸⁵ G. Canguilhem, *La formation du concept de réflexe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, pp. 127-128.

external sense impressions. Thus, everything that “thinking animals” (*denkende Thiere*) do voluntarily, these *hirnlose Thiere* exclusively carry out via the natural forces of their nerves. In short, “they can act orderly, purposively, and reflectively, as it were, as if they thought.”⁸⁶ Note the expressions used in this sentence: “purposively”, “as it were”, “as if” (*zweckmäßig, gleichsam, als ob*). And not just with regard to their content: an ear attuned to Kantian language quickly detects that Unzer has anticipated by almost two decades the terms deployed in the Third Critique to explain *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*. It is therefore clear why physiology is so crucial for understanding the concept of life in Kant’s philosophy. It was from the sphere of human and animal physiology that the philosopher grasped the autonomy of the organism and a teleology that is not finalistic or purposive, or established by the superiority of the human intellect.

⁸⁶ “[...] daß die hirnlose Thiere, ob sie gleich, aus Mangel der Vorstellungskraft, ganz unempfindlich sind, dennoch durch die äußern sinnlichen Eindrücke, die unaufhörlich in sie wirken, alles, was denkende Thiere sinnlich willkürlich thun, bloß durch die natürlichen Kräfte der sinnlichen Eindrücke bewerkstelligen, und kurz, ebenso ordentlich, zweckmäßig, und gleichsam überlegt handeln können, als ob sie dächten [...]”. Johann August Unzer, *Erste Gründe einer Physiologie der eigentlichen thierischen Natur thierischer Körper* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1771), § 439, pp. 443-444.