

The Epigenesis of Rationality: Kant with Neurobiology

Katja Čičigoj

Abstract:

One might wonder how two seemingly opposed concepts ended up in the same book title: epigenesis and rationality. One pertaining to biology, the other to philosophy, cognitive and neurosciences; one describing a modality of change of the living, the other usually taken to be unchangeable, universal; one empiric, the other traditionally linked to the non-sensible; one describing the structuring influence of the environment on organisms, the other the supposed purity of thought. At stake in French philosopher Catherine Malabou's newest book (and her oeuvre more generally) is precisely this: trying to think the mutual in-formation of the real and the ideal, the empirical and the a priori, the material and the symbolic.

How to cite:

Čičigoj, Katja: „The Epigenesis of Rationality: Kant with Neurobiology [Review on: Malabou, Catherine: *Avant demain. Épigenèse et rationalité*. Paris Presses Universitaires de France, 2014.]“. In: KULT_online 45 (2016).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2016.938>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

The Epigenesis of Rationality: Kant with Neurobiology

Katja Čičigoj

Malabou, Catherine: *Avant demain. Épigenèse et rationalité*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2014. 352 pages, 21 Euro. ISBN: 978-2-13-063045-6

Malabou's work is emerging as one of the most significant materialist philosophies of transformation after post-structuralism and deconstruction. She has previously tackled these issues in her reading of Hegel and Heidegger; also in her approach to the neurosciences in confrontation with psychoanalysis. While the present book revolves around analogous philosophical concerns, she illuminates them from another angle: the battleground is now Kant's notion of the transcendental, as confronted not only with its critics and interpreters (notably Heidegger and Foucault), but also with Quentin Milleseaux's speculative realism on one hand and contemporary neurobiology and epigenetics on the other.

Kant's transcendental, aimed at overcoming both empiricism's dangerous scepticism and rationalism's equally dangerous idealism, is here confronted with its contemporary foes. The aim of this confrontation is no non-critical revival of his philosophy, even less its abandonment: rather, as is customary for Malabou, her reading aims at wresting a philosophy of transformation from within transcendental idealism itself. Showing its point of surface-contact with contemporary sciences of life, Malabou's "epigenetic reading" demonstrates both the contemporary pertinence of a transcendental philosophy and the necessity of its confrontation with life sciences. Thereby it demonstrates both the legitimacy and necessity of a contemporary continental philosophy of science. The transcendental and the question of its provenance opened by the "system of epigenesis of pure reason" in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* turns out to be fecund ground for the development of these concerns. For it is precisely the point of tension between the empirical and the ideal – the pure forms of intuition and the concepts of pure reason – which structure intuition and cognition yet have no inherent epistemic validity, no ontological reality without empirical intuition. The transcendental and the "system of its epigenesis" most explicitly open the question of the relation between subject and world and therefore of the nature of rationality: inborn or developed? A priori or a posteriori?

Malabou's book (in a deconstructive move) displaces the question of the origin of the transcendental (of its genesis) to thinking its point of emergence, its epicentre (its epigenesis): where can we find life shaping itself through its rational self-reflection, through making sense of itself? Precisely in the transcendental, the surface point of contact between subject and world, where the two reveal themselves to be inextricable. Abandoning it (as Milleseaux proposes) would entail abandoning both subject and world for a supposed radical alterity and the contingency of a completely other world, instead of thinking the immanent alterity or the

inherent transformability of both subject and world – of this world, as Malabou has always set out to do by thinking life's own permanent self-mutation.

Epigenetically reading the Critique of Pure Reason through the Critique of the Power of Judgement, Malabou develops what I would propose calling a “materialist hermeneutics” of subjectivity (which is of the world too): rethinking the notion of finality as a living being's immanent purposiveness or teleology, she reframes our common understandings of necessity, contingency, and freedom and wrestles it from its mechanistic residues. Kant's transcendental, in Malabou's book, thus becomes an inherently malleable structure: “This suppleness is the condition of the equilibrium of the system /.../ the transcendental is what assures both the stability and the transformability of everything.” (317)

Kant's “system of pure reason,” far from rigidifying subjectivity into universal immutable structures, turns out to be a system whose immanent definition is its permanent malleability. In Malabou's reading, Kant depicts a subject whose conditions of possibility of experience can neither be extricated nor reduced to experience; a subject who is part of a world, whose being cannot be reduced, nor yet extricated from its own making sense of itself: an epigenesis which is immanently rational (“spiritual” so to speak, or symbolic) and a rationality which is immanently epigenetic, i.e. material. Malabou offers an undoubtedly Hegelian reading of Kant; yet it is a Hegel after poststructuralism and deconstruction's critiques that will be found lingering silently in her newest book (and elsewhere). In any case, the urgency of a materialist thought of the symbolic and a hermeneutic grappling with the materiality of life emerges not only from contemporary philosophy's several impasses after poststructuralism, but is at play also in our everyday self-understanding as reframed by contemporary cognitive and life sciences.

Contemporary philosophy on the one hand risks foreclosing any thought of the subject (and its transcendental) by invoking an irrational a priori: prior to any subjectivity and prior to life itself. What follows is a radical contingency, which in the end turns out to be a disappointing necessity of the world's actual facticity (as Malabou objects to Milleseaux), thus remaining blind to the non-eventual, gradual immanent transformability of life (251). The popularized reception of contemporary sciences of life (exemplified by Changeux' Neuronal man) (263), on the other hand, risks enforcing a deterministic and positivistic understanding of subjectivity, often deployed for normalizing ends. Some popularized readings – i.e., the neurosciences – would confront us with a picture of subjectivity reduced to bio-chemical processes, which in neuropathology ends up delinking mental disorders from their social milieu and from the subject's own self-sense-making. Popular discourses on supposed male and female brains, cultural neurodiversity, etc. depict a deterministic understanding of the supposed inborn nature of rationality, as well as other character traits, always differentially allocated to scientifically grounded, existent power relations. Certain accounts of neuroplasticity offer us a model-metaphor for the supposed permanent malleability of the brain and subjectivity, an endless flexibility without negativity, without exhaustion or lesion, which ground popular self-development handbooks of the contemporary flexible labour force (as Malabou has pointed out elsewhere, i.e. in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*)

Why do we urgently need a continental philosophy of (life) science(s)? Why do we need a materialist account of rationality? Why do we still need Kant? In lieu of the above-mentioned context, Malabou's relentless search for the symbolic in the material, the subjective in the objective, the contingent within the necessary, and the mutability of the structural/systemic gives a clear answer, which includes philosophical, scientific, and implicitly political reasons. As she argues, the time has come for a philosophy of epigenetics, for a thinking of the inextricability of the a priori and the a posteriori, as well as of the material and the symbolic, of subject and world. Or rather, to return to the book's title: given the dominant philosophical and (popularized) scientific context, the temporality of such an endeavour exemplified by Malabou's book is (in Nietzsche's sense) untimely: before tomorrow.