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**Kant’s Parasite: Sublime Biodeconstruction**

*It is better to graft like on like.*

-Aristotle, *On Plants* 820b

That biodeconstruction happens, that the act or event befalls life or its discourses, and in so doing befalls us, the living, is one sign of the intimate, even vital, link between life and text. One never encounters life on its own, that is, one discovers life only once it has been brought to a discourse or logos, to bio-logy or metaphysics, to political and technological discourses of control, to naturalizing discourses of return or spiritual discourses of overcoming, etc. Though these representations would be impossible without life, biodeconstruction takes place because one never encounters life outside them, because life never appears as such. Life appears by disappearing, pokes its head into these configurations without belonging to any of them, because it is only and always already a textual animal.[[1]](#endnote-1) Like any text, that is to say, by means of an analogy or dis-analogy that forbids assigning priority to the text of life or the life of the text, life becomes what it is by means of a constant referral to its outside, a constitutive relationship to its other that necessarily troubles any effort to assign an interiority, autos, self, or sameness in the first place. If we understand life as a form of self-directed existence, we search for it everywhere in vain.

Nor should we think that the relations life entertains within biological discourse are more real or literal than those it enters into in all the others (which we dare not call metaphorical). No individual living thing is what it is without a necessary relationship to metabolism, to nutrition and everything else that passes its borders, to sexuality and reproduction which, even when it does not necessitate sexual difference, implies some division- or difference-from-self, to the ecological oikos, an at least virtual relationship to everything beyond itself and all cosmological history, without the relations among parts simulating a whole, and the vulnerability of each, the relation to so many enemies, poisons, and parasites, and ultimately the relation of no more relations, the possibility for these parts to no longer be bound in anything, in nothing but death; all of this to say there is no *individual* living thing. Perhaps these differences, however unstable they render the subject of biological discourse, seem to belong properly to the science of life. Nevertheless, we will find that even the most ingenuous attempts at an empirical grasp of life inevitably presuppose concepts, definitions, and intuitions that seem to belong most properly, that seem to serve better as members or organs of those discourses any self-respecting modern science begins by excluding. The play of differences constituting life can never come to rest in the form of an individual (without which there is no subject for the science of life), unless it relates itself to some absolute, to what we will need to borrow a term from well beyond the domain of biology to name—perhaps to God.

That the living thing, as described by the sciences of life, is an organ of the absolute, that biology is an organ of metaphysics, is the subject of one of Derrida’s most sustained forays into biodeconstruction, his 1975 seminar *La vie la mort*. Francesco Vitale’s *Biodeconstruction* offers a powerful reading of Derrida’s seminar, with a focus on Derrida’s deconstruction of François Jacob’s *The Logic of Life.* The two movements of biodeconstruction take place in this reading: first, to show metaphysics at work in the heart of biological discourse, and second, to deconstruct that metaphysical definition of life. Jacob offers a particularly interesting case because he argued that his borrowing of certain concepts from cybernetics, treating life as a self-replicating informatic program contained in genetic code, could dispel vitalist notions of life (and thereby, so he thought, exit metaphysics altogether). In order to create such a pure ideality, capable of endlessly repeating itself, Jacob must abstract from everything pertaining to the life of the individual, everything that brings with it the stain of contingency: all acquired memory, sexuality, and death. Such a program, one capable of infinite and unchanging life, with no openness on the outside and no accidentability, is indistinguishable from death. Pure life is pure death. Life only becomes what it is by exposing itself to its other, which is why Derrida speaks of *life death*.

Derrida turns to Hegel to demonstrate the metaphysical resonances of Jacob’s thesis, by which individual life and its exposure to individual death must be overcome or sublated to achieve a pure life without outside. Aristotle offered the first explicit identification of life with a form of teleology: the living thing has its formal cause as its final cause, it takes itself as its own end (*DA* II.4, 415b.10-29).[[2]](#endnote-2) For Hegel, absolute life is the sublation of this teleological, individual life. The individual organism is what can, in seeking to accomplish itself, transcend itself in order to return to itself, thus internalizing difference, and the absolute *lives on* the living by a similar transcendence, accomplishing pure life. The absolute is life as presence-to-self or presence returning to itself, which could not be without the individual living things, though these individuals are not truly alive except in relation to it. While one rarely finds this metaphysical definition of life, the teleology of the organism, cited amongst contemporary biologists, it is presupposed everywhere. When biologists attempt to give positive definitions, every characteristic they attribute to the living depends on a prior individuation through self-relation, rather than serving as the possible ground of such; for example, these positive definitions often include: 1) metabolism and self-maintenance, turning the outside into the inside, and the possibility of maintaining its form while replacing its material substrate, which presupposes that we know already what the boundaries and the form of the organism are, 2) self-reproduction, which presupposes that we know the self, the autos, to be reproduced, 3) part-whole relations, which presuppose that we know the whole of which the parts are parts, and 4) some invocation of a molecular structure, which stands in tension with the self-replacing of metabolism (if the living thing seems to demonstrate its ability to transcend the givens of its materiality, this trait seems to be a scientific reaction-formation, grounding organicity in something material in order to avoid seeing things such as informatic processes, for example, as living). Insisting on particular molecular structures presupposes more than any other category what it ought to ground, not only the form of the organism but its matter (which we define as organic on the basis of that form).[[3]](#endnote-3) We will see, when we delve into their relation to teleology in a moment, that these traits are not sufficient to construct the self-relations of the living, but can only presuppose them—and thus that they only dissimulate their inheritance of the definition of life as teleological, as what for the first time creates an inside and a self in nature by relating itself to itself. One could say that the living thing does not have an inside because it has a membrane, but has a membrane because it has (first constitutes itself as) an inside. That this “inside” is riven by internal difference is the deconstruction of this Heideggerian formula.

We should already have misgivings about the scientificity of this concept of teleology based on these attempts at articulating its positive traits. All of these are efforts to describe a natural autonomy; the growth, repair, and reproduction of the organism are supposed to be the signs that it cares for and takes care of itself, that it has and is the self-caring self. Of course, none of these traits are possible without the other, without nutrition, waste, exposure, damage, mates, offspring, etc., which ought to place in question the extent to which any individual measures up to our notion of organic autonomy. The teleological individual is an idealization and abstraction from the actuality and contingency of the living, even before we place it in an explicit relationship to the teleology or life of God or the absolute. One finds several attempts at side-stepping the metaphysical baggage of these positive definitions of life among definitions that we could call differential: life as negative entropy, as a dissipative system, as a structuralist mathematicization of organic form. Because these definitions are differential, they exclude the relationship of the organism to itself, thus foreclosing the teleological definition. As a result, they either produce definitions that include seemingly heterogeneous groupings of technology and (traditionally) inanimate matter, or presuppose teleologically based notions of organism in their differential formalization (or both).[[4]](#endnote-4) That is not to say that we should not think of technology or inorganic matter as living—rather, in order to decide what will be included under the term life, we need to first understand what is meant by it in the various discourses that have invoked it. Merely by positing a quantization, we cannot know if we have proven technology to be living, or simply misidentified the essence of life, if there is one. If both the positive definitions, which attempt to identify the signs of relationship-to-self, and differential definitions that place life in a relative relation to its other, end up presupposing the metaphysical definition of life as teleology, and if this definition seems to exist in a tension or contradiction with the phenomenon of life, then it will be necessary to work or play in the interstices of biology and philosophy—to practice biodeconstruction—to allow life, if there is any, to give or receive a voice to or from its others.

*O Sublime Soul, that, Struggling to be Free / Art more Engaged*

Kant is certainly a metaphysician, and his description of life bears several marks of the idealized treatment Derrida deconstructed in Hegel. The quick transition he makes from the individual organism as purposive to the purposes of God in the *Critique of Judgment* is one sign of this commitment.[[5]](#endnote-5) But I find his text a more interesting subject for biodeconstruction, holding greater potential resources, because he describes how the phenomenon of life presents (or fails to present) itself to the faculties of the finite subject. One never sees a living thing (and certainly not life itself), but only certain phenomena (including many of those noted by contemporary biologists) that allow us to infer the operation of a form of causality unlike mechanism, a causality in accord with purposes (teleology). These traits (for now, let us say reproduction, growth, and interdependence of parts) do not prove that teleology is present, they do not present it as such, but they make the judgment that it is operative possible—merely possible. By demonstrating the (problematical) relationship between these traits and the purposes of the living, Kant takes a step contemporary biologists forego in their “definitions” of life. What one finds in their work is too often a sort of hypostasis of a working definition, where features one has come to expect to be associated with the living are put forward as though they were the essence of life itself. But why are reproduction or metabolism signs of life? Or what is life such that these are its signs? Such questions lead us toward a confrontation with teleology that we can better explore through a reading of Kant.

We judge something to be an organism, as Kant describes it, when we judge it to be acting toward a self-directed end, something fundamentally different from our recognition of mechanical causality. Any judgment of final causality that we make, even such a simple one as saying that the bones of a bird are hollow for the sake of flight, or that a squirrel stores nuts for the winter, implies a recognition in or on the cusp of nature of something at least analogous to a guiding purpose. Kant does not hesitate to hinge these teleological judgments with theology: we must be able to judge matter as purposively organized in order to make room for the thought of a purpose guiding all of nature. Though contemporary science may not speak the language of the philosophers, its descriptions of the adaptation of form to function and the optimization of behavioral efficiency are continuous with this theory of life. While evolutionary theory, genetics, and all of their more recent developments have changed in important ways our understanding of this relationship between mechanical and teleological causality, none does away with the theologically grounded assumption of a self-identical, sovereign whole (whether organism, gene, information, etc.) governing purposive expression.

The observation of organization in matter is an analogy, an analogical judgment. Matter seems to organize itself such that its parts seem oriented toward the whole, in such a way that we judge it on an analogy with our own capacity to determine our will by purposes.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is essential, for Kant, that we not make the mistake of thinking that organization and causality through purposes can be observed in the object, as mechanical causality would be. When Paul de Man takes up the third *Critique* in “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” it is precisely to place in question the success of the analogical aspect of Kant’s project. Though Kant’s stated goal is to discover, in the principles of pure judgment, a mediation or homoiosis between the seemingly severed realms of theoretical and practical reason (nature and freedom, the sensible and the supersensible), de Man finds in the account of the sublime a dis-junctive force that jeopardizes this project. My purpose here is to discover this disjunctive force in teleological judgment as well, rupturing the analogy that forms our understanding of the organism and the ground of biological sciences to this day. Placing teleology in question by dis-analogizing the judgment of natural purposiveness would render the boundaries of any organism, including the organism we believe ourselves to be, undecidable, and while it would dethrone the sovereign self-identity imagined by certain scientific discourses to reside in nature itself (the living thing, the gene, information, etc.), this deconstructability would be the greatest resource for the transformation of the basic concepts of this field, as one already sees at work, for example, in certain formulations of epigenetics and endosymbiosis.

A detour through de Man’s reading of the sublime will help us to recognize our quarry. The guiding task of the *Critique of Judgment* is to find a way to overcome a troubling gap between our knowledge of nature (the subject of the first *Critique*) and our knowledge of our own moral vocation, our freedom (the subject of the second). Though the third *Critique* will trouble every one of these critical distinctions and presuppositions, it stems from the following architectonic: everything in nature can only appear to us as subject to mechanistic cause-effect relations. The only evidence we have that something beyond this order of natural necessity exists is our ability to determine our will by means of the moral law. The form of the moral law necessarily abstracts from all empirical conditions, it is an unconditioned, absolute cause, the one mark of our freedom, of intellectual or noumenal causality. While we experience the determination of our will through this law, nothing that appears in nature, subject to conditioned causality, will ever demonstrate its efficacy to us; we have no way of knowing that our freedom can realize itself in nature. Kant frames the objective of his third *Critique* explicitly as the discovery of an analogy to bridge this gap (the bridge, Derrida points out, is Kant’s analogy for analogy [1987, 36]). Nature can only suggest its amenability to freedom if what the laws of nature leave unconstrained, that which appears contingent to us, can nonetheless be found to exhibit a *lawfulness*, which, not belonging to nature (as the realm of mechanical necessity) seems to reside in an intelligence outside of it—nature appears as though it obeys the purposes of an intelligent design, as *purposive*. We never find a purpose in the objects of nature, but only judge them as purposive by a process Kant explicitly identifies as analogical: “In other words, through this concept [the purposiveness of nature] we present nature *as if* an understanding contained the basis of the unity of what is diverse in nature’s empirical laws” (Kant 1987, 5:181; my emphasis).[[7]](#endnote-7)

The contribution of the sublime toward this bridging task has long puzzled commentators. Typically, Kant’s interpretation of the sublime is read as a strife among our mental faculties, starting with a demand reason places on the imagination to make a presentation of totality; imagination’s inevitable failure to do so, given the constraints of our intuition, make us aware of our supersensible vocation. This forms a problem for Kant’s bridging project: the sublime manifests as the failure of the supersensible to phenomenalize itself—it is not clear how this helps us to discover the possibility of freedom in nature. But de Man isolates an idiosyncratic passage where the opposite seems to be the case. The sublime is not experienced in the failure of phenomenalization, but seems to be immediately present to the senses, threatening a radical dis-junction from the supersensible. The debate around his reading of this passage focuses on a single sentence, which in de Man’s translation reads as follows: “To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do [*wie die Dichter es tun*], merely by what the eye reveals [*was der Augenschein zeigt*]—if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything” (1997, 80). In contrast to Kant’s intentions throughout the analytic of the sublime (though possibly emerging from a tension innate to the theory), this *Augenschein* (appearance to the eye) seems to circumvent the *Darstellung von Ideen* (representation of ideas) that otherwise characterizes the sublime. In the latter, our “direct intuition” of the ocean would be merely a “negative exhibition” of our rational cognition; there would be nothing sublime in the appearance, but rather in what it failed to show us (Kant 1987, 5:275). On the other hand, de Man reads the experience of the poets, the experience of a severed *Schein*, which can no longer be translated as appearance because it is not the appearance of something else, object or idea, as being itself sublime.

De Man acknowledges that it is easier to say what this *Augenschein* is not than what it is. The sublime as *Augenschein* is nothing figural; we do not see the ocean as mirror or abyss by means of some analogy, simile, or metaphor, as if we knew it to be a certain object with properties that we were then placing in proportion or homoiosis with the properties of another object. Nor is the *Augenschein*anything literal; just as it does not represent anything else, it does not present or represent itself. If we were to think of it as a literal or objective judgment (‘this is a mirror’) it would be false. There is clearly nothing objective about this *shine*, but we should not assume that it thereby becomes subjective; if we accept de Man’s reading it does not belong to or present to us the operations of our mental faculties, but exists nowhere and for no one, which is perhaps indistinguishable from saying that it belongs to a pure subject and an a priori judgment. It exists in complete severance, dis-junction from objective presentation or figuration and subjective preconditioning, and this is just what it means to be sublime; to be “absolutely large” (*schlechtin groß*), to be absolute, without relation (Kant 1987, 5:248).[[8]](#endnote-8) The *Augenschein*means nothing and represents nothing to no one, but it has an effect de Man borrows a term from rhetoric to describe: “persuasiveness” (1997, 89). Poets indeed know what to do with this force, and far better than the endless theorists who have attempted to circumscribe it within figural tropologies. The dismemberment produced by the sublimity of the shine needs no recourse to meaning to produce its effects, even if those effects may be productive of the most convincing meanings. Pre-semantic (so to speak) units such as the letter and the sound come to the fore here.

De Man’s one-sided interpretation of the sublime as *Augenschein* (which, I will admit, I nonetheless find quite *persuasive*), depends on a similarly one-sided reading of the passage in which it appears. Andrzej Warminski and Rodolphe Gasché both notice a problem with the translations of the key sentence, and exemplify its two possible readings in their attempts to repair it. Kant did not link his imperative with seeing or regarding, as his translators invariably do (“we must regard it as poets do”). Warminski’s translation joins what was dis-articulated by these translators, while disarticulating what they joined: “rather, one must nevertheless be able to find sublime [that is, find the ocean sublime] only, as the poets do it, according to what meets the eye, for instance” (2001, 20; Warminski’s insertion). Warminski takes the emphasis on seeing in the mistranslations of this passage as a restoration of the figural *Darstellung von Ideen*. He also notes the strange fact that many translators of this passage leave out the *dennoch* altogether, a significant omission. What we must do, Warminski agrees with de Man, is not see the ocean as the phenomenal presentation of ideas, but (nonetheless) find it sublime in disjunction from any figural or phenomenal content.

While Warminski’s reading has an apologetic bent, Rodolphe Gasché turns the same sentence into a polemic against de Man’s distinction of *Darstellung von Ideen* and *Augenschein*. As Gasché glosses it, “despite what the *Augenschein* shows, the ocean must (nonetheless) be judged sublime […] Rather than being mere ocular vision, the ‘immediate intuition’ of the *Augenschein* is immediate in a negative fashion through which it negatively presents the very faculty of the ideas” (Gasché 1998, 80-81). Where Warminski said that we must find the ocean sublime *as Augenschein*, as the poets do, despite its severance, Gasché tells us we must find the ocean sublime as idea, despite its *Augenschein* (the poets disappear completely from his gloss). In order to make this reading one-sided, to completely exclude that of de Man and Warminski, Gasché has cheated. In the crucial phrase “*nach dem was der Augenschein zeigt*,” he has glossed *nach dem was*, which the others translate as “according to what” or “by what,” as *despite what*. One can turn the original phrase to extrapolate this meaning from it, but one cannot, as Gasché does, exclude the poets from the process. The “nonetheless” that is emphasized by both Warminski and Gasché could be understood to mean: the ocean is a dis-articulated *Augenschein*, nonetheless (despite the absence of *Darstellung von Ideen*)find it sublime (Warminski), or: the ocean is indeed an *Augenschein*, nonetheless see this as the imagination’s failure, see beyond it to the sublimity of the idea. While it is impossible to exclude either reading (and thus impossible to exclude an ever-present re-phenomenalization of the *Augenschein*),if this is simply another characterization of the ideas beyond appearances, why are we being exhorted to act as the poets (those who are *after the* *Augenschein*)do at all? It seems rather that Kant was indeed wrestling with the problem of what de Man calls the material inscription—for what would make the sublime a judgment or bridge at all if it had a purely negative relation to sensation?

Still, the division between *Darstellung von Ideen* and *Augenschein* is depicted in de Man’s text as a stable binary, despite its evident undecidability.[[9]](#endnote-9) No one better than Warminski and Gasché have demonstrated this instability, by showing how grammatically identical readings of the passage can work in the service of opposite theses. Clearly, this undecidability resides in Kant’s text, and by necessity transfers to de Man’s.[[10]](#endnote-10) If we carried our reading of the sublime in this direction, we would arrive at Derrida’s “The Colossal” where the sublime as *taille* (what his English translators call cise) both takes the measure of the finite and cuts or de-limits the infinite, straddles here and beyond like a colossus. The movement of the sublime, as Derrida describes it, is an absolutizing of the relative and a relativizing of the absolute, a kind of oscillation.

*Kant’s Parasites: Of Life, that it Perhaps does not Exist*

The analogical method that shapes the entire third *Critique* gives form to the Critique of Teleological Judgement. We do not seek a constitutive principle, from which we could derive or pretend to derive the purposes of nature as objective facts. The difference is subtle: rather than claiming efficiency and adaptation as a principle of nature, from which we can derive the adaptation to purposes of organismic anatomy and behavior, we must treat what we observe empirically as mere *purposiveness*, seeing it *as if* the organized being and perhaps nature operated according to purposes. Therefore, we can make only subjective, reflective judgments about natural teleology, which Kant will go on to describe as (very peculiar) analogies to our causality by means of purposes.

The natural product, to be a purpose, must not send us searching for an external cause, nor can it be explicable merely through mechanical necessity. Yet, in another respect, it must do both. Kant’s way of characterizing this strange state of affairs is that the organism must be “*both cause and effect of itself*” (1987, 5:370; original emphasis). If its every activity seems to serve the purpose of the whole, then a representation of the whole seems to lie at its basis as the organism’s cause (the definition of purpose). For such an object, efficient causality (mechanism) and final causality (teleology) are indistinguishable. For Kant, this is the discovery we hoped for—a form of teleology that would nonetheless be material and therefore at least suggested by sensation. But it will reveal itself to be just as much the undoing of that possibility.

While Kant tells us that the only possible experience of organized matter depends on its being seen as both mechanical and final causality at once, he also denies that it can be viewed as either. He frequently rejects the possibility of an organism arising from mere mechanism, “The internal form of a mere blade of grass suffices to prove to our human judging ability that the blade can have originated only under the rule of purposes” (Kant 1987, 5:378).[[11]](#endnote-11) Nor is it possible to view organized matter as a product of art, “…all our art finds itself infinitely outdistanced if it tries to reconstruct those products of the vegetable kingdom from the elements we obtain by dissecting them” (Kant 1987, 5:371). Of course, Kant would respond simply that neither explanation, mechanical or teleological, is enough on its own to describe a natural purpose. We certainly would not, when faced with a blade of grass, want to jump to assuming spiritual or divine causality (the external artist) at work in what we observe immediately, at least not if we want to have any hope of being scientific. Nonetheless, what we see seems oriented toward a representation of a whole; it allows and encourages us to think of the organism as a natural purpose, *as if* it were both artwork and artist.

But the risk of undecidability is that this *analogy* might break down:

In considering nature and the ability it displays in organized products, we say far too little if we call this an *analogue of art*, for in that case we think of an artist (a rational being) apart from nature. Rather, nature organizes itself […] We might be closer if we called this inscrutable property of nature an *analogue of life*. But in that case we must either endow matter, as mere matter, with a [kind of] property (hylozoism) that conflicts with its nature. Or else we must supplement matter with an alien principle (a soul) *conjoined* to it. But […] that would remove the product from (corporeal) nature […] Strictly speaking, therefore, the organization of nature has *nothing analogous to any causality known to us* [my emphasis] […] *intrinsic natural perfection* […] is not conceivable or explicable on any analogy to any known physical ability, i.e., ability of nature, not even—since we too belong to nature in the broadest sense—on a precisely fitting analogy to human art. (Kant 1987, 5:374-75)

Despite the analogical thinking that launched our investigation (Kant’s choice of our own causality through purposes as a guiding thread for judging the organism [5:360]), we are now informed that not only human artifice, but any art and any life, all of which implies an external agent, is dis-analogous with a nature that organizes itself. Analogy being the relation between relations, it is powerless to picture or cognize the relationship-to-self that we somehow still intimate in organized matter.

Nonetheless, immediately after claiming that “organized beings” are not conceivable on a “*precisely fitting* [*genau angemessene*] analogy to human art,” we are reassured that we can use “a *remote* [*entfernten*] analogy with our own causality in terms of purposes generally” (Kant 1987, 5:375; my emphasis). It is almost as if Kant is saying: see the organized being *as if as if* it possessed causality through purposes. The risk is that we will start to hear this echoing *mise en abyme* in every analogy throughout the third *Critique*, to the point of turning the phrase into an expression of dubiety: *as if* (cf. Heckerling 1995).

The question is less whether our causality through purposes is a good analogy, and moreso why we seem to need to analogize natural purposiveness by means of what it is not—why must we analogize the relation-to-self of the same by means of its difference from heteronomy? Is that an analogy at all? Such a figuration, if it were even *remotely* possible, would require the bridge between nature and freedom Kant set out in search of in his third *Critique*. The ultimate goal of his exploration of both aesthetic and teleological judgment was to find some evidence that the unconditioned freedom of our pure practical reason could realize itself in a nature in which everything appears as constrained by conditioned causality. The *Critique of Practical Reason* allowed that we know our will to be determined freely by pure reason, but cautioned that it is beyond us to know whether or not a will so determined could realize its ends in nature:

It is here a question only of the determination of the will and of the determining ground of its maxims as a free will, not of its result. For, provided that the will conforms to the law of pure reason, then its power in execution may be as it may, and a nature may or may not actually arise in accordance with these maxims of giving law for a possible nature; the *Critique* which investigates whether and how reason can be practical, that is, whether and how it can determine the will immediately, does not trouble itself with this.[[12]](#endnote-12) (5:45-6)

An accomplished action can only appear under the conditions of intuition, the heteronomy of natural necessity. Such alterity is the exact opposite of the spontaneity, the self-causality we are attempting to figure.

If we turn within ourselves, do we find a suitable figuration of autonomy in the auto-determination of the free will? Despite what Kant tells us about our knowledge of freedom in the second *Critique*, we can see that it remains a differential figure, which is the true ground of its analogy with what, for now, we will continue to call the organism. Our pure will is determined by nothing but the moral law—because of its universality and necessity, we know this law to be independent of sensory conditions, and given that it can determine our will, we know ourselves to have an unconditioned, supersensible causality, a spontaneity that initiates a series of causes rather than being conditioned by prior causes (as something sensible and within nature would be). We cannot learn of or secure this pure will through any action, because of the distinction Kant makes between legality and morality—an action can be *in conformity with the law* without being done *from the law*, and only if the latter determines our intention is our will pure and our choice free. Thus, if there were an action called for by the moral law, and which we suffered no pathological inclination against, it would be impossible to say if the subject acted morally in choosing it. Because our will is not holy (not in perfect agreement with the moral law), but is hybrid, affected by the sensory inclinations forced upon us by our finitude, we gain awareness of the power of the moral law in us, awareness of our freedom, through its opposition to sensory inclination. In fact, one can see how the ostensible perfection of the will for finite creatures such as ourselves would be the identification of inclination with the duty imposed by the moral law, and thus would be as much the eradication of morality as its perfection (because one could never be sure of acting out of respect for the law, rather than inclination). So, Kant declares such an outcome impossible, and describes morality as an *infinite progress* by which our will continually approaches such holiness, without ever securing it in its self-identity (1999a, 5:83-4). Our autonomy is known through heteronomy, and in fact would be at its most corrupt and impure were it to be pure of this alterity. This provides for the analogy between our causality through purposes and the purposiveness of the organism; not that either figures the relationship-to-self of spontaneous causality, in which agent and patient are the same, but that neither can appear without this difference-from-self, the relation to the other, the dis-analogy.

If we turn to the dis-analogy between organization and life, we glimpse this fundamental problem: the same differs from itself. Kant invokes a metaphysical definition of life in *The* *Metaphysics of Morals:* “The faculty of a being to act in accordance with its representations is called life” (6:211).[[13]](#endnote-13) If we were, therefore, to attribute life (on this definition) to *organized matter*, we would be attributing objective purposes to it, rather than limiting ourselves, as Kant exhorts, to making a subjective, reflective judgment of *purposiveness*. For this reason, Kant does not speak of living things or life throughout the Critique of Teleological Judgment, but only of organized beings (*organisierten Wesen*).[[14]](#endnote-14) This representationalist account of life is certainly anthropocentric—it limits the attribution of vitality to those organisms that we can imagine with cognitive faculties analogous to our own (in the footnote to 5:464, where Kant betrays his own principles and attributes life to animals, it is on the grounds that they have a faculty of causality through representations as well, an instinct merely analogous to our reason).[[15]](#endnote-15) That we recognize plants and protists as living suggests that we need not only to redefine life, but to rethink the grounds of the life in us. Our life may indeed be something unconscious, unpresentable, and unrepresentable.

Freedom and life are not simply one or two analogies among others that can be discarded along the way in Kant’s search. Spontaneity and conscious self-presence are the nodal points that anchor the self-identity grounding all science and all tropology (what governs the substitutability and adequation of figures, such as analogy). By denying that natural purposiveness can be analogized by means of art, life, human art, *or any causality known to us*, Kant is suggesting that it is not figurative or figurable, not analogical. And he has insisted from the beginning that it is not known theoretically or logically, that it is not a literal, objective fact. It has no *logos*, no account and no proportion sufficient to it. The definition Kant gives us of life, causality through representations, is to define life as *logos* itself—in the manner we traced back to Plato in our introduction, the *logos* has always been a living thing, and indeed life itself. Kant is figuring life not only *by* analogy but *as* analogy, not merely as what can be figured but as the possibility for figuration; he is defining life not only by *logos* but as *logos*—life is not merely a certain representation, a certain concept, but is the faculty for and precondition for representations. That we ask after a definition (that is, a concept) of life at all already guarantees that the answer will be logocentric—one way of understanding the problems into which Kant is led by his definition is to see him as attempting to define the condition of possibility of conceptuality within the field it inaugurates. One can either place the center of a system outside it, preserving its unconditioned status by means of heteronomy, or one can attempt to place the center within, thus relativizing the absolute. These possibilities determine the life of this and every metaphysical concept.

We should not take the effort to figure the organic by means of the dis/analogy with our practical activity as a mistake or strange proclivity on the part of Kant. One finds this attempt as far back as Aristotle, who also found it necessary, when attempting to understand *phusis*, to invoke its dis/similarity with *technē* (*Phys.* II.1193b12-18).[[16]](#endnote-16) Surely what is itself by itself and of itself, what makes itself a self by making itself, what can be related to itself first of all because it is a self, should be known first, prior to what is by means of something else. The simple should be known most immediately. Yet, it seems that we can only understand the simple or the self-related by means of its difference from the different-from-self. If difference is more fundamental than the same, this would jeopardize all self-relation, whether of causality, knowledge, or figuration. One cannot *know* life, can have no theory or science of it, because such knowledge is the explanation of ground or condition, and life is the unconditioned. Nor can one *figure* life; analogy, for example, is the relation between relations, and life has been defined as what is without relation, absolute. Life is, thus, a form of causality that is only possible as impossible. So, Kant pursues two conflicting paths: 1) to figure the organism by analogy with our causality through purposes, in order to discover teleology in nature, but 2) to break the analogy with our art and even our lifebecause these are forms of causality that separate agent from patient.

This dis-articulating an-analogy produces the effect that de Man showed us in the analytic of the sublime to be the risk of material inscription, the result of the dis-junction between appearance and idea: a general dismembering. Indeed, the dis-membering of organic unity was Kant’s example of the *Augenschein* at work on the human form. This dis-junction makes its appearance in the Critique of Teleological Judgment in the oddest manner, one which, like the sublime as *Augenschein*, admits quite easily of the description, “apparently tranquil, because entirely unreflected, juxtaposition of incompatibles” (de Man 1997, 79). Again, the problem is precisely one of how natural purposiveness will be able to materialize. While Kant is in the midst of describing the reciprocal cause-effect structure of the natural purpose, he offers an example that is disruptively heterogeneous, that is the heterogeneous itself. First, a tree is its own cause and effect qua species, in that new individuals are produced from old ones (self-reproduction). Second, as an individual, a tree has part-whole relations that allow its individual parts to constitute more of itself (self-production, growth). Third…what exactly is Kant’s third example? “Third, part of the tree [*dieses Geschöpfs*] also produces itself inasmuch as there is a mutual dependence between the preservation of one part and that of the others” (250). One might expect, under this heading, for Kant to discuss self-repair and the possibility that harm to certain parts can kill the others. Indeed, these cases are mentioned, but only as subsidiary examples.[[17]](#endnote-17) Here is Kant’s primary example:

If an eye is taken from the leaf of one tree and set into the branch of another, it produces in the alien stock a plant of its own species, and so does a scion grafted onto the trunk of another tree. Hence even in one and the same tree we may regard each branch or leaf as merely set into or grafted onto it, and hence as an independent tree that only attaches itself to another one and nourishes itself parasitically. (1987, 5:371)

It is difficult to reconstruct this passage so that it obeys Kant’s purposes in the least. First, we should note that the very principle of which this is an example contains an apparent contradiction; the part produces itself (*erzeugt…sich selbst*) inasmuch as (*so: daß*) it mutually depends (*wechselsweise abhängt*) on the others. This somewhat teratological suturing of self-sufficiency and interdependence dictates that the examples that follow will feel heterogeneous, both in their interrelations and unto themselves.

Kant is not explicit with his reasons for seeing this self-production of parts as a necessity for natural purposiveness. In the following section, he gives reasons why the parts must be able to produce each other, but not why they must produce themselves (which seems closest to the stakes of the parasitic example). As a result, we can only speculate as to why he felt the necessity or the logic of this principle and its example. If the parts are in interdependence with the whole, this allows us to see them as a purpose but not necessarily a natural purpose—the representation of this whole could still exist in a merely external agent. If the parts are reciprocally cause and effect of each other, then, Kant tells us, “Something like this cannot be an instrument of art, but can be an instrument only of nature, which supplies all material for instruments (even for those of art)” (Kant 1987, 5:374). Let us note in passing that here, again, Kant is breaking the analogy with art. He is also accounting for how nature itself can suggest that it contains a purpose to us—it requires that that purpose be seen (analogically, problematically) as animating the very parts of the whole. In a clock, the form the parts take on in no way seems to come from the matter itself; we imagine the representation/purpose to reside external to that matter. But if the parts themselves seem to follow and realize this purpose (for example by reconstructing or compensating for missing parts), then we can observe a natural purposiveness.[[18]](#endnote-18) Perhaps—we can only speak of possibilities here, can only read Kant’s text *as if* this principle obeyed a purpose of the whole—Kant’s fear is that an overemphasis on the interdependence of parts would strip them of their natural purposiveness, that the assertion of their *independence* was necessary to see the representation of the whole still animating and operating within an isolated part.

The example of the parasite will confirm what logic should already have led us to suspect, that the values of independence and dependence are in mutual tension (though perhaps we should not see this tension as merely logical *opposition*). Though Kant stops his clock example (§65) short of comparing the independence of parts, we could extend it by considering that a gear taken from one clock and put into another would either not fit (retain something like independence without functionality) or would fit to the point of losing itself entirely in the new construction (nothing would suggest that the gear belonged originally to a different clock).[[19]](#endnote-19) So, the grafting example shows us that even the individual parts of a tree have and retain their purposive force, a discovery that, if we don’t think about it too much, helps us to see the purposiveness of the whole, original tree as residing in its parts, thus as natural and material.

Kant is perhaps getting a little overexuberant, carried away with himself and away from his purposes, when he then suggests that we turn our gaze back to the graftless original organism: “Hence even in one and the same tree we may regard each branch or leaf as merely set into or grafted onto it, and hence as an independent tree that only attaches itself to another one and nourishes itself parasitically” (1987, 5:371). The graft may help us to see purposiveness operating in the part, but it threatens to reveal an independence of the part that exists at cross purposes with the whole. After all, the eye (bud) or scion preserves itself in this example apart from the whole, and in such a fashion that it even demonstrates its mutual independence from its second host (its purpose does not cooperate with the purposes of its new host). Thus, Kant’s glance over his shoulder is a fracturing of organic unity, a recognition of the possibility that even what *seems* purposive (this seeming is the highest form of evidence we ever have of organization) can only hide the subversive autonomy or autonomicity of endless parasites. We could borrow a term from the analytic of the sublime to describe the parasite; it is contrapurposive for teleological judgment. Kant mentions the parasite here merely to conjure a nonetheless harmonious independence of parts, but the parasite is an undecidable figure. Our ability to judge anything as an organism depends not on objective facts, but on a subjective judgment which is only possible if its basis performs itself both as an organism, and as a shattered, dismembered brood of parasites, a dis-organism. One’s own limbs, cells, and atoms must be intelligible as a hoard of individualistic parasites without a host—a terrifying, accurate vision of life.

Only a palimpsest of mechanism and finality, the lawfulness of the contingent, gives us the analogue of an organism, of a natural purpose. While Kant imagines these purposes uniting harmoniously, from the parts, to the individual organism, to the whole of nature, it is clear based on his formula that there can be purposiveness or lawfulness only to the extent that there is, equiprimordially, counterpurpose, counterlawfulness. “Outside” the organism, certainly, it abuts other purposes and other laws—in fact its boundary or membrane is only the borderline of a conflict of purposes. But, even more intimately, it must be in a counterpurposive relationship with itself; if its parts are simply obedient, then we can think only a soul-vitalism, an obedience to purposes of the whole. But if they each posit their own ends, themselves as an end, any stable shape, any harmonious form of those purposes is a mere chance alliance, a momentary détente. One can never say whether the purpose of nature is life or death, self-production and self-reproduction or self-transgression. The endless possibilities of disease, death, parasitism, auto-immunity, commensalism, hypertrophy, etc., whether they most closely resemble threats from within or without, cannot be strictly understood as accidents befalling an otherwise lawful and purposive organism—and even when they seem to turn toward some benefit of the whole, they cannot be understood as a unifying purposiveness. These are the constitutive possibilities of organicity, to the extent that one never simply has *an* organism, as a positive entity with clearly defined boundaries existing for itself, self-identical. Life, if there is any, only comes to be as the difference among purposes, what Derrida called *life death*.

Kant’s parasite dis-orders every boundary his critical project hoped to maintain. It introduces a relativism of part and whole which infects all form/matter judgments (a similar result follows from Derrida’s destabilizing of the parergon in the analytic of the beautiful). The Critique of Teleological Judgment opened with the promise or threat that we can view something as a purpose of nature (as a whole) only if we can view that thing as its own purpose; Kant infects this homology with the destabilizing potential of the absolute parasite, the parasite of the absolute. Could each of us in our relationship to God be only so many flickering parasites? Moving toward the colossal, we would see ever greater chimeras usurping creatures as so many organs of the obscure purposes of bodies as large as the planet or cosmos. Moving toward the infinitesimal, every seemingly stable, living form would be undermined by the secret purposes of its rebellious parts, plotting unbeknownst to the host. In at least one of these two directions, we advance toward sublime life.

It is not by accident that Kant’s discourse itself exemplifies the textual form of this parasitic fragmentation. Rather than this example serving as the faithful organ of the third critique’s animating intention, we can read the entire text as a host for the secret purposes of Kant’s parasite; we will never know what concept or master it serves or what pleasure it may take from dis-ordering every critical delimitation in Kant’s corpus.

This passage is not at all an error in need of correction or an oversight that could be crossed out while preserving the integrity of the whole—any more than the parasite is an accident that may or may not befall a life whole and integral unto itself. That experience be a blend of the lawful and the contingent is the only possible result of the cognitive faculties posited by Kant’s critical project. That is to say, nature will always be art or organism for us. That Kant imagines these to be continuous, that he transitions a bit too quickly from the organism as its own purpose to nature in its entirety as a divine purpose (internal and external purposiveness), is one of the unthought contradictions in his project. The Kantian architectonic, imagined by its author as itself an organic unity (Kant 2007, 4:861), here stands on its head: if we cannot discover a continuity of purposivenesses, parts cooperating toward a single whole, if we cannot sort necessity from contingency, or nature’s mechanism from its technic, we will be no more able to tell reason, understanding, or judgment and their laws or lawfulness from intuition, a priori from a posteriori, or ultimately subject from object. Does the parasite belong to nature or to us? Do we posit the purpose it transgresses, or is there only purpose to be thought to the extent that such purpose abuts a parasite, or only parasiticity once there is the conflict of purposes? We can say only that the disorganism is the necessary failure of our faculties. If we were gods, if we were like God, there would be no contingency and no freedom. The *intuitus originarius* with which Kant contrasts our derived, finite faculties (as *intuitus derivativus*) would bring about the actuality of its concepts or ideas without the necessary recourse to intuition, with its conditions and contingencies. Such reason would know the good and actualize it by necessity—there would be no conflict with sensory inclinations, no decision, no freedom, indeed no morality. And for theoretical reason, there would be no contingency in which to posit a natural purpose; the absolute ground of all nature would lie immediately in such an understanding, and so there could be no life, only external purpose (Kant 1987, 5:404). We are the ones who need the absolute and, finding it nowhere, find it everywhere. Such is the lesson of Kantian critique, which errs only in thinking that our continuity or analogy with the divine mind is a progress toward the knowledge and realization of an absolute that grounds these differences. Our effort to make our own thought resemble this point will forever be undecidable with that cognition Kant describes so well in his *Anthropology*, which will sound by now quite familiar—a judgment driven by analogy, giving pleasure and creating art, all the while functioning *as if* it were an understanding:

*Insania* is a deranged *power of judgment* in which the mind is held in suspense by means of analogies that are confused with concepts of similar things, and thus the power of imagination, in a play resembling understanding, conjures up the connection of disparate things as universal, under which the representations of the universal are contained. Mental patients of this kind are for the most part very cheerful; they write insipid poetry and take pleasure in the richness of what, in their opinion, is such an extensive alliance of concepts [*zusammenreimender Begriffe*] all agreeing with each other. The lunatic of this sort is not curable because, like poetry in general, he is creative and entertaining by means of diversity. This third kind of derangement is indeed methodical, but only *fragmentary*. (2006, 7:215; original emphasis)

The ultimate risk, the *fragmentary*, is the very risk of the parasite.

Have we today not advanced beyond art to science? Do we not explain what Kant thought could only be analogized? Such would be the aspiration of evolutionary theory, which would accomplish what Kant said to be impossible, making the teleology of nature an objective principle. Do we not posit as a constitutive principle of nature, from which we can derive purposes as objective facts, the principle Kant told us could only ever be a subjective guide? Do we not find the adaptation of form to function in the organism, without any need for the false humility of the judging subject? Are we not like gods? That Kant can help us to dispel this enthusiasm is why I consider him, of all the metaphysicians of life, the most salutary. That we can only read purposes into nature, his fundamental insight, remains. The best sign of this comes from the ideologically motivated efforts of evolutionary biologists and psychologists to naturalize what I will not hesitate to call animal and human cultures (from the very beginning—there is always already bacterial culture). The classic text on the problematic status of final judgments in evolutionary theory remains Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin’s “The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme” (1979/2006). Their title makes a comparison between certain evolutionary biologists and Pangloss, the character from Voltaire’s Candide meant to parody Leibniz. Leibniz thought he could derive from a knowledge of God the proof that we were living in the best of all possible worlds and thus that nature always did the maximum with the minimum, that its forms and behaviors were perfectly adapted to ends(Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is precisely a critique of such dogmatism). Gould and Lewontin counter Panglossianism by explicating the many ways that the unfit may survive. Their hope is that biologists will take better precautions when making judgments of adaptation, but a biodeconstructive reading of Kant suggests a more radical undecidability of finality. The very possibility of a judgment of purposiveness necessitates that it simultaneously be haunted by some counterpurposiveness. Indeed, it is a necessary possibility that a species may be too fit, may outstrip its resources by excessive reproduction and ultimately die of survival (Gould and Lewontin 1979/2006, 90).

This generalized parasitism reconfigures the possibilities the biologist can attribute to or recognize in the living. It is not the case that one must or even can subordinate a drive for play, sex, or death to the productive aims of work, reproduction, and survival. These are not opposites—each implies the other. Evolution is no longer a Protestant God demanding constant work or a whiggish historian pretending that the result of history justifies itself—life can and indeed must waste itself for the sake of nothing, for no reason, for pleasure and pain without end.

Furthermore, we cannot conclude from any advance in genetics that we have gained insight into the mechanism governing natural purposes, as though such a thing were possible. There is life to the extent that some part of nature organizes itself. If we posit the purposes of the organism as grounded in the mechanism or purposes of the genes, of information, etc., that is not to explain life but to explain it away. Life, if there is any, is underivable. To pattern what of itself offers no guarantee of patterning is a description both of the life and the cognition of the finite subject. Life is a necessary discovery of the cognition of a finite subject because it is the cognition of the finite subject. Without life, understood as this strange interweaving of necessity and contingency, there is no thinking, and without (finite) thinking, no life. The life of cognition is the cognition of life. If we can derive it from a principle, law, or mechanism, if we can explain its pattern on the basis of some ground or reason, then it loses what is most essential to it, which is its very inexplicability. That locating something so unconditioned in nature, in matter, is aporetic, often leads to the search for a higher power in which it could exist in purity, a mind, spirit, soul, or God. Such overdetermination strips life of life for the same reason; if there is life it exists not in the subjugation of diversity to a higher or prior ground. If there is life at all, it can only be right here, immediately in the *living present*, and yet must remain for us (the only ones for whom it could be at all) infinitely distant, inaccessible, sublime life.

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   This connection was made already in Plato’s work, for example in the *Phaedrus*, “Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work” (264c). On this point, see Michael Naas’ *Plato and the Invention of Life*, especially pp. 26-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For Aristotle, this identity of formal cause and final cause is continuous throughout all of nature, from the elements to the living (*Phys.* II.7, 198a22-37). The motion of the elements (earth goes down, fire goes up, etc.) belongs to them; though it is not voluntary or ensouled it is part of their nature to move in this way, an understanding of motion and matter that is only possible on the basis of a representation of space with an absolute center, an anchor point to distinguish up from down. Galileo will not only dislodge this geocentrism, but also identifies matter as in itself inert—it can only receive motion from an external impetus. This accounts for Kant’s struggle to re-discover purposiveness in nature; in the inorganic one can find only *external* purposiveness, only organized matter offers some semblance of a purpose in nature itself. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a summary of recent attempts at positive definitions of life by biologists, see ch. 5 of Michel Morange’s *Life Explained*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For an account of how both problems interfere in Schrödinger’s attempt to define life as negative entropy, see my “How the Other Half-Lives: Life as Identity and Difference in Bennett and Schrödinger,” forthcoming in *Postmodern Culture*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant offers a quite traditional binary between the sensible, physical life disparaged by morality and the intellectual, infinite life it reveals (a pair he refers to as “physical life” and “moral life” (Kant 1999a, 5:67-68), “The second [the moral law within me], on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as an *intelligence* by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world, at least so far as this may be inferred from the purposive determination of my existence by this law, a determination not restricted to the conditions and boundaries of this life but reaching into the infinite” (Kant 1999a, 5:162). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “…experience cannot prove that there actually are such [natural] purposes, unless we first do some subtle reasoning [*eine Vernünftelei*] and merely slip the concept of a purpose into the nature of things rather than take it from objects and our empirical cognition of them, so that we would not so much cognize nature from objective bases as use the concept of a subjective basis on which we connect presentations within us, namely, the concept of a purpose, so that we can grasp nature by analogy with that subjective basis. […] Yet we are right to bring teleological judging into our investigation of nature, at least problematically, but only if we do this so as to bring nature under principles of observation and investigation by *analogy* with the causality in terms of purposes, without presuming to *explain* it in terms of that causality” (Kant 1987, 5:360). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. That we would even imagine a priori principles could be found in our judgment is also identified by Kant as an analogy with other faculties (understanding and reason): “And yet the family of our higher cognitive powers also includes a mediating link [*Mittelglied*] between understanding and reason. This is *judgment*, about which we have cause to suppose, by analogy, that it too may contain a priori, if not a legislation of its own, then at least a principle of its own, perhaps a merely subjective one, by which to search for laws” (Kant 1987, 5:177). It is also “judging by analogy” that we link the feeling of pleasure and displeasure to the cognitive power and power of desire. “Now between the cognitive power and the power of desire lies the feeling of pleasure, *just as* judgment lies between understanding and reason” (Kant 1987, 5:178; my emphasis). We have direct evidence, in the laws of nature and the moral law, of the legislative power of understanding and reason. The lawfulness of the contingent (judgment’s principle) is not a knowledge of this kind, but is a supposition authorized by analogy, “Hence we must suppose, at least provisionally, that […] judgment will bring about a transition from the pure cognitive power, i.e., from the domain of the concepts of nature, to the domain of the concept of freedom, *just as* in its logical use it makes possible the transition from understanding to reason” (Kant 1987, 5:179; my emphasis). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kant specifies “*absolute, non comparative magnum,*” which Pluhar translates as “Large absolutely rather than by comparison” (1987, 103). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Derrida comments briefly on this passage in the fourth section of “Parergon,” “The Colossal,” and describes it as continuous with the theory of the sublime as a negative presentation (1987, 129). In this connection, he emphasizes the “abyss” in Kant’s description of the ocean. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. My hypothesis or hunch is that treating undecidability with a canny one-sidedness could serve as the matrix for a more sustained reading of de Man’s work. For example, at the end of “Kant and Schiller,” the latter’s making continuous of aesthetic and practical concerns is denounced by de Man as the forerunner of fascism. Nonetheless, in the introduction to “Hegel’s Sublime,” one finds critique of “the principle of exclusion that is assumed to operate […] between a concern with aesthetics and a concern with political issues” (105). That is to say, dis-junction is a relationship, “In the history of aesthetic theory since Kant, aesthetics, far from being a principle of exclusion, functions as a necessary, though problematic, articulation […] The treatment of the aesthetic in Kant is certainly far from conclusive, but one thing is clear: it is epistemological as well as political through and through” (106). I read this pattern at work in de Man’s deconstruction of *Of Grammatology*, in “Misreading Generalised Writing: From Foucault to Speculative Realism and New Materialism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. *CJ* 5:400, 409. Kant’s other invocations of the mechanical inexplicability of a blade of grass focus more on the purpose or intention that seems to be seen in it. Of course, mechanism will never account for teleology, by definition. But, in this passage Kant insists that the “internal form” of the organism cannot be accounted for by mechanism, which contradicts his thesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Compare the section, “Of the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment,” (*CPracR* 5:67-8). “[A]ll cases of possible actions that occur can be only empirical, that is, belong to experience and nature; hence, it seems absurd to want to find in the sensible world a case which, though as such it stands only under the law of nature, yet admits of the application to it of a law of freedom and to which there could be applied the supersensible idea of the morally good, which is to be exhibited in it *in concreto*.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. A similar definition appears in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:9n. It is tempting to trace a development in Kant’s representation of life that could perhaps be coordinated to his transition from pre-critical to critical philosophy. His earliest definitions of life are consistent in seeing it as an inner principle of spontaneous activity. However, Kant posits in “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer” (1766) that we can recognize life in animals by means of a definite external mark: “The undisputed characteristic mark of life, belonging to that which we perceive by means of our outer senses is, doubtless, free movement, which shows us that it has originated from the power of the will” (2:330). Though this external mark is not necessary for life (Kant tells us that plants have the inner principle though it does not manifest itself), Kant maintains that at least in the case of animals we can see life’s operations in the object. This understanding of life would be pre-critical in the sense that it imagines we can know life empirically, without requiring an a priori principle of judgment in order to see anything like the lawfulness of the contingent (which grants only problematical, subjective access to organization). A passage in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786) could be a marking point for Kant’s transition to a critical take on this subject, “*Life* is the faculty of a *substance* to determine itself to act from an *internal* *principle*, of a *finite substance* to change, and of a *material substance* [to determine itself] to motion or rest, as change of its state. […] But these actions and grounds of determination *in no way belong to representations of the outer senses* [my emphasis – JB], and so neither [do they belong] to the determinations of matter as matter” (4:594). Here, Kant says life has *no* external, sensory manifestation.

    As possible exceptions to this pattern, one can note several instances of the “pre-critical” definition in Kant’s lectures on metaphysics from as late as the 1790s, cf. *Metaphysik L1* 28:275 (mid-1770s), *Metaphysik Mrongovius* 29:894 (1782-3), and *Metaphysik K2* 28:765 (early 1790s)—though Kant’s lectures employed Baumgarten’s textbook and often did not follow Kant’s own thinking. One would also have to grapple with the footnote from the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which claims that we can, by analogy, know that we share the genus of “living beings” (*lebende Wesen*) with animals (5:464n). I cannot read this passage as anything but a contradiction with the whole of the Critique of Teleological Judgment. On this footnote, see Geoffrey Bennington’s *Kant on the Frontier*, pp. 185-187. The present essay owes much to his book, especially its fifth chapter, “The Abyss of Judgment.” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Note, however, the exception mentioned in the previous footnote. Kant also suggests herbivores possess life in 5:426, though he is not speaking in his own voice in this passage. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On account of this representation of life as consciousness, we can understand some otherwise enigmatic details of the third *Critique*. Rudolf Makkreel is particularly astute on these points in the fifth chapter of his *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant.* For instance, the experience of the beautiful, which is our “pure mental spontaneity” (Makkreel 1990, 92), is what Kant calls our *Lebensgefühl*, feeling of life (1987, V:204). If life is representation, then the purest representation is the purest life. Given the connection of judgment to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, pure judgment is the feeling of life itself. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For Aristotle it is a matter of the autotelic character of all *phusis*, nature, not just life. See note 2, above. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Perhaps one sign of the strangeness of this example is many commentators’ avoidance of it (e.g. Illetterati 2014, 88; Fisher 2008, 382-83). For example, Guyer placidly refers to this characteristic as “self-maintenance” (2005, 322), even “ordinary self-maintenance” (2005, 354). He skips Kant’s primary example, focusing on the subsidiary example of defoliation. Part of his description is not mentioned in Kant’s text and directly contradicts Kant’s primary example, “the whole is also the cause of the parts, since the leaves cannot function without the rest of the tree” (Guyer 2005, 354). Zuckert also places the whole back in a determinant role, “its parts depend on one another and on the whole tree as the sum of those parts for their continued existence” (2007, 99). For an account that acknowledges at least a potential contradiction and gratuity of this paragraph and this parasite, see Shell, p. 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. In §77, Kant accounts for why our understanding can only move from the parts to the whole in this fashion. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. I thank Dilek Huseyinzadegan for suggesting this interpretation to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)