ODIP: Online Dictionary of Intercultural Philosophy

The Organic (in philosophy)

Introduction

Historically, the scope of philosophical reflections on the organic has been broad because the organic addresses universal and individual ways of interpreting the world order and of how people should live within that world order. The organic concerns ethics, aesthetics, and religion. Very often, in the history of philosophy, the organic has represented a paradoxical fusion of the particular and the universal, of the concrete and the abstract. The "dynamics" of the organic that represents a paradox as it insists on the interplay of evolution and decomposition: though all living structures are held together by a coherent and evolving "organic" model, at the same time, the organic element is able to "decompose" all static structures. This means that even while the organic evolves, it will still be the product of decay. In an organic context, nothing can be static, not even evolution.

Though in the nineteenth century the idea of the organic could serve as an intellectual model in many cultural areas, in the latter half of the twenty-first century, organic thinking would be pushed into a peripheral niche. Prominent today are discourses on "universal" values on the one hand, and various forms of individualism on the other. Postmodern philosophies attempting to deconstruct universalisms do exist, but most typically they do not engage in organic thinking. They do not necessarily deconstruct universalisms in view of alternative, coherent "organic" models. Organic philosophy rejects the dialectical scheme of thought. Therefore organic thinking very often finds itself on common ground with postmodern philosophies. The difference is that organic philosophy constantly attempts to reflect otherness against some kind of unity that it attempts not to lose sight of. Hermeneutics (see Gadamer 1970) **transculturalism**, and intercultural thinking can be seen as organic as they reflect upon an ontological or existential self-contradictoriness able to simultaneously affirm the existence of single elements *and* their unity.

The History of Organic Thinking

Reflections on the organic have existed at least since Aristotle's extensive elaborations on the spatial paradox of the *chôra*; and they stretch into contemporary physics through the Big Bang hypothesis or chaos theory. Some roots of organic thinking can even be traced to the pre-Socratics and Indian philosophy. In Western philosophy, the organic has an ambiguous status, which is due to the fact that the word "totality" has always had both positive and negative connotations. The simultaneous philosophical affirmation of single elements *and* their unity (an idea most widely reflected by Idealism) has been developed at different ages. All philosophies experiencing, in this paradoxical way, the tension between the individual and the general are "organic" in the broadest sense of the term. Plotinus, Spinoza, Bruno, Eckhart, and Hegel are examples. Spinoza held that even though there is only one substance, this substance has infinite attributes. Hegel saw wholes and parts as united in their oppositional contrast, which means that even opposing elements could rely on an underlying complicity. A large part of Western philosophy is fueled by a stimulating tension between descriptions of the world composed of clearly definable singularities on the one hand, and a unifying generality on the other.

The dangers of organicism can also be found here. No matter how "total" the totality is supposed to be, the singularities should always remain clearly definable: in an all-encompassing "dark" totality we will simply be lost. In other words, the rooting of the empirical world in the world of the absolute should never bring about the total disappearance of the border between the natural and the supernatural order. If philosophy does not more than simply negate any differences within an abstractly established totality, it abandons ratio altogether and turns into mysticism.

A large part of organic thought is linked to evolutionary theory. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cultural theories were increasingly influenced by Lamarck's and Darwin's studies of evolutionary history. As a consequence, biological analogies attempting to retrieve an organic, functional unity in Aristotle's sense became popular.

August Wilhelm Schlegel used the term organic in 1809 in lectures on architectural theory describing how the mind can translate an indefinite plurality of distinguishable parts "into an entire and perfect unity."[1] In the Germanic region, Schlegel is the most important organic philosopher of his time, paralleled by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England. Schlegel opposes the organic process to the mechanic and criticizes that the latter imposes rules upon material irrespective of the quality of this material. In his lectures on architecture, Schlegel lays down an understanding of the organic that will be relevant for many later generations:

> Form is mechanical when, through external force, it is imparted to any material merely as an accidental addition without reference to its quality; as, for example, when we give a particular shape to a soft mass that it may retain the same after its induration. Organic form, again, is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and acquires its determination contemporaneously with the perfect development of the germ. (Schlegel 1963, *Lecture XVII*)[2]

In the light of its history, it is certainly not surprising that until the beginning of the twentieth century, discussions of the organic will focus mainly on architecture – leading to the creation of the term "organic architecture" – and are less often evoked in other contexts. In architecture, parallels between the organism and the building go back to the High Renaissance and had already been noted by the Vitruvian architect Andrea Palladio who referred to the villa plan as a digestive system (Gans 2003: vi).

Apart from architecture, music is the only other art for which the term "organic" has had similar importance. Modern musical theory (up to more recent deconstructive tendencies) has even been said to take "for granted the idea of 'organic form' as an absolute aesthetic value, that is to say, the premise that all great works—those that truly merit the analyst's attention—should manifest a deep-laid unity of style and idea, whatever their apparent (surface) lack of any such unifying features" (Kerman 1983).

Almost a hundred years after Schlegel, William Morris and John Ruskin are again interested in the organic, this time in the context of Gothic architecture. The 'Gothic vs. the Classic' theme is not new but goes back to a much older debate on architectural theory that was sparked by Goethe's text *Von deutscher Baukunst* (*Of German Architecture*, 1772). Around 1800, both Schlegel and Goethe adhere to the romantic view that Gothic architecture is close to nature, first because it has developed from the morphology of plants and second, because it seems to represent a forest. Goethe had celebrated the Gothic cathedral because here, "just like in nature," all elements contribute purposefully to the establishment of a magnificent whole. In this context, Goethe addressed some of those dichotomies that will become important much later in modernity, such as the themes of 'measuring vs. feeling' and 'geometry vs. organic'. The topic's indirect connection with Goethe's metamorphosis doctrine (published in 1817), which explains that forms slowly emerge and then transform, already projects certain concepts of natural organization and evolution making those ideas on architecture even more relevant for any discussion of the organic.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth and in the first three decades of the twentieth centuries, organicism will transgress the limits of architectural theory and even the limits of aesthetics in order to become a full-fledged philosophy. This will happen in various regions of the world. In all those philosophies, the idea of the organic as a coherent whole in which single elements are interrelated in a non-mechanic fashion remains the most important guideline. The organic unity is seen as the result of a natural growth emerging from within and therefore it is not totally controllable from without. Among the most famous organic terms emerging within the first two decades of the twentieth century are: Henri Bergson's notion of *durée pure* in which past, present and future are supposed to form an organic whole; Nishida Kitaro's notion of *basho* (place) signifying an existentially defined locality; and Wilhelm Worringer's influential concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy), which has clearly organic undertones.

In Russia, philosophers living around 1900 were more active than anybody else in establishing a unique philosophy around the idea of "All-Unity" (*vseyedinstvo*), which represents an organic "unity in multiplicity" of all beings. The so-called Russian "Silver Age" overlaps with

the decades during which organic philosophies are booming worldwide, and the Russian productions are impressive in terms of both quantity and quality. All-Unity as an organic totality would fascinate pre-revolutionary organicist thinkers like Vladimir Soloviov (1853-1900) and Lev Lopatin (1855-1922) as well as more modern philosophers like Semën L. Frank (1877-1950) and Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948). In the area of politics, the organic concept of ***sobornost***, first launched by the Russian Slavophils, is partly inspired by the organic Romantic conception of nationhood as it was developed by F.W.J. Schelling. Schelling criticized Kant's view that a priori elements do not exist in the real world but are simply "put into it" by the human mind. As a result, Schelling reestablished nature as an organic quality in possession of its particular reason (*Naturvernunft*) and able to organize itself (cf. Schelling 1967: 336ff). Schelling also uses the terms *Allheit* and *Einheit.*

The Russian line continues into later decades of the twentieth century, where it is mainly represented by N.O. Lossky's idea of the "world as an organic whole" (1928) as well as by Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of the polyphonic and harmonized totality and his idea of the chronotope as an "idyllic relationship of time and space" (Bakhtin 1981: 229). Finally, even a subgroup of the Russian Formalists (led by V. Zhirmunsky and V. Propp) reverted to the less mechanic forms of what it decided to call "Organic Formalism" and which was inspired by biology (see P. Steiner 1979: 19).

Bergson

This most organic philosopher of all philosophers develops the idea of *durée pure* in Chapter 5 of his book *La Pensée et le mouvant*, where he opposes it to mathematically constructed or "spatialized" time. The *durée pure* accumulates and eternalizes within the same absolute present a maximum of elements. Time as it is experienced, is lived time in which the different steps of succession are not distinguished. Pure duration is always undivided. Lived time is experienced time that is fluent, organic, and intuitive. Whenever we experience the evolution of time, we do not divide it into steps; those steps can only be imposed upon time from an extra-temporal point of view (by clocks or example). In other words, time is not a juxtaposition of moments but an organic whole.

Space and Time

Most of the above concepts attempt to draw both time and space away from Newtonian geometrical or mathematical definitions. The organic represents a fundamental and coherent order that should underlie the incoherent patchwork of elements by which our reality is constituted. However, contrary to the structuralist anthropologist or the Newtonian physicist, the organicist looks for an order that is not merely rational or scientific. She looks for the organic as a quality that remains distinct from the "universal." More precisely, she looks for an order that is

more fundamental than merely mathematically established universal structures. This order will most typically be likened to a certain idea of nature.

The organic as a subject of intellectual interest has had its ups and downs and there are specific reasons for these fluctuations. After a post-Renaissance decline and a peripheral existence during the enlightenment period, Lamarck's and Darwin's studies of evolution would lead to a fresh interest in organic unities in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Theoretically, today, the latest discoveries in biology should be able to turn organic systems once again into a subject interest. The mapping of the human genome (the Human Genome Project) should inspire new reflections on the meaning of organic unities in society as well as in art.

The Logic of Nature

The logic of organicism tries to draw the whole world (art, politics, religion, and science) into a coherent, harmonious structural network by following a model that is not formal but that imitates the immanent, self-sufficient logic of nature. Like math and logic, the organic structure evolves by following a *general* ideal; but it moves towards this ideal by following *individual* steps that do not necessarily fit into the overall plan of the general structure at each and every moment. In other words, contrary to abstract structures issued by mathematics, the organic structure does not follow a predetermined and static order invented by the human ratio. The organic structure is rational (it makes sense) *as a whole* but it can accommodate single elements that can look irrational to the mathematical mind at certain moments. The organic constellation looks senseless sometimes in terms of logic, not because it contains no logical order, but *because human logic cannot grasp this logic*.

Organic structures are not supposed to follow a final design issued by a human mind beforehand because the model of the organic is not math or logic but nature. What this "reason of nature" actually is, can be spelled out in different ways. All those ways are common in that they will never be *merely* scientific but strive to embrace the unknown dimension of a total structure. In purely scientific explanations there is no place for contingency while in organicism there is. While pure science establishes abstract structures in which the general necessity and the individual event perfectly overlap, organicism refuses to reduce nature to such a known structure. As a result, the organic evolves within a tension unfolding between the general and the individual, the abstract and the concrete, the logical and the illogical. This tension is not mechanic or dialectical, but it represents the essence of the organic itself, which cannot be cancelled because that would make the organic aspect of the structure disappear.

The Organic and God

In many discourses on the organic, spiritual connections and links with God are striking though they are not always expressed in the form of theism. True, Romanticism with its nostalgia for the unity of God, nature, and man has left its own imprint on organic philosophy. However, in

general, the God of the organic – if there is one – is more likely to be the pantheist God contained in nature. Mysticism is knocking at the door as is always the case when pan-theism has been invited. Still this spiritual tendency has nothing to do with the God-based universalism of fundamentalists.

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Further Reading:

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[1] The lectures were published only after his death.

[2] Schlegel's influence on English Romanticism is so important that Coleridge is said to have plagiarized the above passage from Schlegel in his *Lectures*. Coleridge is often quoted as a precursor of organic theory because he was arguably the first who contrasted an innate development effectuated from within with a mechanic effectuated from

without (see Bloom and Trilling 1973: 66). Coleridge's version of this passage is interesting in its own right because he incorporate a "clay metaphor" into the text that does not occur in Schlegel: "The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material – as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form on the other hand is innate, it shapes, as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such is the form." Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 Vol. II*, p. 362. On the plagiarism reproach see Wellek, 1955, 151-157.