History & Theory of Vitalism: From Descartes to Canguilhem

[ Mini-course by Charles T. Wolfe ]

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Auditorium FFCUL, C1.3, Lisbon, Portugal

[ No fee but registration is required. Please send an e-mail to rssantos@fc.ul.pt ]
In this 'master class' (without any Master principle!) I try to reconstruct something like a vitalist conceptual tradition, present both in a subterranean form in the Scientific Revolution period, despite the fact that, as I suggest in the "Life" paper (text 1), there can be no ontology of Life in this period, and increasingly with the emergence of a science of biology in the late 18th century (and here I ask: what do we do with the growing obsession with 'life science' from the 1740s onwards, with people like Buffon and Diderot - Diderot who in his 1753 *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* dismisses the mathematical sciences as somehow 'done' and asserts that 'life science' is a new revolutionary area [*]). In the 19th century vitalism becomes something of a dogmatic concept, with people like Hans Driesch (**), but in the 20th century there is a new, less metaphysical form of theory of organism, sometimes with vitalist ambitions, culminating perhaps in the idiosyncratic theory of Georges Canguilhem, himself influenced by Kurt Goldstein (text 4 and see Ferrario and Bianco's papers – on Goldstein and Canguilhem respectively, in Normandin and Wolfe eds., 2013, and Wolfe forthcoming). And in recent years it is possible to see a new kind of 'organizational' concept emerging in theoretical biology, eg in the work of Moreno and collaborators (***), discussed by the philosopher William Bechtel (text 5), which is light years removed from metaphysical vitalism, but is perhaps closer to what I have called the 'functional vitalism' of the 18th century Montpellier medical vitalists, with references to concepts such as the 'animal economy' (texts 2, 3). I do not argue here that we need to be vitalists, or that mechanistic science (whatever that means) is bad, indeed there has been much good work on mechanistic explanations in recent years, sometimes with reference to biology (****). And perhaps we should reflect on 'words' themselves (text 6) and the problem of how vitalism has been treated and defined (texts 7, 8). But nevertheless, I believe a historico-philosophical investigation and evaluation of these episodes – are they a tradition? a discontinuous tradition? – helps us have a more diverse, less stubborn and dogmatic conception of the philosophy of biology and its orthodoxies and heterodoxies.

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(***) see the many excellent papers by Moreno et al., and also Moreno and M. Mossio’s forthcoming monograph on autonomy and organization in biological systems (Springer).

(****) Malaterre and Braillard, eds., forthcoming

Texts discussed

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Additional (optional)


